

## **Sunday Sermon – Sunday before Holy Cross – Cornelius the Centurion**

Fr. Demetri Tsigas, St. Katherine, Melbourne, FL – 2015-09-13

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Old Testament was a limited covenant, a limited contractual relationship, between God and what would become the Nation of Israel, the offspring of Jacob who was later renamed Israel. Initially Jesus Christ came to establish His New Testament, His New Covenant or contract relationship, with the offspring of same Jewish people. Likewise St. Paul and the other 12 Apostles initially limited their outreach only to Jewish believers who would accept Jesus as the prophesied Messiah -- God in the Flesh, crucified, resurrected and glorified.

So, who was the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity? According to Acts 10, it was Cornelius the Centurion who is commemorated today by the Orthodox Christian Church. From that point forward, Christianity began to become a universal contractual relationship between God and any and every one who would believe.

Who was this Cornelius and why did God choose him? Cornelius had previously lived in Thracian Italy. Although he was a pagan, he distinguished himself by deep piety in prayer, fasting and generous charitable giving, as we learn from the Gospel of Luke (Acts 10:2). The Lord recognized his virtuous life, and so led him to the knowledge of truth and to faith in Christ.

Cornelius was praying in his home around 3 PM. An angel of God appeared to him and said that his prayer had been heard and accepted by God. The angel commanded him to send to Joppa to find Simon, also called Peter. Cornelius immediately obeyed the command. The next day while Cornelius' servants were on their way to Joppa, the Apostle Peter was at prayer at noon on his house top. He also had a vision: three times a great sheet was lowered down to him, filled with all kinds of beasts and fowl. He heard a voice from Heaven commanding him to kill and eat. When the apostle refused to eat food which Jewish Law regarded as unclean, the voice said: "*What God has cleansed, you must not call common*" (Acts 10:15). The Lord then revealed to Peter that three men were at his door.

Through this vision the Apostle Peter understood that the Lord telling to preach the Word of God to the pagans, to non-Jews. When the Apostle Peter arrived at the house

of Cornelius, Cornelius fell down at the feet of the apostle. St. Peter talked with him and all those gathered about the earthly life of Jesus Christ, spoke of the miracles and signs worked by the Savior, and of His teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven. Then St. Peter told him of the Lord's death on the Cross, His Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, Cornelius and all those assembled began to speak in tongues. They believed in Christ and were all baptized – all his family and assembled friends as well. He was the first pagan, the first non-Jew, to receive Baptism.

Cornelius retired from the military and went preaching the Gospel together with the Apostle Peter, who made him a bishop. When the Apostle Peter, together with his helpers Sts. Timothy and Cornelius, was in the city of Ephesus, he learned of a particularly vigorous idol-worship in the city of Skepsis. Lots were drawn to see who would go there, and St. Cornelius was chosen.

In the city lived a prince by the name of Demetrius, who knew ancient Greek philosophy, hating Christianity and venerating the pagan gods, in particular Apollo and Zeus. When he learned about the arrival of St. Cornelius in the city, he immediately summoned him and asked him why he had come. St. Cornelius answered that he came to free the prince from the darkness of ignorance and to lead him to knowledge of the True Light.

The prince became angry and demanded that Cornelius answer his questions. When St. Cornelius explained that he served the Lord God Jesus Christ and that he came to declare the Truth. The prince became enraged and demanded that Cornelius offer sacrifice to the idols.

The saint asked to be shown the gods. When he entered the pagan temple, Cornelius turned towards the east and uttered a prayer to the Lord. There was an earthquake, and the temple of Zeus and the idols situated in it were all destroyed. All the populace, seeing what had happened, were terrified.

The prince was even more vexed and began to take counsel together with his royal court about how to destroy Cornelius. They bound the saint and took him to prison for the night. At this point, one of his servants informed the prince that his wife and child had perished beneath the rubble of the destroyed temple.

Later, the pagan priest, Barbates, reported that he heard the voice of the prince's wife and son somewhere in the ruins and that they were praising the God of the Christians. The pagan priest asked that Cornelius be released in gratitude for the miracle.

Prince Demetrius ran to the prison, declared that he believed in Jesus Christ and asked St. Cornelius to bring his wife and son out of the ruins of the temple. St. Cornelius went to the destroyed temple, and after praying there, the prince's wife and son were found and freed from the rubble, both alive and well.

After this the prince Demetrius, and all his relatives and comrades accepted holy Baptism, just as St. Cornelius and his family and friends had done a few years earlier. St. Cornelius lived for a long time in this city. He converted all the pagan inhabitants to Christ. St. Cornelius died a martyr's death in old age and was buried not far from the pagan temple he destroyed.

I was living in Portland, Oregon when 9/11 happened. We were sleeping then got a wakeup call to turn on the TV from my mother-in-law. No sooner had we turned on the TV than we saw the second plane crash into the Twin Towers and soon thereafter both towers came down. The words out of my mouth were, "My God, why have You removed your protection from us?" No sooner had I said those words than I knew the answer. We've taken the Bible and prayer out of our kids' school. We've taken the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and completely twisted them around. We've declared a constitutional right to abortion and now to gay marriage. Does anybody really believe that that is what the authors of the constitution intended? Does anybody really believe that that is what God intended? We have increasingly turned what was a freedom of religion into a freedom from religion. We have turned our backs on God and God has removed his protection and blessing from us.

Unless we repent, unless we like Cornelius and Prince Demetrius and all their family and friends turn back to God with prayer, fasting and charitable giving, we will continue to pay the price for our rebellion and we, our families, friends and all those around us will suffer the consequences. Our problems are not physical, financial or political. Our problems our spiritual. We need spiritual solutions. We need to repent and turn back to God. Then we and all those around us will be blessed and God's protection will once again be over us.

Brothers and sisters, as we just commemorated the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, let us not be ignorant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Read your Bible. More importantly, live your Bible and share it with your children, your family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and everyone you can. God still wants to save us and all those around us. Let's work with Him to bring about salvation, His blessing and protection upon us and all those around us.

Tomorrow we commemorate St. Helen finding the cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May we like St. Helen seek and find the saving cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To God be the glory, now and forever and to the ages of ages, Amen.