

The Bridge  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Romans 10.1-10

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit—one God—Amen!

Today in America is Orthodox prison ministry Sunday. This ministry is an important ministry. This is one of the things that our Lord tells us—*I was in prison and you ministered unto me* (Mt 25.36).

Probably each of us knows somebody who has been in prison. Someone who has been removed from society because of what they have done.

So often, those who find themselves in prison are ones who are shunned both while they are in prison and when they come back out into society.

They do not have the same opportunities that everyone else has.

The prisoner is cut off from society and they become captives on a rocky island surrounded by raging waters with the bridge to connect them to the mainland for sustenance and support blocked off.

But this is not the way of church, right—to shun, to degrade to cut off connection. It's not the way that our Lord asks us to behave. Our Lord asks us to visit those who are in prison—to open that bridge of community in which we find salvation.

We can think about the thief on the cross. One of the last acts of our Lord is to promise paradise to this prisoner who is dying on the cross next to him (Lk 23.43)—to open a lifeline to him and provide a way for connection with Himself.

Do we visit those who are in prison?

Do we minister to those who are in prison?

Do we open bridges and find ways to connect to those who are cut off from others?

One might say, “it is difficult to minister to or to visit those who are in prison”

And here you might be right to certain extent. . . our prison system makes it difficult to visit those who are in prison but we are not let off the hook that easy

Why?

Well, in a certain way, every person can find themselves in prison.

In the prison that we make for ourselves when we seclude ourselves from others in sin

In the prison that has blocked the bridge to the mainland through unrepentance

So actually we have no excuse for not ministering to those who are in prison, for when we do not minister to our neighbors, we block the bridge that can lead to sustenance, community and salvation.

So what does it look like to visit those who are in the prison of sin?

Well, our Lord shows us the way, we forgive as he forgave the thief, the publican and the prodigal son, we listen as listened to those who asked him for healing—the lepers, the paralytics, the sick and those in mourning, we give a good word when asked, as he taught, preached and admonished those who needed it.

So there is outward work to do

But there is also inward work to do.

The work of salvation that our Lord did was a work that extended to a place where no one could go and that is into the human heart

Our Lord descended into hades and the prison of death and He opened that bridge to paradise that sin blocked off.

This descent into the human heart—the place no one else could go—is what saves us

Do we perhaps sometimes keep Him from visiting us in the island prison of our hearts?

Is it perhaps easier to shun Him and continue in our sin? . . .

Today we hear from St Paul—*he who confesses with his mouth and believes in his heart will be*

*saved* (Rom 10.9)

Now what does confessing with our mouth and believing in our heart have to do with being saved?

Well, opening the bridge from the mind to the heart is part of the work of salvation and this confessing and believing is what we do when we practice the Jesus prayer—*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner.*

This prayer—when we put it upon our lips often, when we confess it—is how we invite our Lord to descend into our hearts and open and use that bridge for us that is our salvation.

In fact, the Lord himself is the bridge. The constant repetition of His name connects the mind and heart and this connection sustains us, nourishes us and ultimately saves us. The Lord's through His power removes the stone that blocks the bridge off from Life.

As Christ connects us to Himself through this prayer we become aware of an amazing thing...

We become aware that it is actually Christ in a certain way who is in our hearts—our Lord says, *I was in prison and you visited me.*

How can this be?

Well, each of us is created in the image of God (Gen 1.26) but also our Lord says, *I will give you a new heart and a new spirit* (Ez 36.26) and that *we are the temple of God* (1 Cor 3.17)

So when we cooperate with our Lord through calling on His name we can understand that we encounter our Lord in this work. This understanding is made very clear in the Matthew 25 passage that I mentioned earlier. *I was sick, I was in prison, I was hungry, I was thirsty*—We encounter Christ in our neighbor and there is a way in which we can encounter Christ in ourselves in a certain way as well.

When we cooperate with this opening of the bridge done by Christ we become Saints—we become ones who are deified, ones who have submitted to our purpose—which is to be united to our Maker.

In the beginning God speaks and all creation comes into being so that creation contains in

some way God Himself. When creation turns away from God in sin, that Life which sustains creation and completes it, is cut off from God and blocked up with the stone of death.

Our Lord's descent into His creation in His incarnation is His work of removing the stone and opening that bridge for Life and our work of saying the Jesus prayer is one way we participate in the incarnation of our Lord—allowing Him to be incarnate in us.

Before He took on Human flesh, this pathway to our heart was not open except unto a few chosen ones

But after His incarnation, death and resurrection this bridge into the heart was cleared for everyone

This mystery is difficult to comprehend—the bonds of Sin that we willingly choose make Christ captive in our hearts. Are we willing to cooperate with our Lord so that He can deliver us from the prison of death and so that we can cooperate with the Word of God?

This cooperation and bridge opening begins with the outward work of ministering to our neighbor—those who need a kind word, or a helping hand or a listening ear

This cooperation begins with the outward work of visiting those in prison

This cooperation continues with the inward work of allowing Christ to sanctify us through the work of connecting our mouth or our mind with our heart.

Cooperate with our Lord and visit the prisoner

In so doing you will keep the commandments of Christ

Cooperate with our Lord and say the Jesus prayer—Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the Sinner.

Say this when you wake,

Say this before you eat,

Say this when you drive,

Say this when you are bored,

Say this when you are waiting in line,

Say this before bed,

In so doing you will participate in our Lord's redemption of the world through the removal of the stone and gaining access to paradise again.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the Sinner. Amen!