

1st October 2017  
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17th after Pentecost

*'Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.'*

We are called to be different. Is that what brings us here today? Would it not be easier to live without that 'obligation' to gather for the Liturgy, so that we might take our leisure like other folk? What drives us to believe? Would it not be easier to live without that seal of Chrismation, stamping its mark upon the soul, so that everything must be seen in the light of the gospel? Would it not be easier to live without those pangs of conscience that weigh upon us every time we remember that we are to be sons of the Most High; merciful, even as our Father is merciful, so that we might claim our rights and, like others, live only in mutual self-interest?

After all, Christianity is impossible; it is too difficult for human beings! We, who have somehow to survive in this life, we, surely, have far more important things to do, not just on a Sunday morning but with all our time. Yes, that is perhaps the prime temptation, to think in that way.

Am I being deliberately provocative? Why, Yes, of course! Plenty of things in life are difficult; being a devotee of any of the world's religions might be difficult in some way or another. But Christianity is not just hard, it is impossible, for we are called to be *like God*. Not any old god, of course, but the Living God; the one revealed on earth in Jesus Christ; the same Christ who is the celebrant of this Liturgy, *the one who offers and is offered, that accepts and is distributed* - as prays the priest silently during the Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn.

But if this is so, why do we even try, knowing we must come here each Sunday in penitence; sometimes going to Confession; having to fast from all food from midnight; having to read the prayers of preparation; having to forgive in order to be forgiven all our inability to be *like God*? As St Symeon the New Theologian writes in the Philokalia, *'Do not go to communion without tears.'* Do not our very failures witness to the fact that this is an impossibility? Was it not the

philosopher Immanuel Kant who stated that a moral idea that cannot be put into practice could in no way be an imperative? In other words, we are not obliged to do what we are unable to perform?

Is that all we are then, here, this morning, so many failures in the spiritual life? Like the publican in the parable, standing in the temple, head bowed, beating the breast and saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner. Well, there are two answer to all these questions I have posed today.

Firstly, remember what Our Lord says at the meeting of the rich young ruler who found the call of the gospel too costly: *'The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.'* (Lk.18:27) It is the grace of God that makes up for what is lacking in us. It is by grace that we become the children of the promise who before were children of wrath. For each one of us, our baptism was the turning point in our existence, no matter how long ago, for baptism is a fountain, and the font is an inexhaustible well of life from which to draw. No wonder Confession is called a 'second baptism, not that baptism can ever be repeated but in that it renews our state of grace, so that we are restored to that primal purity that we obtained when we were first reborn. Dare I say, it is like the repair of this house of God, this unique building? We can only raise so much between us but not sufficient to complete what must be done. So it is that the grants from the Heritage fund are received with thanks and will bring to completion the works which, God willing, shall preserve this temple *unto the end of the age*, to quote St Basil's Liturgy. So it is with us, that the graciousness of our God will bring to perfection the work He has begun in us. *'Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.'* (Matt.5:48)

But grace does not operate through magical powers; God does not work through the 'quick fix' and never has. So, the second answer to these questions is our own response, our own ascetic struggle, all our striving and effort, our faith and hope: the offering of ourselves as a living sacrifice, so that we too, like Christ Himself, are both the one who offers and the offering itself, through that way of the Cross upon which we have embarked.

So we have found the treasure hidden in the field, that pearl of great price: what then is our part in this great work, to attain the *End*, that life of eternal communion in God? The apostle James says (Jm.1:27): *‘Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.’* And St Paul tells us today, *‘let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.’*

As for grace, our faith assures us of that through the holy mysteries: in the new beginning of Baptism, in Confession, in the Holy Gifts, in the communion of marriage, in the sanctification of our illnesses by Anointing, we abound with the grace of God. Without grace what man would dare enter beyond the veil, to minister and serve in the holy mysteries of Christ? A mere man, an icon of the incarnate God-Man? Impossible without grace! ‘Grace divine,’ says the ordination prayer for making a deacon, ‘Always heals that which is infirm and completes that which is wanting.’

And as for our part? We are to remain ‘unspotted’; *‘Come out from them, and be separate from them,’* the epistle says today. Paul is writing to the Christians at Corinth, a city famous in the ancient world for its decadence, its immorality, sexual license and general hedonistic depravity. Nothing changes, as you can see. The Corinthian mind is still with us; it pervades our own day and has seeped into the very culture of these post-modern, liberal times and all sewn up into the very garment of political rectitude.

We are called to be different to other people. Here, where the public media themselves purvey and promote these Corinthian values now, expecting all to be conformed and absorb these messages - have you not the right, after all, to indulge whatever fantasy version of reality you randomly claim as your own and to hell with the idea of eternal verity and truth, beauty and order!

But how do we separate, how do we come out of this? Do we end all engagement with the world? How can we, who are not called to the monastic life but to witness to Christ here? And it is not only we ourselves but our children likewise. We can have real fears of the

messages they receive that do not conform to our understanding of Christ and a life that is fitting for those of His household. And it is not the all-pervasive media alone but even the schools and universities now wherein much has been seduced by siren voices coming from a strange and alien shore.

For our part then, three watch-words, three ways in which we can co-operate with grace. For in proportion to our striving and ascetic struggle, so the synergy of grace from God and the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself, advances the work to perfection. **Firstly**, then, let us be Circumspect, careful over what we receive from the media in whatever form. Let us be discerning and teach the same to our children. Indeed, nothing will protect our young people better than their possessing a real knowledge of Orthodox Christianity, that they may be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. **Secondly**, Watchfulness: each one alert, guarding his or her heart through temptations in this life. As St Peter says, *'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.'* (1 Peter 5:8) **And lastly**, Sobriety. Not just free from dependency upon the opiates of this world, dulling the alertness of the mind but free, as well, of the intoxicating values that seek to overturn the moral bounds, the narrow way, in which have been called by the way of the Cross. *'Cursed is the one who moves his neighbour's landmark.'* (Deut.27:17)

Circumspection, Watchfulness, Sobriety: though here we live our life, we are summoned and called to be different. How else can we witness to the truth in Christ? And though outwardly we are the same as all men, the grace of our Baptism has altered what we are. Writing probably around the year 130AD an early Christian, corresponding with a man called Diognetus, wrote:

*'The Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe... The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men... and following the customs of the natives in... the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the*

*prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.  
They love all men, and are persecuted by all.'*

You see how we are called to be different.