

There is an awful lot of bad religion in the New Testament, especially in the gospels! Yes, you heard me correctly and I am being deliberately provocative. Of course, what I mean is that Our Lord confronts a lot of bad religion. This involved not only the controversies in which He engaged with the parties of the Pharisees and the Sadducees; He confronted bad religion through many of the parables that He taught to His disciples and the people at large.

We have just heard the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Previously, he had told the parable of the Unjust Steward (Lk.16:1-8) and St Luke tells us that the Pharisees then derided Him. They sneered at Him because He has unmasked them, not just concerning their love of money but because their religion is what these days might be called 'moral grandstanding,' signalling how virtuous they must be and making sure that other people know it. Christ tells them: 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.' We might remember those words whenever we find the public media once again occupied by those promoting the current secular and political morality: what on the surface appears to concern equality, inclusion, unity, liberty, science and modern 'values' but are, in fact, apologists enslaved by their own passions and far from free, they are the victims of demonic delusions.

Let us at the very least understand one thing this morning. We who gather here come for all sorts of reasons: pious, social, curious, necessity and, most probably, a mixture of motives, not necessarily to be sneered at. Yet whatever the case, whatever has called us together, the gospel itself has a message for us today; something to take away with us: it is that we are engaged in the great struggle, we who take any of this at all seriously. The poet Philip Larkin, not a religious man had, in his poem, 'Church Going,' the lines:

'A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet.'

Yes, we are engaged in a serious struggle, here in this serious house.

Religion itself, as I have told you many times, does not save us. A man who has fallen overboard from a ship will survive for time if he knows how to swim. What will save him is someone throwing him a life-buoy and then pulling him from the water. Is religion necessary? Yes, of course; it keeps us afloat before God but we are saved by Jesus Christ. No one can be saved without Jesus Christ. And what I mean by salvation from the Orthodox understanding I do not have time to develop at this time. However, Fr Dc Filip has recently written a very good essay on Theosis; perhaps I shall persuade him to publish it on our parish media somewhere.

Yes, the gospel has a particular message for us today: this struggle. It takes place in a small chamber, a cell, the epicentre of our very selves: our hearts. And it concerns a struggle not with other people or even against the demons but within ourselves. David the son of Jesse was chosen by God to shepherd His people Israel in the Old Testament not because of his outward appearance but because God could peer into and scrutinise his heart.

And the Lord does the same today as He did then, when He tells this parable of poor Lazarus and the rich man. He looks into and knows the hearts of those around Him. Why a parable; why is so much of His teaching seemingly so obscure, told in parables? Because a parable puts the listener to the test; how one reacts to the story clarifies what is in the heart. Do you hear the criticism of bad religion in yourself and repent or do you imagine that this is not about me, surely! That I have no need to change?

But our good religion is all about change and struggle and constant repentance. Currently, many western Christians are celebrating Martin Luther's original protest. Poor old Luther! An irascible, grumpy, misogynistic and constipated anti-Semite. He lived in a time when there was little real contact and understanding between Orthodoxy and the West but he knew one thing: there was something profoundly wrong with his contemporaries' understanding of how we are saved. The idea that one might buy a share in the merits of saints, in order to crave the indulgence of God at your own sinfulness has nothing to do with the gospel, firstly because it does not demand that we change. Luther was right in this; where he

goes wrong is in thinking we only need faith. In fact, we need two things: faith and the ascetic struggle.

In a work attributed to St Symeon the New Theologian, the writer, borrowing an idea from St John Climacus, tells us that those who enter the monastic life must ascend by steps, by stages. They are 1] Overcoming the passions of the heart. 2] The recitation of the Psalms. 3] The life of Prayer - he means the Jesus Prayer and 4] Unchanging contemplation and perfection - which is actually a gift of God. But it starts with the heart and mastery over the sinful passions within.

You and I are not monks or nuns but we also are called into the kingdom of God, we too are called to engage with that struggle to make the heart right with God. Go through, once more, all those parables of Our Lord; think of The Rich fool, the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the Lost Sheep, the Pearl of Great Price, the Treasure Hidden in a Field: they all concern what really matters. When we rise from our beds tomorrow morning where shall we be setting our hearts? On just getting through the day that we may arrive at Tuesday or might it be that our hearts are set on high; that we are watchful over the heart, like those guards and immigration officials at ports and airports, mindful of whom they are letting into the country. So we should be likewise, with the very thoughts that come into our hearts!

People come to Christ in many ways, conventional and unconventional but they must all start with the mystery, firstly of curiosity and need and then...faith! And faith leads to repentance and repentance to the great work of purifying the heart: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.' The monastics have their steps but we have ours too, no less arduous, though lived out in a different domain.

As for today's parable, we need to be careful how we hear it. It is not a literal description and guide to the cosmology of the afterlife; it is a parable, a story with representations of a spiritual mystery: the hellish gulf between the loving heart of God and the closed heart of a wealthy man. He was a man who had all he needed and more. He

has money and property and family and friends and no doubt, sycophants and hangers-on. He has servants and slaves, position and power and a life of sensual pleasures of all kinds: the good life, the desirable life, the very best that the world and the flesh and the devil can give. He even has religion, he has the Law of Moses speaking to him - as well as to his brothers - informing them of what the God of Israel commands as regards the treatment of the orphan and the widow, the poor and the destitute and the giving of alms according to ones means. But if he could not carry out the old commandments, so gloriously given to Moses in thunder and lightning and the terrible shaking of the mountain, shrouded in the profound and awesome darkness where God dwelt, would his brothers really turn and repent if one come back from the dead?

We are of those who do not have to wait for some final revelation, some apocalypse to convince us of the one thing necessary; we act now, we who take this very, very seriously. Like the descending cadences at the very end of the chanted gospel just now, so the images of this story must descend into our hearts, there before us like an icon in words. St Paul tells the Galatians in this morning's epistle, that having found Christ, having been joined to Christ, the older Law of Moses had served its purpose. What really mattered is that we really understand what it means to be human, truly human; recreated in the image and the likeness of God, eternally alive with the energies of God. And that, at heart, means to be changed. 'For neither circumcision counts for anything,' Paul tells them, 'nor uncircumcision but a new creation.'

The reference to coming back from the dead in the parable has indeed a hint of irony about it. We know that it prefigures our Lord's own resurrection. But we too, we who have been baptised into Christ, we also have come back from the dead! For by the way we change we too are a warning to our fellow-man, a sign of contradiction in this age. For with the love of God for all and especially the poor, we announce our knowledge that there is a judgement coming on all. Starting with our selves first and so to those around us, the gospel is, as always, the same: 'Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.'