

*“Some without fulfilling the commandments think that they possess true faith. Others fulfil the commandments and then expect the Kingdom as a reward due to them. Both are mistaken.”* So writes Saint Mark the Ascetic in the *Philokalia*.

When St Paul wrote one of his letters he was not composing a theological treatise. Rather, he was dealing with problems that had arisen in the churches of God to which he had brought the gospel or which he intended to visit. Perhaps the exception was his letter to the Hebrews, a profound meditation on the mystery of ancient Israel and economy of salvation.

Today is the Sunday after the feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos. Here, just over a week since the beginning of our liturgical year, we keep festival with all the faithful who venerate the birth of the one who, favoured of God and fulfilled through grace, consented to bring God incarnate into this world. Such is the very beginning of the mystery of our salvation. But today is also the Sunday before the year's second great feast: the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

In the epistle we heard today, St Paul reminds the church at Galatia *and indeed us*, that the saving love of God is shown to us primarily, not just in being *born of a woman* but in revealing his true glory on earth; not just in the shining light of His Transfiguration - for that was before three of His chosen apostles only; not in his wonders and miracles of healing - for those benefited only those who received them; not even in the profound wisdom and true philosophy of His teaching - albeit a wholly new way of understanding the commandments of God, but he reveals his true glory on earth by the most counter-intuitive way possible: The Cross. The Cross shows saving love of God and reveals His glory on earth.

We need to remember that the very first Christians, those who responded to the preaching of the Apostles, came, for the most part, from Judaism and even in Our Lord's own day, there were those who through ignorance or through wilful malice, misunderstood or misconstrued His word. Paul understood that there were those, who for all sorts of reasons, wanted the Messiah *contained*, even *restrained* by the confines of the Old Testament; that they should go on, following the Mitzvot, the commandments of the Torah (the Law).

It was a quandary that the whole body of the Apostles had to face, the Twelve and the Seventy, and they did face it, meeting at Jerusalem, as you can read in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. And the answer was No! Those who had died and risen with Christ in Baptism were not bound to the Torah, in fact to boast of being able to keep all 613 commandments as well as claiming to be *in Christ*, was sheer vanity from a disposition of pride. What need of Christ if you can save yourself by the Law? As St Mark the Acetic said: '*Others fulfil the commandments and then expect the Kingdom as a reward due to them.*'

So it seems that the Galatians were being taught by these false guides that they had to observe the Jewish rite of Circumcision as well as being Baptized. But Paul remarks: '*For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the Law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh.*' It is an odd phrase: '*...that they may glory in your flesh.*' But actually, I think what St Paul means here is that these false teachers are worldly men; they are being mere ritualists, demonstrating religiosity not true religion; the pedantic, over-scrupulous Pharisee-mind; a way of thinking based in anxiety rather than faith. Moreover, they are not prepared for the consequences in this world of trusting in Christ. Perhaps it was nostalgia for the old way of worship, Torah study and sacrifices in the temple.

It was certainly fear of persecution from their contemporaries and a kind of embarrassment, the Cross after all was the death of a despised criminal. As Paul himself says: *'It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that would compel you to be circumcised and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.'*

The whole point, he insists, is not whether physically and outwardly you conform to the ritual requirements of the Old Testament but that you have become reborn. Since the cross and resurrection of Christ the true Israelite is to be found only in the newly recreated humanity, the New Adam. *'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all, who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.'*

So what does this imply for us? We, the New Israel, how is our humanity different from the rest of the world? Recall what we saw last week: the very mysteries of the kingdom of God. We saw one bear in his body, like Paul, the marks of Jesus. We saw one fulfilling what was prefigured in the Old Testament, going through the waters like the children of Israel under the guidance of Moses. We saw one like David of old, whom Samuel anointed king in Israel with holy oil, becoming a *'christ,'* an anointed one. We saw one who, like those in the wilderness fed with manna, tasting, for the very first time, the bread of heaven that gives eternal life. Outwardly we saw a sacrament, but the inner eye of faith perceived one whose soul had died and was reborn. We saw the body buried under the waters but the soul that emerged at that time from the womb of the font was purer than he was when born of his mother: the old and the new Adam!

But for him and for all of us who have shared in the same mysteries of the kingdom, we still have Time to get through and there is life in the world of men, among the snares and temptations and the false ideas, the misplaced values, the worldly wisdom that entices down into spiritual death. Do we see

how we must struggle? The Cross is ours also to take up and carry and to glory in.

But St Paul not only had to contend with the Judaisers, those wedded to the old way. He also had to contend with false teaching and heresy from the Gnostics, both Jewish and pagan, who latched onto Christ, hijacked His gospel, as it were, and taught salvation through faith in a secret knowledge: it did not matter *how* you lived, there was no spiritual or moral struggle for the initiated, only the knowledge that you belonged to secret spiritual elite who had been lost in an world but were now rescued: such was the Gnostic myth. But as St Mark the Ascetic says, "*Some without fulfilling the commandments think that they possess true faith. We are justified by faith indeed, as St Paul tells the church at Rome but not by faith alone, as the Protestant Reformers thought, which is entirely unbiblical as an idea.*"

She, who by the Holy Spirit, brought to birth Christ in this world, had the highest vocation of any in our race. And we, who have been reborn in her son will only be seen as her children and will only prove His brothers and sisters now by being faithful, taking up His Cross and in hearing His Word and doing His commandments. For our glory is only to be found in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to us and we to the world.