

## **JESUS AND KING ABGAR, THE HEALING TOWEL: CHRIST HIS OWN ICONOGRAPHER**

by

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In this short homily, I will ‘finish off’ the spiritual relationship between our Lord Jesus Christ and King Abgar of Edessa. To recap, the King had leprosy over his entire body. He believed in Christ without seeing Him, which is a spiritual standard for all of us! He had written to Jesus and sent the letter by his courier-painter Ananias. He had been instructed to paint the image of our Saviour.

When the courier-painter arrived in Jerusalem, the Lord was surrounded by people, and he couldn’t get a good vantage point to paint Jesus. He tried to paint Him while standing on a very large rock but to no avail. The Lord saw him, called him by name and gave him the wonderful letter discussed in the previous homily on the letters and King Abgar’s faith. In that letter, He promised to send His disciple after His Ascension to heal him and instruct him in the True Faith.

The Image/Christ’s Icon of Himself:

After this, the Lord called for water and a towel. He wiped His face, rubbing with the towel, and on it was impressed His Divine image. The towel and the letter the Savior sent with Ananias to Edessa. With thanksgiving Abgar received the sacred object and received healing, but a small portion, only a trace, remained of the terrible disease on his face until the arrival of the promised Disciple of the Lord.

[see <http://www.stvlads.com/article.php?id=33>, *Icon Not-Made-By-Hands*]

After Christ’s Ascension, Thomas dispatched Thaddaeus, one of the Seventy, to Edessa to complete the cure. Thaddaeus preached the Gospel to them and baptised King Abgar and everyone in Edessa. The King wrote on the Icon Not-Made-By-Hands “Christ-God, everyone trusting in Thee will not be put to shame”. He “adorned it and placed it in a niche over the city gates”. [*ibid.*]

This image of the Lord is the first icon, and it was ‘written’ by Christ Himself. This holy cloth is our spiritual protector and a gift from the Saviour. God Himself has sanctioned icons as a missionary vehicle for our salvation! How could the Iconoclasts have attacked the spiritual values of icons when the Lord Himself was the first iconographer?

## The Spiritual Trek of the Image Not-Made-By-Hands

The people of Edessa through time developed a custom of bowing down to the Lord's Icon whenever they went through the city gates. One of King Abgar's great-grandsons who later ruled Edessa fell into idolatry and decided to take down the Icon from its niche. The Lord intervened coming in a vision and ordering the Edessa bishop [note: they only had one as things are supposed to go, smile] to hide His Image. The bishop came at night with his clergy, lit a lampada before it and walled it up with a board and bricks.

As time went by, the people forgot about it. However, in 545 A.D., the Persian Emperor Chozroes I attacked Edessa. The situation looked hopeless; however, Divine Providence intervened again, the Most Holy Theotokos Mary appeared to Bishop Evlavios [again, only one bishop apparently, smile, smile] ordering him to remove the Icon from its sealed quarters and it would save the city. He did just that and found the lampada still burning plus a copy of the image had been reproduced on the board enclosing the niche.. The Church carried the Icon Not Made-By-Hands in a procession around the walls of the city. Afterwards, the Persian army miraculously left.

In 630 A.D., the Arabs seized Edessa, but they did not hinder the reverencing of the holy Icon, whose fame had spread throughout the entire East. In 944 A.D., the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos (912-959) paid a ransom to the emir of the city to transfer the letter and Icon Not-Made-By-Hands to Constantinople. With great reverence, the clergy brought both the letter and Icon to Constantinople. On August 16, the Icon of the Saviour was placed in the Tharossa Church of the Most Holy Theotokos.

Whatever ultimately happened to the Image?

Hard to say exactly. Tradition has it being carried off by Crusaders during their rule at Constantinople (1204-1261), but the ship on which it was being transported sank in the waters of the Sea of Marmora. In another version, around 1362 the Icon was transported to Genoa "where it was presented to and preserved in a monastery dedicated to the Apostle Bartholomew". [*id.*]

During the iconoclast heresy, "the defenders of icon-veneration, shedding their blood for the Holy Icons, sang the Troparion to the Image Not-Made-By-Hands". [*id.*]

Hymn of Praise

Prince Abgar

A gentle God, Who reveals mysteries,  
Wonderful mysteries, never before dreamed of,  
Once by the lake, You proclaimed  
That many pagan peoples

From throughout the east, to the west  
With Abraham to sit at the table,  
And the unbelieving sons of the Jews  
To utter darkness, will be expelled  
Because of their hardened heart.  
The mystery You spoke and the mystery came about:  
The Jews in Your face gazed,  
Behind Your back, death, were preparing.  
And from distant regions, Prince Abgar,  
A leprous body and a wretched soul  
From a false faith of paganism,  
Heard of You from mouth to mouth,  
Heard of Your words and miracles,  
Heard of You and, in You, believed  
Of Your All-pure face, saw the likeness  
With tears, kissed the likeness  
In both body and soul, became whole  
His soul in Paradise, took up abode  
With Abraham to rejoice eternally.

[see

[http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/my.html?month=August&day=16  
&Go.x=13&Go.y=15](http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/my.html?month=August&day=16&Go.x=13&Go.y=15)

There are a number of variations regarding the spiritual paths of the Image Not-Made-By-Hands, but what we have developed here is the main thrust of the Tradition.

We are called by Christ to believe in the Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Tradition supports the very spiritual encounter between Jesus and King Abgar and the healing power of Christ's Image. There was a letter exchange between Jesus and King Abgar; there was an Icon Not-Made-By-Hands; the Saviour 'made' it; it cured King Abgar and Disciple Thaddaeus completed the curing when he went to Edessa; and the Icon has generated a number of miracles during its spiritual history. In fact, some say there are three other miraculous images. Only God knows the truth of these matters.

Read these two homilies in tandem with each other. I presented the first one to emphasise the great faith in Christ that the King showed, not ever having seen the Lord and His miracles. King Abgar was resolute in his faith in Christ. That is a wonderful lesson for ourselves. In this homily involving the cloth, shroud, call it what one will, Christ, the Chief Iconographer, uses His Image as a curing tool. We can use it also in a most spiritual way. We can use our belief in it to express more deeply our faith in Christ and His Way that cures the soul and prepares us for our salvation.

Our works will flow naturally from our faith; if they don't, we don't have faith. Let's keep trying to spiritually improve ourselves daily, by praying the Jesus Prayer and letting the 'good works' flow. Our goal is to become the image of Christ in His energies: deification. It is a long, arduous struggle, but spiritual and physical striving toward deification is the norm, not the exception, for those voluntarily embarking on the ship of Holy Orthodoxy.

Are we 'up' to the voyage?

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