

Yesterday the Church celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration of our Savior. And for one week, the church will celebrate this great feast of the Master, when Jesus of Nazareth showed His three disciples, Peter, James, and John, that He was the Son of God.

Next week the Church will celebrate the Dormition of the Theotokos. We have begun this celebration by fasting and chanting the canon every night. The feast will be celebrated for eight days in honor of the Theotokos, the one who held God in her womb. We will venerate her dormition, which is the pinnacle of all her feasts, by honoring her with hymns, written specifically for her, who is the mother of all creation, since she is the mother of God.

And today, the Sunday that falls right in the middle of these feasts, we began the Gospel reading by saying, “the kingdom of the heavens is likened to a man”.

The “Kingdom of the heavens is....” Many times did Christ describe the Kingdom of Heavens by a parable or by comparing it to something, like “little children” or “a wedding feast”.

And It is significant that today, amongst these two great feasts of the Church, the Transfiguration of our Savior and the Dormition of the Theotokos, we have a gospel reading of a parable describing what the Kingdom of Heaven is.

For these two great feasts show us and explain to us what our salvation is. Today’s Gospel reading gives us one way of achieving this. Our salvation lies within the Kingdom of Heaven and it can be inherited, or given to us, with mercy and forgiveness. It is for this reason that God became man. It is for this reason that the Church exists. God became one of us so we may learn and understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is and by doing so, inheriting it through the Church.

Every celebration of the Divine Liturgy begins by the priest saying, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Every Mystery of Holy Baptism, which allows us to become inheritors of the Kingdom, begins with these same words. It is only within the church that we may hear these words. When these words are exclaimed by the priest then we must know and understand that we are truly present in the Kingdom of Heaven.

What is the Kingdom of heaven? Is it not communion with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? And is not Holy Communion the unification of man and God? When we celebrate the Divine Liturgy and partake of Holy Communion with preparation, prayer, and fasting, are we not uniting ourselves with God? When we receive Holy Communion, Christ dwells within us and we dwell within Him. We become one, man and God.

This is why He became man. It was to unite the two natures, the Divine and the human. But it was only through Him, the Christ, the Son of God, one of the Holy Trinity that this could become possible. Man does not have the ability to unite the two natures. This is possible only because God wills it and allows it. He voluntarily became one of us, out of love, so He may bring us back to Him. He became one of us to unite the two natures. He became one of us to bring heaven down to earth and earth up to heaven.

And yet this great mystery could seem impossible to the human mind and to human reason. How can the two natures be united in a God-man? How can heaven come down to earth and earth go up to heaven?

These questions, although they can never be explained by human logic, came into fruition in the Nativity of Christ, and they were affirmed and witnessed by the disciples in the Transfiguration of our Savior. The Transfiguration is the awesome and yet ineffable manifestation of God and the experience of the divine by us humans.

The three disciples, Peter, James, and John, were brought up to Mount Tabor by Jesus. And there on the top they witnessed this extraordinary and ineffable event. They witnessed, as much as they could endure,

Jesus showing Himself as God. His face shown as bright as the sun and His garments became white as light. And a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved son, with whom I am pleased'.

The disciples witnessed the two natures of Christ-they were led to Mount Tabor by Jesus and they saw Him glow brighter than the sun as the Son of God. There on Mount Tabor, with three witnesses present, the Son revealed His two natures-man and God.

And it is here today, during the Divine Liturgy, that a sort of transfiguration is taking place. For when the Eucharist is celebrated, this building here in Westwood, and every other Orthodox church in the world, whether it is a large cathedral, or a small tiny chapel, they become like Mount Tabor. Heaven comes down to the earth and earth rises up to heaven. Our building here becomes the Kingdom of Heaven.

And all of us here, we must be transfigured, we must change our sinful ways and open our hearts so that God's light may enter. We must transfigure ourselves for God's grace to enlighten us, so that we may grow, so that we may partake of the Body and Blood properly, so we may be united with the divine.

It is appropriate, that next week we will also celebrate the Dormition of the Theotokos. The Dormition is a joyous feast, the Pascha of the summer, when the Church venerates the translation of the Theotokos.

We are not remembering the death of Panagia, she did not die, because for the true Christian there is no death. With the dormition of the Theotokos we have living proof that Christ has abolished death, but what we call death is a simple sleep. The body of the Christian accepts the grace of God and it is glorified, and the soul lives after death, and if man has been sanctified he finds himself in "the hand of God." What happened with Panagia, we want to happen to us. That is, we hope, when the time comes to leave this world, we are in the Church, to pray, to have our spiritual fathers close to us, to receive their blessing, and especially to commune the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Church helps us prepare to meet our Heavenly Father. It is our preparation throughout our whole life. And Panagia is our model and example. Our preparation means a change in all our thoughts, and the moral change of all our being, so that we would be pure and white as snow, washing clean everything that defiles our body and spirit, so that we are adorned with every virtue: repentance, meekness, humility, gentleness, simplicity, chastity, mercifulness, abstention, spiritual contemplation, and burning love for God and neighbor.

This preparation requires again, a transfiguration, so that we may become like Panagia. Panagia now finds herself in the Kingdom of Heaven and sits at the right hand of the king. She is our link, she is our ladder to heaven. She is proof that heaven and earth are united in Christ.

And so today we began the Gospel reading with the words: 'The Kingdom of Heaven of is like...'. And we are told about the parable of the unforgiving servant and are taught that we must be merciful and forgiving. Again, we must transfigure ourselves and ignore our pride and our first reactions or emotions when someone has done us harm or "owes us something" like in the parable. We must become merciful and compassionate if we want to find ourselves in heaven. We must be merciful and forgiving if we want to experience Christ and be united with Him.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, God our father, wishes to forgive us all of our sins if learn to forgive others. In the Kingdom of Heaven, Christ has united man with God. And in the Church, we find the means to unite ourselves with Christ, by partaking of the Holy Eucharist.

When Jesus was transfigured before His disciples, He showed all of mankind that he was both God and man. When the Theotokos was translated into heaven, all of mankind saw proof that man can be received into the heavenly abode. And when we learn to forgive others, we know that our Father in the Heavens will forgive of our sins. This is Heaven. This is our salvation, AMEN.