

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today is the Anniversary of the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and Flight 93 that came down in the fields of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. At the same time that we remember those who lost their lives from these shameful acts of human terrorism, we are praying for the millions of people who have been affected by the ongoing onslaught of natural disasters, particularly hurricanes and earthquakes on several continents, including our own.

Even in popular media these multiple events prompt apocalyptic thinking about the end of the world. It certainly seems that the extent of both natural disasters and human violence place us in a context much as our Lord Jesus Christ describes in the Gospel reading we hear on the Saturday following the Elevation of the Cross [Matthew 24:1-13]: “Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.’ Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?’ And Jesus answered and said to them: ‘Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

While the tone of this passage seems frightening, it is important to recognize that this passage is heard while we are in the midst of the celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross.

“He who endures to the end shall be saved.” With our Lord’s final exhortation, we are given an overall message of hope and encouragement, which is precisely the message of the Cross: through the Cross, joy has come into all the world. Indeed, the very next verse says it is this gospel of the Kingdom—this joyful news of God’s presence in the midst of calamities—that is our message and witness to the world. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” [Matthew 24:14].

As we sing on the feast itself, the Cross is ultimately a source of hope for us and the means by which mercy and resurrection are offered to us and to the world. “The Tree of true life was planted in the place of the skull, and upon it, eternal King, Thou hast wrought salvation in the midst of the earth! Exalted today, it sanctifies the ends of the world. Angels in heaven greatly rejoice and men and women upon earth make glad, crying aloud with David and saying: Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His footstool, for He is holy and grants the world great mercy!” [Litiya].

Suffering makes the world “the place of the skull.” Yet that is where God has chosen to plant His Cross as “the Tree of true life.” As we pray for those who lost their lives in the 9/11 terrorist attacks (and all the attacks that have subsequently afflicted so many parts of the world) and those who have perished or are suffering through the effects of Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Irma and the earthquake in Mexico, let us make the message of the Cross and Resurrection our focus and hope.

Yours in Christ,

+ Tikhon

Archbishop of Washington

Metropolitan of All America and Canada