

The Most Reverend  
Robert Rabbat, DD  
by the Mercy of God  
Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand  
to  
the Clergy, my fellow ministers at the Altar,  
the Religious and All the Faithful of our Holy Eparchy,  
a Pastoral Letter  
for the Third Sunday of Great and Holy Lent, 2018,  
The Sunday of the Holy Cross

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

*“Do not seek the perfection of the law in things human, for it is not found perfect in them. Its perfection is hidden in the Cross of Christ.”* (St. Hesychius the Priest, 7<sup>th</sup> century)

In the cultural patrimony of most, if not all, human societies, there is the recurring theme of journey. From the eighth century BC, the two heroic poems of Homer are at the very beginnings of European literature, and from one we take our word for an epic journey – an *odyssey*. Italian vernacular literature, in large measure, has its origins in Dante’s mystical journey the *Divina Commedia* completed in 1321. In English, many literary journeys, such as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrims Progress* (1678), come immediately to mind.

Throughout the chronicle of human experience there are countless instances of the journey as either event or metaphor. In Sacred Scripture, Patriarch Abraham undertakes a journey which changes the course of human history. Indeed, to attempt a comprehensive list of journeys is an almost pointless task; and, besides, there are as many favourite accounts as there are readers or listeners.

However, for the Covenantal People of God, it is the Old Testament that provides us with the pre-eminent journey word – Exodus, which was the decisive and formative event in the history of the Old Covenant Faithful.

One way to consider the unfolding of the Gospel narratives is to discern the journey undertaken by Jesus during his public ministry, “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem” – the place of his Pascha, his Life-giving Death and Glorious Resurrection. (see Lk 9:51)

For three weeks, we have been on our Lenten journey. It is good for us not to consider the Great and Holy Lent as simply the passing of time but to understand these days as a movement; and we must not confine ourselves to the idea of journey as only a physical change of place. There can also be, and often it is the most important, an inner journey; a movement of our souls, an ongoing spiritual journey. There is a story told of the monastic who was seated in a convent cell. When asked what she was doing, she simply replied, “I am on a journey.”

Anyone who has ever travelled with children or perhaps an impatient adult will be familiar with the repeated and tiresome question, “Are we there yet?” For them the journey has become oppressive in itself. Perhaps, like some of the Exodus people, there is a regret that the journey ever began. (see Ex.14:12)

Our journey during this blessed season of Great Lent should be one of each day at a time. The Church understands that any journey can become burdensome if we look constantly at where we have been, or if, on the other hand, we fix our gaze only on the final destination.

Thus, today, the Church, our wise Mother who journeys with us, reminds us that we are half way. Apart from its inclusion in the services of the Passion and Death of Jesus, there are at least eight Holy Cross days during the liturgical year, Catholic and Orthodox. In the Byzantine Churches, on the third Sunday of Lent, the Cross is held up not simply as a material object worthy of the utmost veneration, the instrument of our salvation, but as a “holy sign-post” pointing the way to the events of Holy Week, especially Good Friday, Easter Saturday and Easter Sunday.

On the third Lenten Sunday it is not only the jewelled, golden and triumphant Cross that is raised on high – the Cross made glorious by the Lord’s Resurrection – but also the wooden Cross, rugged and splintery, rough and cruel. There is a 1912 Protestant hymn, “The Old Rugged Cross” – however, we must not forget that the rugged, rough-hewn Cross was also the Throne of Glory upon which Jesus was lifted up and from which he has drawn all nations to himself. (see Jn.12:32) Indeed, it is a feature of Byzantine crucifixes that the inscription by Pilate is more often replaced by the true description of Jesus, “The King of Glory.”

There is a type of blessing cross which consists of a wooden cross encased in a beautiful golden cruciform cover. This is the Cross that the Church holds up today – a two sided Cross; one side exquisitely beautiful, the other side stark and unadorned.

This Sunday, the Church reminds that we cannot have one without the other – the two aspects of the Cross, suffering and glory, are so interwoven that they constitute the one indivisible entity. The Cross of Suffering is the Cross of Glory.

Not everyone will have kept the Lenten fast with the same rigour; not everyone will have been as careful in attending the additional services. However, now is not the time for looking back; now is not the time for regrets. The Church urges us to look forward. If we have been exact in keeping the fast, let us continue as we intend to finish. If we have been less than thorough, now is a good time to begin.

For all of us, it is good to keep in mind the words of a Russian Orthodox spiritual father, “Of course, it would be more convenient to get to Paradise with a full stomach, all snuggled up in a soft feather-bed, but what is required is to carry one’s cross along the way, for the kingdom of God is not attained by enduring one or two troubles, but many!” (Elder Anthony of Optina, 1795-1865)

Beloved Friends,

Today is also an appropriate occasion to remember that we are People of the Cross. Let us give thanks to God that we live in a nation where we are free to lift up the Cross, and to do so publicly – on our churches and schools, on private homes, in our cars; wherever we wish to say I am a Christian, I am a servant of the Crucified and Risen Lord. However, we must be prepared to struggle for that right.

As St John Chrysostom writes, “What then is more precious than the Cross? What more profitable for our souls? So let us not be ashamed to name the Cross, but let us confess it with total confidence.” (Homily, *Concerning the Cross.*)

As we continue our Lenten journey, it is a privilege and a blessing for me to be your fellow pilgrim. You are very much in my prayers, and I hope that you will keep me in yours.

With my paternal blessing and with prayers assured,

✠ Robert Rabbat, DD

From our Eparchy in Greenacre, NSW,  
Sunday, 4 March, 2018.