

Follow Christ

Talk given by His Eminence Archbishop Makarios of Australia
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Christ is with us

It is a joyous day today because I have the blessing of being with you, of meeting you face to face, of physically being among you. And it is not only I who am with you, but Christ is among us, for He says where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.

He is not just here with us today, but He is with us always to the end of the ages. It becomes clear then for us, nothing can separate us from his love. It is up to us to stay close to him and follow Him.

Follow Christ

Remember when you were younger, how you would run after someone, trying to catch them you would keep your eyes firmly on the person you were running after. You wouldn't look left or right, but straight ahead at the person in front of you.

That is how it is with Christ. Focus on Him, stay on His path, don't get side-tracked, follow him and He'll lead us to His Kingdom. He loves us, and wants to give us everything that He has, everything that He is. He calls us to Him.

Christ is our true happiness

Unfortunately, there are a lot of things competing for our attention in this life, competing for our heart. Media and social media and the materialistic world in which we live with the constant bombardment of advertising, whether it is on television or in shopping malls or supermarkets or billboards, all of these want to impress upon us that happiness is to be found, not in Christ, but elsewhere.

The subliminal and prevailing message of current society, presented through advertising, reality TV shows, even in news-stories and through endless social media posts, is that happiness is to be found in what they present as the good life, in having lots of money, and being able to do and go wherever you want, in having an important position in life, a high paying job, a modern house, a fast car, relationships of any type – in and out of marriage.

The established values and principles, by which previous generations lived are seen as outdated. Everything is fast, everything is instant, everything is negotiable and changeable, even our genders, as unfortunately we see in recent times. The model of the world is: I can be and do whatever I want, that is my human right.

Christ fills our hearts

My dear friends, without Christ there is no life, there is only a lot of noise and distraction, there is emptiness and depression and bullying and suicide. Without Christ people turn elsewhere to be consoled. They try to fill the emptiness with other things and it hurts because there is no true consolation.

What starts as recreational drug use, to feel a fleeting moment of happiness, quickly leads to a full-blown drug addiction. The same with prescription drugs and smoking and alcohol. It's quick and easy to have just one puff, just one drink to feel good, but then one puff and one drink is not enough, and it becomes two and three, and the whole packet and the whole bottle. More, and then, even more.

Attending frenetic music festivals aims at blocking out and forgetting the pain. It is too painful to face life. For the same reason people go from one relationship to another, looking for something more, something different, to fill the gap inside them.

But there is no true happiness. The void deep in the heart is not filled, it has only temporarily been bypassed, leaving behind a very sour taste because the reality is that the futility of all these distractions has left them even more desolate and alone.

Christ gives meaning

I urge you, turn to Christ. He won't let you down. Only He gives meaning to our life, only He takes away the emptiness, only He can fill us because He has made and fashioned us. In his famous confession, St Augustine, who gave away his hedonistic life-style and turned to a life in Christ, declares to God: 'You have made us and drawn us to yourself.' And he loudly proclaims to the Lord, as a result of his own personal experience: 'our heart is restless until it rests in you.'

Christ promised us that if we follow Him, we will have true joy and this joy no one will take from you. Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full. Thousands of Saints and Martyrs over the course of centuries have testified with their lives and proven the truth of these words. They did not hesitate to give up everything for Him. They were not enticed by the fleeting pleasures of this temporary world. They firmly focused on Christ and followed Him, and Him alone.

Why? Because it is only in Christ and with Christ that our life has purpose, it has meaning and is full. It is only in Christ that our relationships will be true and deep and genuine. It is only with Christ that our position in society has significance and sense. It is only in and with Christ that we will have abundant riches, not necessarily lots of money, but the grace of God and the fruit of the Holy Spirit which is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. It is only in Christ, and the Church, that we will eventually overcome even the tragedy of death and live eternally.

The glory of Christ in our trials and struggles

Last week we celebrated the great Feast of the Transfiguration, when for a brief time Christ revealed to His three disciples, to James, John and Peter, the fullness of His glory. This glory is what He wants to share with us. This glory is what He wants us to experience eternally with Him. But we must remember, after this revelation on Mt Tabor, Christ came down, and soon after he was betrayed and crucified.

This is who we are following. If we are to be His, then His life must be ours. We, too, will have to take up our cross daily, as He tells us, and follow Him. To take up our cross means that each one of us will face difficulties and pain and suffering and trials and even death. We shouldn't be under the false illusion that if we are Christians, everything is going to go well for us. No it won't! We will have our fair share of trials, whatever God allows and for reasons that He knows best. But we will face all these with hope and with faith, trusting in God, who is our Father, who allows whatever happens to us to be for our spiritual benefit and for our salvation. If we come through these trials, with faith and trusting God, then we will transcend them, we will transform them and they will lead us to the eternal Kingdom.

And it is not just external trials that we will face, but it is also the internal difficulties that we must conquer. Conquering all weaknesses and sins and bad habits, we all have them, no one is perfect, but we must struggle against these in the small measure that we can, daily, and without ever losing hope, without ever losing sight of the one we are following, without ever losing sight of the eternal Kingdom and the glory that He revealed on Mt Tabor at His Transfiguration.

It is like we are cast into the sea and we need to get to the other side. The waves will come and beat against us and we will go up and sometimes down and the sea will be furious at times, but we must keep swimming to get to the other side and as long as we are on this journey, as long as we are heading in the right direction, then when the right time comes, Christ will pull us up out of the water, and take us across to the opposite bank and give us the victory.

This taking up of our cross, this struggle, must be a daily struggle. So, when we get up in the morning, let's do our cross and pray for God's help for all that we will face in the day to come. And let us also ask for help from His own holy Mother, whose Dormition we will celebrate in two days. And let us ask for help from the countless Saints and from our personal Guardian Angel. They are there waiting for us to call upon them. In this way we will begin our day strengthened by grace.

Then again, at the end of the day, try very hard to find a few moments when you are quiet, to reflect on all that happened, how did you speak to those around you, how did you react, spend a little time in prayer. Pray for forgiveness if you spoke harshly and hurt your brother or if you felt jealous or angry, or criticised or slandered someone or if you imposed your own will upon the other person.

Our neighbour is our life

In the Sayings of the Desert Fathers there is a story from a monk called John the Dwarf, who lived in the Egyptian desert around the 4th century. He said, 'A house is not built by beginning at the top and working down. You must begin with the foundations in order to reach the top.' When they asked him what this means, he replied, 'The foundation is our neighbour, whom we must win and that is the place to begin, for all the commandments of Christ depend on this one.' Our neighbour is our life, if we serve their needs, if we treat them with respect, if we don't criticise those who hurt us, if we forgive them their wrongdoing, if we gently show them our love by attending to them, then we have set the right foundations.

It is clear in the parable of the Last Judgement, the criterion for our entering into Heaven will be '...in as much as you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.'

It is not so much what we say, but who we are. The Gospel doesn't record much of *Panagia's* words, they didn't have to. Her silent example, her silent love to the end of her Son and for all humanity. Her humility is what made her the holiest person on earth and the only one suitable to give birth to the Son of God. Her service to her neighbour was achieved in her heart, by purifying it and following Christ's commandments. That is what set her apart, that is what made her excel spiritually and be the holiest person ever to walk on this earth. She followed Christ by making her heart one with His, she loved Him to the end and she loves all humanity, even those who killed her beloved Son.

Stay with Christ

I urge you, pray! Pray to *Panagia*, pray to the Saints, stay with Christ, and stay with Christ in the Orthodox Church, this is where our life will be transformed. Partake of all the Sacraments, find a spiritual father, if you don't have one. We have so many good priests here in Melbourne that are willing and available and ready to listen to you. Go for confession, talk about your difficulties and be guided. Find relief from the burden of sins, don't see it as a counselling session, but see the grace of God that acts through the priest and heals the broken heart. Speak to your spiritual father and receive a blessing to participate, to partake of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion is above all else, union with Christ's very own Body. When we partake of Holy Communion, His blood runs through our own veins and His Body becomes one and the same flesh as ours. Then, His grace will fill our beings. Not drugs, not cigarettes, not crazy dancing parties or alcohol, but His Life, His life-giving Spirit.

Put Christ in your life, sanctify your life with His grace through the Sacraments, through prayer, through the Divine Liturgy. Read spiritual books, read about the lives of Saints. Recently our Ecumenical Patriarchate canonised a number of people, who are our contemporaries. More canonisations are forthcoming. Read about these people, see what made them stand out, how did they withstand the pressures of this world, how did they think and react, what did they counsel the hundreds of people who went to see them with problems like our own. Let the Saints inspire us, substitute vices with virtues, don't take

advantage of others, but give to one who is in need. Don't exploit the other person but serve them. Don't criticise, but try to see the good in our neighbour. Substitute idle talk with prayer, substitute the fleeting values of this world with the good news of the Gospel which is the eternal joy of the Resurrection, that comes through the Cross and by following the crucified Christ. Substitute mindless TV shows and endless hours on the internet with meaningful family time and with reading and reflection. Transform evil, transform hatred with love. Don't hate your enemy, but love them. Don't abuse substances, partake of Holy Communion.

Use the material world and the things we have been given, but don't abuse them. Use them for the glory of God, and for our salvation. If you have the blessing of being in a financially good position, then give to those who are in a less fortunate position in life. Go on a pilgrimage to our Mother Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to the Holy Land and places of worship in Greece, in Cyprus. Live and breath Christ.

There is no joy without Christ

My beloved children, everything that we do and with Christ, attracts God's grace. It gives meaning to our existence and fills us with abundant joy and deep peace. Strive for this at all costs. There is no joy without Christ. St Paul tells us clearly in his own words, '...for the wages of sins is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

The call of Christ

Christ calls us at least twice in our life. The first time is when a person meets Christ personally in their life and makes a decision to live the Christian life and to follow him. Christ goes before us and we follow behind on the same path that He followed, not a different one. The second time is when we reach the end. When Christ will return to us again to see, are we still following him? Have we trodden the same path of humility that he did, the same path of service to others, the path of love for God and our neighbour. If we have, then we will hear Christ's words: 'Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.' This joy awaits us. This is the joy that I wanted to bring to you, to share with you, to encourage you to seek with all your heart. Stay focused on Christ, follow Him please, and then, we will all share in this joy together with Christ in his Kingdom that has no end. Amen.