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6th Sunday after Pentecost

And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming."

Jesus had a lot in common with the Scribes and the Pharisees. Does that sound shocking? After all, those two groups do not have a good reputation in the New Testament, constantly laying verbal traps for Our Lord in what he says, trying to catch Him out and prove Him to be a charlatan and a deceiver.

But like the Scribes and Pharisees, Our Lord also taught the importance of the Prophets, the Psalms and the other writings of what we call the Old Testament, alongside, of course, the Torah, the Law. He also agreed with them about the ministry of the angels and hope of the general resurrection. Quite unlike the party of the Sadducees, the ones who dominated the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, and controlled the Temple in Jerusalem: they only believed in the Torah of Moses.

The Scribes, as a profession, were important as preservers of the sacred writings. They were learned men in the Law of Moses; they produced the scrolls of hand-written copies of the holy books; they wrote commentaries; they interpreted how the Commandments should be practiced by Jews. It was doubtless such Scribes that produced the Septuagint translation of these writings into Common Greek in the third century before Christ, at Alexandria in Egypt: still, to this day, the official Old Testament text of the Holy Orthodox Church.

Yet for all their learning, the Scribes had not known the secret, the mystery of the kingdom of heaven. After a series of parables in St Matthew's gospel about the kingdom, Jesus said, *"Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."*(Matt.13:52) If only they had known, they would have seen how the treasures of the Old Testament were fulfilled in the New.

In his telling of this gospel story, the healing of the paralysed man, St Matthew dispenses with all the dramatic details found in Mark and Luke, where some poor and, no doubt, irate householder, finds a great hole opening up in his roof! No, Matthew cuts straight to the chase, as we say. Having just returned from exorcising the two demoniacs of whom we heard last Sunday, His words used in the healing of a paralysed man, land Christ once again in a confrontation with a group of Scribes.

To be fair, they do not complain about the healing itself: after all, it was not done on the Sabbath or anything this time! No, the Scribes complaint is about the words Christ uttered. Here, they find ammunition to use against Him; this time He has really overstepped the mark: in effect He has claimed the power, the authority, to forgive sins and so they accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

How important Theology is; how crucial is what you actually believe! According to their theological understanding, the Scribes have a point. In their view, Sin is any thought, action or word that goes against one of the 613 commandments in the Torah. To their mind, Jesus has blasphemed against the Holy Name of God (too holy even to be uttered) by claiming a right that belongs only to God. For a sin is an offence *against* God, therefore only God can forgive: it is quite logical.

Strictly speaking this is true. One can only sin against God: you cannot sin against another human being. You can trespass or be a debtor, as we say in the Lord's Prayer; we can cause harm to and offend others, but not actually *sin* against them. For Sin, unlike crime, is a theological idea and refers to our offending of God. We can understand, perhaps, the shock, the very real shock, experienced by the Scribes when they hear Christ say, "*Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.*"

There is no need to imagine that Our Lord is being deliberately provocative here, announcing this forgiveness. For Him, the power to heal and the authority to forgive are the same anyway: '*Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'*' And just as He knew the sarcasm and snide grumbling of the

Scribes against Him, so He knew, could peer into, the heart of the paralysed man. Somehow there was a mysterious connection between the man's paralysis and the state of his soul. Is he crippled by guilt; immobilised by the weight of his heavy conscience? Who knows? All we are told is the result: He picks up the pallet, the very symbol of his prone state, his living grave, and he walks, making his own way home.

And here precisely is the problem for the Scribes. If this is blasphemy, how do they explain the evidence before their own eyes? If healing is from God, why does God answer the prayer of a blasphemer? But that is precisely the point! This is not a prayer on behalf of Christ, it is an authoritative statement: *Your sins are forgiven.* Jesus has no need here to call on the assistance of His Father; he does this on His own authority. *'When the crowds saw it, they marvelled, and they glorified God, Who had given such authority to men.'* Who, then, is this Son of Man? The Scribes do not know but, of course, you and I know.

Writing in his book, *Against the Heresies*, St Irenaeus says, *'How can sins be rightly remitted unless the very One against whom one has sinned grants the pardon.'* For us, the believers, there is only one conclusion to be drawn: it is God Himself who acts here, one who possesses, as the only-begotten Son of the Father, the same divine nature; not an intermediary, not a representative or messenger, but God Himself in the flesh as the Son of Man.

Rendered spiritually sightless by their indignation, the Scribes refuse to see what was plain to the Theotokos, to Joseph the betrothed, to aged Simeon and Anna the prophetess in the temple, to Peter in his confession Caesarea Philippi, even to the two demoniacs across the Sea of Galilee from here in Capernaum: what we affirm in Orthodoxy, that Christ is God. And it is the very same Christ whom we encounter in the holy mysteries of His Church.

Only, let us be admonished, let us be warned this morning. Yes, the same Christ has through the Spirit, baptized us into His death and resurrection; we too have been forgiven all and have been raised up from that supine life, enslaved to our passions and

sins. But it is possible to pass through all this in the correct form, to observe the rites, to receive the gracious gift and yet, and yet never quite to surrender the will, to open the heart; never quite achieving that real repentance, the change of mind. Like the once paralysed man in the gospel, who had, actively, to pick up his bed and walk, so we too must co-operate with grace if we are to be healed. The Scribes sneered in their ignorance, indeed, but we have no excuse, we who are initiates of the holy mysteries. The Scribes we might excuse, but what of us if we remain inactive, still preferring to remain on our bed, still refusing to answer the door to One who, as pictured in the Book of the Apocalypse, stands at the door and knocks, who is, Himself, the door?

How can we be sure that we will escape a worse condemnation than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, we who know who Christ is? It will be through the change in our life, in the newness of our life. For if the way we live, the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act has never changed, then we are in a worse, more pitiable case than the most hypocritical of the Pharisees. Let us, therefore, measure ourselves by what St Paul tells us today, his summary of the life in Christ:

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, and serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.'

Let's mark these words of scripture; let them be what we pray for; let them be the direction in which we change and of how we live, even now in the Church of the living God, showing the kingdom is indeed within and among us.