

On the Victory of the Cross

Prayer

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory, together with thine unoriginate Father, and thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Introduction

Last time we met we discussed the Trisagion during which we make the sign of the Cross several times. To help illustrate why we make the sign of the Cross, this week we have something a little different: a poem by St Romanos the Melodist. St Romanos was born in Syria at the end of the fifth century. He was ordained a reader but had a mediocre voice. In Constantinople, after being ridiculed for poorly singing, the blessed Virgin appeared to him in a dream and gave him a scroll to eat (recalling the prophet Ezekiel [3.1–3] and the apostle John [Apocalypse 10.8-9]). He awoke and divinely inspired he sang “Today the Virgin gives birth to him who is above all being...” the first ever *kontakion*, a sermon put to song. He went on to write many more, several of which we still sing.

The *kontakion* I’ll read today, *On the Victory of the Cross*, was written for midLent for the week of the Sunday of the Cross. I thought it appropriate to recite here as we observe the Elevation of the Cross this week. Before we begin, note that most of the hymn, besides the introduction and conclusion, takes the form of a stylized conversation between the Devil and Hades upon the Crucifixion of our Lord. And one note on vocabulary: Beliar / Belial is another name for the Devil. Jesus son of Navi is better known in English as Joshua son of Nun. Without further ado, let us begin.

On the Victory of the Cross On Wednesday of Mid-Lent,
a crucifixion kontakion,
bearing the following acrostic: by the humble Romanos.
Grave mode, Idiomelon

Prelude 1

A fiery sword no longer guards the gate of Eden,¹
for a strange bond came upon it: the wood of the Cross.
The sting of Death and the victory of Hades were nailed to it.
But you appeared, my Savior, crying to those in hell:
“Be brought back *again to paradise*.”

Prelude 2

Having been nailed to the form of the Cross
as truly a ransom for many,²
you redeemed us, Christ our God,
for by your precious blood in love for humankind
you snatched our souls from death,
you brought us back with you *again to paradise*.

Prelude 3

Heavenly and earthly things rightly rejoice with Adam,
for he has been called *again to paradise*.

¹ Genesis 3.24.

² Matthew 20.28.

1

Pilate fixed three crosses on Golgotha,
 two for the robbers and one for the giver of life,
 whom Hades saw, and he said to those below,
 "O my ministers and powers,
 who has fixed a nail in my heart?
 A wooden lance has suddenly pierced me and I am being torn apart.
 My insides are in pain, my belly in agony,
 my senses make my spirit tremble,³
 and I am compelled to disgorge Adam and Adam's race.
 Given me by a tree,
 a tree is bringing them back *again to paradise*."

2

When he heard this, the cunning serpent
 ran crawling and cried, "What is it, Hades?
 Why do you groan for no reason? What words do you offer?
 This tree, at which you tremble,
 I carpentered up there for Mary's child.
 I intimated it to the Jews for our advantage,
 for it is a cross, to which I have nailed Christ,
 wishing by a tree to do away with the second Adam.
 Therefore, do not upset yourself. It will not plunder you.
 Keep hold of those you have. Of those whom we rule,
 not one escapes *again to paradise*."

³ Jeremiah 4.19.

3

"Away with you, come to your senses, Beliar," cried Hades.

"Run, open your eyes,
and see the root of the tree inside my soul.

It has gone down to my depths,
to draw up Adam like iron.

Elisha of old painted its image in prophecy
when he drew the axe head from the river.⁴

With a light object the prophet dragged a heavy,
warning you, and teaching you
that, by a tree, Adam is to be brought up
from wretchedness *again to paradise*."

4

"Who gave you such an idea then, Hades? From where
now this cowardly fear, where once there was no fear,⁵
of a worthless tree, dry and barren,

ready for the removal of malefactors
and those who welcome bloodshed?

For Pilate discovered it, persuaded by my counsels,
and do you fear it, and reckon it powerful?

With you, the universal executioner, will it prove salvation?

Who has misled you?

Who has persuaded you that he who fell by a tree
is being raised by a tree, and, so that he may dwell there,
is being called *again to paradise*?"

