

11th February 2018
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Sunday of the Last Judgement

In St Matthew's gospel, from chapter twenty-one, where Jesus enters the temple, to the end of chapter twenty-five, there is a continuous discourse; the teachings of Our Lord bearing a common theme. We find there the lesson of the withered fig tree; the parable of the wicked vinedressers; the parable of the wedding feast; the dispute with the Sadducees over the resurrection; the condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees; the prediction of the end of the temple and the foretelling of the tribulations at the end of the ages; the parables of the faithful and the evil servant, the wise and foolish virgins and of the talents. Finally comes what we have just heard read to us.

The common theme is of course the Judgement to come: in this last week of our preparation for the Great Fast we are permitted a foretaste, a glimpse of what is to come. We do not know when and we certainly do not know how but we assert it as a point of dogma, a fixed matter of belief, for those who belong to the household of God. *He shall come again to judge the living and the dead. Yes, we shall be judged.*

We might notice from today's parable that in Our Lord's mind, at this final reckoning, there is no gradation, no subtlety, no degrees, no taking into account, all things considered, based on the circumstances. All we have is acceptance or rejection, salvation or damnation; nothing more, just sheep or goats.

Perhaps, when you were a little child you liked to paint or draw. No doubt you would show your creations to your mother or father. Why? Because you wanted their approval. No matter how gruesome the results of your attempts to become the next Rembrandt, no doubt your parents, being kindly people, would indulgently praise your work and perhaps, even fix it on the wall to be seen by everyone. Wanting approval is innate, it is born in us, it is natural. From the elder brother of the Prodigal Son, longing for recognition for his faithfulness to his father; the Pharisee in the temple, showing God all his virtuous works of religion; to Zacchaeus, climbing his sycamore tree, longing to be

received back as a part of the true Israel of God: what do we see but a seeking of approval, to have God judge us and find us acceptable. What we cannot tolerate is the thought that we might be among the goats, one of those rejected by Christ.

And yet the idea of the judgement is indispensable if our life is to have any meaning at all. Nothing, no action, no thought or word can possess any moral worth if there be no judgement, if there be no higher authority over Man, no Father of divine love to pronounce the final word. If it is only in front of men that our goodness can be approved; if only for this short life that we can expect any applause, with no consequences in eternity, then the best of our morality is but mutual self-interest and we may as well join together with the Pharisee and the elder brother, and for that matter, the wicked vinedressers and evil servants, as long as we are not found out!

But what then will the Lord look for in us at the judgement? What is the deciding factor that places us on one side or the other? One thing is for sure: it won't be merely a matter of religious piety, indispensable though that be. What we embark on in the Great Fast: that offering up of our time, that surrendering of our indulgence, that giving of our own wealth, is not an end in itself but a means to that end, a work undertaken to help us to be regarded among the sheep of his pasture. For we shall be judged on whether we have regained our true nature, our real humanity, children of God recreated after His image and likeness.

The question is a simple one, the matter of our nature: are we human? In Biology? Yes, the species, Homo Sapiens. Under the Law? Yes, we have the rights of Man. But in the Judgement of God? *"Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?'"* [Matt.25:44] The question is whether we can see the spiritual humanity, *the image of God - no matter how hidden* - in one another. The physical image, the biological form, the symbol of the human face, is a reminder to us, that each shares a common, if fallen, nature and that, in creation, we must reckon all as our own brothers and sisters, especially those who suffer. But the question of

how we shall be judged will depend on how far we have become and recovered that image and likeness of God in which we are created.

Every human creature that has ever lived was born as the child of God in this world. As it says at the end of Christ's genealogy in St Luke's gospel: *'the son of Adam, the son of God.'* The human face remain the icon of God, no matter what wickedness they have fallen into. That image, that icon in each one, enables Our Lord to say, *"Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me."* For Christ is not only divine by nature, the image of His Father of whom He is begotten but He is also for ever human by His incarnation in the flesh, to redeem our humanity that had fallen away from God.

No matter how mean, how degraded, how wicked we might become, no matter how deformed or embittered or corrupted our humanity, no soul can lose that image. But having accepted our need for forgiveness and co-operated with the graciousness of God, our judgement will be on how far we have restored *the likeness* of God, our perfected humanity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (see: Eph.4:13)

Does this mean then, someone might object, that our belief in Christ means nothing; that our Orthodox religion and practice are of no account before God? Of course not! Even if an unbeliever gave more to charity than you, saved more lives, relieved and healed more of the sick, would he be among the sheep and you among the goats? No, he won't. For acts of relief and charity come from all sorts of causes, whether empathy or sympathy for another's plight or assuaging guilty feelings or vain dreams of a perfectly equal world, or a seeking after adulation and admiration from others. No human action in a fallen world can be free of ambiguity and our motivations hide many agendas. But of themselves good deeds do not show that we are perfected and worthy of the Kingdom. Can even our charity be pure altruism when it seeks a reward; are we not indignant if someone bites the hand that feeds him? Yet God *'makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.'* [Matt.5:45]

We may not be as cruel and as inhuman as Genghis Khan, Vlad Tepes, Henry VIII, Ivan Grozny, Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin but there are no mitigating circumstances, as in a court of law, no varying grades of attainment, as in our school examinations. There is only one standard against which we shall be assessed - will Christ recognise us; will His favour rest on us, as the Father's rested on Him at His baptism and His transfiguration?

Avoid hypocrisy; come to your right mind and remember the future Judgement, has been the message of these three Sundays of preparation in the Triodion. We are invited to take a step back; to recover that state of grace that was ours when we were baptized and died and rose again with Christ; to be set free from the deadening effects of our sins committed since our last confession. This is not what the world calls freedom, the pursuit of our own individual will. Such self-realisation can only end in isolation and self-destruction.

We, though, are not called to this endeavour on our own. We enter the Great Fast together, as a body. We must be together, support one another; encourage one another in this paradise of the New Adam. We are invited to find our real liberation not by indulging the old Adam, not as the victim of the insatiable demands of our own inner tyrant but in the humble service of the will of God. It is to regain paradise, to find in ourselves and moreover, *in one another*, our own connection and reconnection with God and His kingdom; to find once more the grace to be fully human again, to serve one another and to be the sheep of His right hand.