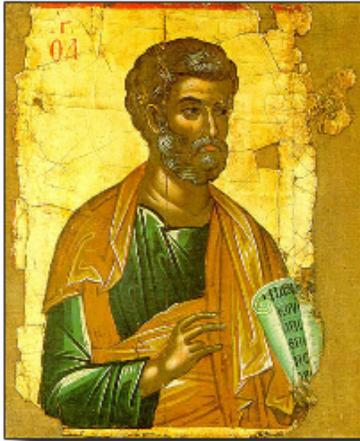


Love Overcomes Fear

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



After Pascha we read the book of Acts in sections. Acts 4: 13 to 5: 33 are filled with wonderful evidence of the power of love in the young Church.

The first verses describe the "boldness" of the apostles Peter and John, who preach to growing crowds that there is "salvation in no one else" except Jesus Christ. When the chief priests and elders warn them to stop, their response shows that they are not the same fearful men who hid away when Christ was crucified. They are compelled, they answer, to share the truth they have seen and heard.

The two apostles return to their friends, and everyone prays together that God will look upon the threats made against them, and "grant to Thy servants to speak Thy word with all boldness." The place where they are gathered is "shaken" and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. There will be hostile enemies trying to instill fear in them, but the Spirit will strengthen them to overcome it with love.

The next verses describe the practical results of the love God has enabled them to share. "Great grace" is upon them all, and there "is not a needy person among them." Everyone gives their property or money, laying it at the apostles' feet to be used for the common good.

But the Book of Acts is not a naive description of idealized human behavior. So the very next verses tell us of a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who succumb to temptation and betray this communal trust and love. They sell their property and bring what they claim is the total of the proceeds, while actually keeping back some.

Peter says solemn words to Ananias: "You have not lied to men but to God." He is not pronouncing judgment, but seems to be saying that in the atmosphere of love, deceit cannot survive. Ananias falls dead on the spot. When his wife Sapphira continues to lie to Peter about the price of their property, she too dies immediately.

Following both deaths, we read that "great fear" fell upon those who heard about them, and indeed upon the whole church. But even this fear is overcome by God's love, the love uniting His people. The next verses tell us that "more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women..."

The Church commemorates the Holy Martyr Leonidas, the father of the prominent theologian Origen. Leonidas, a brilliant Christian philosopher, was imprisoned during one of the third-century persecutions of Christians. His wife and seven children, of whom Origen was the oldest, were terrified, especially when all their possessions were confiscated by imperial decree, leaving them in abject poverty.

Yet Leonidas had nurtured in his eldest son a deep trust in God. Origen wrote to his father in prison: "Do not worry about us, and do not flee from martyrdom on our account." He was one more person who knew that love centered in God can always overcome fear.