

10th June 2018

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Blessed art You O Christ Our God / You have revealed the fishermen as most wise / By sending down upon them the Holy Spirit / Through them You drew the world into Your net / O Lover of Man, Glory to You! (Troparion for Pentecost Sunday)

The Church by her very essence is Apostolic, meaning both that, her teachers come directly from the Apostles' tradition and that she is *sent out*. She exists not only to bring her members closer and closer to Christ but also, to pass on the mystery of Christ to others. The Great Commission [Matt.28:16-20], read at every Baptism and every eleventh week at Sunday Matins in the Orthodox Church, is quite unambiguous. Christ, the God-Man, risen from the dead, has received from the Father all authority in heaven and on earth and with that authority, commands his followers to make disciples not only *in* all nations but *of* all nations.

How this is done, however, is another question altogether. One thing, though, is clear to me, that Orthodox evangelisation or mission, although not a fixed process, nevertheless, depends upon two prime things: namely, the prompting of the Holy Spirit and secondly, the blessing of the local bishop. With these two principles in mind, we should explore just how, in our current situation, we might cast the net and go fishing for souls.

Some naive sects imagine that the propagation of their message is best to be done calling from door to door or, perhaps stranger still, haranguing passers-by in shopping arcades. They are, perhaps, trying to be thoroughly biblical, following the command of Christ to his own Apostles [St. Luke 10:1ff], as if the sacred text were a pattern for all mission. They are, though, neglecting the context of Scripture, forgetting that we do not live in a commonly shared religious culture, generally speaking, nor are we first century Jews, oppressed by a foreign power and longing for the coming of the Messiah.

Unlike the Jews in the Roman province of Judea who shared a common religious language, it is doubtful if many today even appreciate the meaning of terms like Redeemer, Saviour, Grace or even Sin in the sense that they are used in Christianity. The Christian story itself has largely been lost, even as a shared cultural narrative.

This is far from saying that we live in a spiritual desert. In fact, the opposite is the case: it is a spiritual jungle, a supermarket of ideas from the bland to the bizarre yet ungoverned and un-marshalled through any religious conventions.

Here, we must be honest and admit that most Britons are not only unreligious but often anti-religious. Religion for them has become a negative factor. Its decline in the public market place of ideas has largely been welcomed as freeing minds from its social constraints even if this leaves many wondering, often with anxiety, whether a life of materialistic hedonism that must end in illness and death is, for the majority, the height of human endeavour. This is the very setting for the Orthodox Church in this country and it is imperative that we understand that setting. Though I might seem pessimistic about this society, I am certainly not so as regards the mission of the Orthodox Church. Who can be a pessimist with God?

We do not live in the days of the Apostles but we share two things with them very specifically: their faith and tradition on the one hand and secondly, the gift of the Holy Spirit which they received at Pentecost. This is not just in an individual sense, as when the catechumen is Chrismated following baptism but in the communal sense of coming through unity with our bishop.

At the level of our archdiocese we are concerned with the planting of churches and the establishment of worshipping

communities which, by their very existence are missionary. The fact that each Lord's Day the faithful gather to '*proclaim the death of the Lord until he come,*' is testimony to the evangelistic nature of the Church; that she is apostolic according to the Nicene Creed. At the level of individual parishes like ours, of course, we can develop our own way of working when it comes to spreading that fishing net.

But I am not so much concerned here this morning with teaching programmes and other means of drawing souls to Christ at the parish level. Rather, my concern today is more for our individual responsibility, where each Christian soul is an ambassador for Christ (II Cor.5:20). There is a very simple covenant here: if we ourselves desire salvation through reconciliation with God, we must share that opportunity with others, also. If we ponder our own experience, what has happened to and in us through the holy mysteries, what else are we supposed to be as Christian people, other than *the evidence* of what Christ can do in fulfilling the meaning and purpose of human lives?

In other words, the best way for you and me to evangelise our neighbour is not by preaching *at* them about things they do not understand [*"Do not cast your pearls before swine...."*] but, in the first place, by *revealing* Christ to them in our own lives. Orthodox Christians are naturally aware of the power of the saints; of how we see in their lives and in the effectiveness of their intercession with Christ, that it is through other people that Christ is proclaimed. It is not, in the first place, through the Bible, or Church institutions, or Liturgy (though these all be essential), but rather, through other human beings that all evangelisation begins.

So how do we shine to enlighten the path for others who dwell in darkness? We do it by living the Orthodox Christian life

and this begins very simply with basic ideas: faithful attendance at the Liturgy; regularity of repentance and confession; care over our training in the ascetic struggle; the generosity of charitable giving; taking the trouble to know that Orthodox Christianity is in beliefs and practices. If we would change others, we must, firstly, change ourselves, removing the plank before removing the speck (Matt. 7:3). Quite bluntly, if we want others to hear the gospel, we must hear it ourselves, first!

If there is one message I would bring back from our recent Archdiocesan Conference it is this: *you cannot give what you haven't got*. In other words, there is no point in spreading the fisherman's net to haul in the catch of souls, unless we know where we are taking the catch. Unless we know what the Church teaches. Unless we are confident to *wear* our faith like we wear our clothes, our net will be all holes and not string. Let me end with a simple question. If someone discovered you were an Orthodox Christian and asked you *what's so special about Orthodoxy, what do you teach*, would you know how to reply?

Yes, firstly, we might make a start by drawing back in the irregular and the lapsed, the culturally Orthodox, the wandering souls. We who are strong ought to support the weak. In the gospel of the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5) Peter, witnessing the superabundant grace of Christ, falls at his feet in repentance. Remembering that true repentance is a longing for what we might become, it is we, ourselves, having recovered the image of Christ and striving for the likeness of God, who will draw in those whom the Lord has called to inherit eternal life.