

AKATHIST TO ST. PANTELEIMON
LECTURE ON CHRIST THE DIVINE PHYSICIAN
St Basil's in Simpson
July 30, 2008

What a great blessing it is for us to gather this evening in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the purpose of singing the beautiful Akathist Hymn to St Panteleimon. Saint Panteleimon is one of the great saints of the Holy Church, and is one of the many saints who were also physicians and doctors, as we understand the word today.

Saint Panteleimon, and the other saints like him, were unique because they were very well versed in the medical science of their time (which was in the third century) and many of them became famous because of their great skill in the art of bringing physical healing to people and even to animals. Saint Panteleimon was one of these saints, whom we refer to as the Holy and Unmercenary Healers, but at first, he was simply a young boy, who received the name Pantoleon from his parents. It was only later that he was given the name "Panteleimon" (which I will speak about in a moment).

And so, the young Pantoleon, very early in his life, was placed by his parents under the care of a well-known doctor who trained him in all the medical science of that time. Pantoleon became so perfect in this field that the Emperor himself requested him as his personal physician. While he was working for the Emperor (whose name was Maximian), Pantoleon, who was not a Christian at this time, began to pass by the house where a certain Christian priest was hiding. During this time, there was a great persecution of Christians and many became martyrs for the faith. Those that were not killed were forced to hide away in various places in order to preserve the life of the Christian community.

So the young Pantoleon would pass by this house where a priest was hiding. Only it was not just any priest that was there, it was Saint Hermolaus who is also honored by the Church as one of the Holy Unmercenary Physicans. Saint Hermolaus is commemorated by the Church on July 26th, which is the day before Saint Panteleimon's commemoration (July 27th, last Sunday).

One day, St. Hermolaos, who had observed the nobility of character of the young Pantoleon, walking by his house each day, invited him in and spoke to him about Jesus Christ. Saint Hermolaus gently taught Pantoleon that medical science can only offer very feeble relief to our suffering human nature which is subject to death and that only Christ, Who is the Only True Physician, came offer us salvation, freely and without earthly medication.

Hearing these words, Pantoleon's heart was filled with joy and with love for Christ and he began to stop by every day, learning from St Hermolaus of the Christian Faith and of the great power found in the grace of God. He was soon baptized and began to work many healings through the invocation of the Name of Christ. He distributed all his wealth to the poor, freed all of his slaves and began to offer his services as a physician without asking for anything in return. (This is why he is called "unmercenary" because he was not tied to the things of this earth).

This made the other pagan doctors jealous and they soon denounced Pantoleon to the Emperor, who had him put to many tortures, although he first tried to reason with him and bring him back to the worship of the false gods. Pantoleon was steadfast and did not waver, but always placed his trust in the

mercy and grace of God. After many horrible tortures, Pantoleimon was brought forth to be beheaded. Before the executioner could lower the blade, a heavenly voice was heard saying: "Faithful servant, your desire will now be fulfilled, for the gates of heaven are opened to you and your crown is prepared. From henceforth, you will be the refuge of the despairing, the help of those in temptation, the physician of the sick and the terror of demons. This is why your name will no longer be Pantoleon, but Panteleimon."

And this is how he received the name Panteleimon, which means: "very merciful." He was given this name not only because he himself received much mercy from the grace of Almighty God, but because, through him, we too can receive this same mercy and this same grace of God.

The icon in front of which we have been praying is an icon of Saint Panteleimon and it comes from the Monastery in Greece which was named after him: the Monastery of St. Panteleimon, on Mt. Athos. This monastery is a very large Russian Monastery on the Greek peninsula of Mount Athos, which is also known as the Holy Mountain. This particular icon was painted by a monk of that monastery and it was given as a gift to St. Tikhon's Monastery, here in South Canaan, in 1905, when our Monastery was founded.

At the time of the sending of this icon, which was sent along with the icon of "She Who is Quick to Hear", there were probably 2-3 thousand monks at St. Panteleimon. There are not as many today, but that monastery is still there and is seeing a revival in the monastic life. And our Monastery of St Tikhon is also still here today, and both of these monasteries exist by the grace of Almighty God and by the prayers of our many great saints, such as Saint Panteleimon. This grace of God remains with us forever, whether we live in the third century, like Saint Paneteleimon, or in the 21st century.

Back in the 20th century, when this icon was brought to Saint Tikhon's, there are many eyewitness accounts of the events of Memorial Day in 1906, when the two icons were brought in procession from Mayfield, through Carbondale, to Waymart, by train (the railroad which passed very close to this very spot) and then carried on foot the remainder of the way to St. Tikhon's Monastery, where they have stayed until this day.

Bishop Innocent from Alaska led the procession, along with Fr. Arseny, and the entire procession was greeted by St. Tikhon and St. Raphael, along with St. Alexander Hotovitsky. These were all saints who labored here in North Eastern PA, and these are saints which form a choir with all the saints of our Church, such as St Panteleimon and St Hermolaus. All of these great saints bear witness to the grace and power of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Physcian.

Saint Pantoleimon's icon is a reminder to us, not just of the history and the life of one man, but of the miracle of healing that is wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not worship the wood and the paint of the icon, but we honor the saint who is depicted there, the saint as he is in heaven, in his transfigured glory.

We are all in need of transfiguration and of healing: some of us suffer from physical ailments, others from emotional stress, some from psychological disorders, and all of us must face the reality of death. Saint Pantoleimon reminds us that there is only one place to turn for to find healing of our infirmities and that is Christ and His HolyChurch. It is though the Holy Mysteries of baptism, of Chrismation, of repentance and of Holy Anointing,

that we enter into that mystery of God's grace which comforts us, but most importantly, brings healing to our wounded hearts.

Even though we each suffer in a unique and different way, we all do so because we face the common enemy which is death. But in Christ, we are given the One who has overcome death and granted us life. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to us, not simply to ransom us from death, not simply to pay a debt for us because we couldn't pay it ourselves, not simply to suffer a horrible death for our sins. He came to do much more than this: He came to open to us once again the gate of Paradise. He came to bring joy and light to our sad and darkened hearts. He came to slay death by his death, so that death would no longer have dominion over us.

He came so that we might inherit in this very life, the divine and heavenly life of the angels, the life in paradise which we lost through disobedience, but which we can regain through repentance and obedience, through faith and through prayer. This is the example of St Panteleimon's life: we are told of the tortures he endured and the suffering he went through at the hands of the pagans not to make us afraid, or for us to be amazed by them. We are told of all of this so that we might be encouraged to bear the sufferings that each one of us endures in this life, and for us to know that we cannot do this ourselves: we must rely on something greater than ourselves, and that something is the grace of God, the healing touch of the divine Physician who unfailingly enters the hearts of those who have been humbled. Psalm 50 reminds us: "A broken and contrite heart, God will not despise". This means that, when we face our struggles and our crosses, we should be humbled by them, even be crushed by them, but not so we can enter into despair or depression, but so we can receive that grace of God which will bring true and deep and lasting healing.

There is nothing in this world that can withstand the grace of God, just as there is not darkness that can overcome the light of the resurrection of Christ. This grace and this light are given to us as a free gift by God, but we have to make ourselves worthy of that grace and of that life. Perhaps we will never be called to offer our life itself for Christ, as Saint Panteleimon did, but are nevertheless called to give ourselves completely to Christ, who IS our life. Even we make just a small effort, we will receive in abundance the gift of eternal life.

May this be so though the prayers of St Panteleimon, of St Basil and of all the holy men and women who have struggled and attained their crowns in the heavenly Kingdom.