

***Put your best foot forward*** – 2 (Luke 13:31-35; Phil 3:17-4:1)

\* Dear Friends, you should agree with the statement that climbing a mountain is more difficult than walking a plain footpath. But it doesn't mean that all Friends prefer comforts to challenges. Instead of watching the enthusiasts *journeying the oceans*, some Friends are getting out to the oceans themselves. For example, Californian Bill Burke who **thrice** made an attempt to reach the summit of the world's highest mountain, Mount Everest. His first attempt in 2007 ended just **300** feet from the summit when he turned around, afraid he wouldn't have the strength to climb down if he continued. But on his **third** attempt in May 2009, he reached the summit. Significantly, 67-year-old Bill became the oldest American to climb to the 29,035 feet peak. The next interesting thing is that that in spring around **300** people climbed up but several people have never returned. All those mountaineers dealt with cool-cold things like those described by the hero Bill. The day after reaching the summit, he called his wife Sharon, *I've never been in a storm like that in the mountains*, he said. *Snow, freezing, freezing cold, high winds, it was quite a wild ride. It was really difficult, a very hard mountain. There is nothing about it that is easy. But, thank God, we made it and we made it back safely.*

\* If you noticed, Bill's message was summed up with giving thanks to God for his successful achievement, as he said, *we made it and we made it back safely*. It is obvious that Bill is a Christian who likes to sail the open ocean instead of a harbor. I am always fascinated by characters who get to one summit after another; especially by those Friends who, instead of world-love happenings, concentrate their goals upon spiritual and intellectual summits after being charmed by *Mount of Beauties*, (Mat 5:3-11). Significantly, saying in an expressive way each Christian can be seen as a mountaineer whom Christ calls for ascension up to the most high mountain that is Christ's perfection itself. Now, imagine the apostle Paul as a mountaineering instructor and we are his students. Before putting our best foot forward, we receive guidance from him. *I do not say that I have already won the race or have already reached perfection*, he says. .... *This one thing let us do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, let us press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus;* ( Phil 3:12-14).

\* As was mentioned before, the 40 days of Lent should be the days of our preparation for Easter. What does this mean to be prepared for the celebration of Christ's Resurrection? Some of you might think we need to mop up the sanctuary, decorate the church with flowers, cook Easter bread, send hundreds of Easter-cards and so forth? Friends, all these things are good but they are not what God calls us to do for preparation. If there would be no concern regarding self-examination, self-denial, faithfulness, charity,

penitential prayers, then we would not be mountaineers heading for the perfection, and we would not be prepared for the upcoming celebration. Within this context, do you think God will reward his people, even though they are going to decorate each corner of the church with flowers?

\* Now it is time to take a closer look at our Gospel lesson for today. In short this passage includes the two segments; the first one, (v.v.31-33), represents a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees, and the second, (v.v.34,35), is the so-called *Jesus' lament over Jerusalem*. Both parts signify the notion of *the rejected prophets* or the *Prophet* who himself is the chief among all prophets, (Deut 18:15). At the beginning of our text Jesus explained what he was going to do. It is about driving out demons, healing the sick and in the end he was going to perform something special. After those things the great city Jerusalem would be left without the King's support and protection, he said. Today we know what Jesus had in mind saying these things. He had in mind the cross, resurrection and the city's desolation. The records of these events were written and come to us from first hand accounts; even the first-century Jewish historians Josephus mentioned some details. They witnessed that Jesus was crucified, died and rose from the dead, after all the Jewish capital was leveled to the ground.

\* But in what way can this lesson benefit our need to prepare for the celebration of our perfection through Jesus Christ? In order to answer this question, look at Philippians 3, the epistle's reading for today. Here the apostle asks his Brothers to follow him as a pattern, Brothers, *join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those (Friends) who walk according to the example you have in us*, (3:17). Now look around, Do you have any one whom you may like to follow as an example of a faithful servant? By the way, we may like to follow Paul as a chief mountaineering instructor, or even Jesus who is the First and the Last, absolutely perfect example for imitating. So imagine yourselves again as eyewitnesses to the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees and learn from Jesus how and what to say to people who by their false arguments want to destroy God's mission through you.

\* The scholars would be saying that the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees is a *dialogical exchange of imperatives*. Here it is as Pharisees said, *Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you*, (v31). Friends, are we afraid? Of course we are not; there is no one who can threaten us with death. Thinking about this, I recall my past in Russia. Once I was rebuked by an influential man who said that *if I will not stop my missionary activities, I will be killed like Alexander Men*, – the Orthodox priest Alexander Men was murdered on September 9, 1990 with an ax on his way to church. But in spite of threats, many follow after Jesus as a pattern in his sayings and acts. So the Pharisees said to him, *Get away from here*,

*for Herod wants to kill you, in one voice with Jesus we respond, Go you and tell that fox, 'Look, I am casting out demons and performing healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will complete my work, (32).*

\* Friends, from my life-experience I learned, if a person works out God's plan for perfection, nobody can stop him. One year after receiving the threat to my life, Jesus had started a church through me. It was a snow-crowned summit that I reached on October 1993; after that there were some other snow-crowned summits in my way, including two theological seminaries, citizenship and a pastorate. Today and tomorrow Jesus Christ leads you and me to ascend the next mountain and at the Lord's timing he will complete His work through us.

\* Friends, some of you have surprised me with your achievements. I am pretty sure that you are good mountaineers. But my and your work has not been completed yet, today and tomorrow we keep on 40-days of ascension climbing upward for our spiritual perfection. Significantly, if to follow a literal translation from the Greek, Jesus' phrase, *and on the third day I complete my work, (v.32)* needs to be translated as, *to the third day I am being perfected.* That moment, in view of the upcoming suffering on the cross, Jesus had in mind Golgotha, that is the spiritual Everest where the human body was perfected for eternity.

\* Beloved, according to St. Paul, it is necessary for us to work out our perfection under the supervision of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Don't give up, stand firm in your preparation. Have a hope that your labor will not be forgotten and you will receive the crown from the Master of your final perfection, Jesus Christ. By his omnipotent power Jesus subjects everything under his control and on the third eschatological day He will transform our lowly bodies into the likeness of his glorious body and we will be with Jesus forever.

Amen.

Dear Lord, let us see your glorious resurrection in our mortal bodies, for to you belongs all glory and honor and dominion, Amen.

Beloved, grace and peace be with you always,

Amen.