⁴ 4 Reigns (2 Kings) 6.5–7.

⁵ Psalm 13.5.

5

“You have suddenly lost your senses, you of old the cunning serpent.⁶
 All your wisdom has been swallowed up through the Cross,⁷
 and you have been caught in your own snare.
 Lift up your eyes and see that you have fallen
 into the pit that you created.
 Behold that tree, which you call dry and barren,
 bears fruit; a robber tasted it
 and has become heir to the good things of Eden.
 For it has outdone the rod
 that led the people out of Egypt,⁸
 for it is bringing Adam back *again to paradise*.”

6

“Wretched Hades, cease this cowardly talk;
 these words of yours reveal your thoughts.
 Were you afraid of a cross and of the crucified one?
 Not one of your words has shaken me,
 for these deeds are part of my plan;
 I would again both open a tomb and entomb Christ,
 so you may enjoy your cowardice double,
 from his tomb as well as from his Cross.
 But when I see you, I shall mock you.
 For, when Christ is buried I shall come to you and say,
 ‘Who now is bringing Adam back *again to paradise*?’”

⁶ Genesis 3.1.

⁷ Psalm 106.27.

⁸ Exodus 14.16.

7

Suddenly Hades began to call out to the devil,
 the eyeless to the sightless, the blind to the blind:
 "Look, you are walking in darkness, feel around, lest you fall.
 Consider what I tell you, slow of heart,
 because what you are doing has quenched the sun.⁹
 The tree that you boast of has shaken the universe,
 has convulsed the earth, hidden the sky,
 rent the rocks together with the veil,
 and raised up those in the tombs.¹⁰
 And the dead are shouting, 'Hades, understand,
 for Adam is hurrying back *again to paradise*.'"

8

"Has the Nazarene's tree been strong enough to scare you?"
 said the devil to Hades the destroyer,
 "Have you been slain by a cross, you who slay all?
 Truly if a tree has scared you,
 the crucifixion of Haman should have frightened you,¹¹
 and that stake with which Jael did away with Sisara,¹²
 and the five crosses to which Jesus of Navi
 once fixed those who tyrannized him.¹³
 More than all, let the plant in Eden
 scare you, because it led out Adam,
 yet does not lead him back *again to paradise*."

⁹ Matthew 27.45.

¹⁰ Matthew 27.51–53.

¹¹ Esther 7.10.

¹² Judges 4.21–22.

¹³ Joshua 10.26.

9

“Now is the moment for you to open your ears, Beliar.
 Now the hour will show you the power of the Cross
 and the great authority of the Crucified.
 For you, the Cross is folly,¹⁴
 but for all creation, it is seen as a throne,
 on which, as though seated, Jesus is nailed,
 and hears the robber crying to him,
 ‘Lord, remember me in your kingdom,’
 and answers as from a tribune,
 ‘Today, poor beggar, you will reign with me.
 For, with me, you will go in *again to paradise*.’”¹⁵

10

When he heard this, the resourceful¹⁶ dragon
 began to wilt, and what he heard he saw,
 a robber witnessing to Christ crucified.
 And so, astounded at this,
 he strikes his breast and argues,
 “He speaks to a robber, yet does not answer his accusers?
 To Pilate he never deigned so much as a word;
 now he addresses a murderer, saying, ‘Come, live in pleasure.’
 What is this? Who has seen,
 where the robber on the Cross is concerned, words or deeds
 by means of which he is taking *this man to paradise*?”

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 1.18.

¹⁵ Luke 23.42–43.

¹⁶ The Greek word πολυμήχανος was an epithet of Odysseus, a protagonist of many devices.

11

A second time the demon raised the same cry,
 calling out, "Receive me, Hades. My recourse is to you;
 I submit to your views, I who did not believe them.
 I saw the tree at which you shuddered,
 crimsoned with blood and water.¹⁷
 And I shuddered, not, I tell you, at the blood, but at the water.
 For the former shows the slaughter of Jesus,
 but the latter, his life, because life has gushed from his side.
 For it was not the first
 but the second Adam who carried Eve,
 the mother of all the living,¹⁸ *again to paradise.*"

12

With such words the wholly wicked one
 barely admitted that he had fallen together with Hades.
 And so together they bewail their fall:
 "To what," says the devil, "have we brought ourselves?
 How have we fallen by this tree?
 For our destruction its planting was rooted in the earth.
 We grafted to it bitter shoots.
 We did not transform the sweetness in it."
 "Alas, my comrade." "Alas, my companion."
 "As we have fallen together, so let us grieve,
 for Adam is going back *again to paradise.*

¹⁷ John 19.34.

¹⁸ Genesis 3.20.

13

“O how did we not remember the types of this tree!
For of old they were shown forth in many and varied ways
in the saved and in the lost.¹⁹
By a tree, Noah was saved,
but the whole world, unbelieving, was destroyed.
Moses was glorified through one when he took a staff as a scepter,
but Egypt, with the plagues that came from it,
was drowned as though fallen into deep wells.
What it has now done, the Cross showed forth of old in image.
Why then are we weeping?
For Adam is going *again to paradise*.”

14

“Wait, wretched Hades,” said the demon with a groan,
“Quiet, be patient, lay hand on mouth,
for I hear a voice revealing joy.
A sound has reached me bringing good tidings,
a rustle of words like the leaves of the Cross.
For Christ at the point of death cried out, ‘Father, forgive them.’
But he grieved me when he then said
that the lawless know not what they do.’²⁰
But we know that it is the Lord
of glory²¹ who is suffering and that he wishes
to bring Adam back *again to paradise*.”

¹⁹ Hebrews 1.1; 1 Corinthians 1.18.

²⁰ Luke 23.34.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 2.8.

15

“Did the Master, by the tree he showed to Moses,
the very one that once sweetened the water at Mara,²²
teach what it was and what was its root?
Then, he did not say, for it was not his will.
But now he has made it clear to all.
For behold, all things have been made pleasant,
but we have been embittered.²³
From our root, a Cross has blossomed,
which was cast into the earth, which became sweet.
The root, which formerly bred thorns,
now like a Sorech vine²⁴ has spread branches,
which are transplanted *again to paradise.*”

16

“Now therefore, Hades, groan and I will harmonize with your wails.
Let us lament as we see the tree that we planted
transformed into a holy trunk,
beneath which have sheltered
and will nest in its branches²⁵
thieves, murderers, and publicans and harlots,
that they may reap sweet fruit from the supposedly arid.
For they cling to the Cross as to a plant of life,
pressed against it and swimming,
through it they escape and are brought for anchorage
as to a fair haven *again to paradise.*”

²² Exodus 15.23-25.

²³ Isaiah 14.9.

²⁴ Isaiah 5.2.

²⁵ Psalm 79.9-12.

17

“Swear then, tyrant, finally to crucify no one.
 And you, Tartarus, make a firm decision to slay no one.
 We have had our experience, let us draw in our hand.
 May what we have undergone become for us knowledge for the future.
 Let neither of us ever again tyrannize the race of Adam;
 for it has been sealed by the Cross, like a treasure
 containing an unravished pearl in a corruptible vessel,
 which a robber, well-suited to his trade,
 ravished on the Cross. For stealing he was nailed up,
 and having thieved he was called *again to paradise*.”

18

O most high and glorious, God of fathers and of youths,
 your willing outrage has become our honor.
 For, in your Cross, we may all boast.
 To it we have nailed our hearts,
 that on it we may hang our instruments
 and sing to you, the Lord of all, from the odes of Zion.²⁶
 The ship from Tarshish once upon a time
 brought gold to Solomon, as it is written.²⁷
 To us your tree gives back,
 every day and moment, wealth beyond price,
 for it brings us all *again to paradise*.

Mellas, Andrew. Hymns of Repentance: Saint Romanos The Melodist (Popular Patristic Series Book 61) (pp. 87-89). Saint Vladimirs Seminary Press. Kindle Edition.

²⁶ Psalm 136.2–3.

²⁷ 3 Reigns (1 Kings) 10.21–22.

Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

Our Father...

Through the prayers of St Romanos the Melodist, and all our holy fathers and mothers in the faith, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen