

According to the figures for the year 2012, it has been estimated that there were 2.3 billion Christians in the world; that is 31.2 per cent of the world's population. That might be of interest to historians, sociologist, anthropologists, even political planners. For us, however, it is just numbers. There were also 1.8 billion Muslims, 1.1 billion Hindus, half-a-billion Buddhists, 14 million Jews and 2.6 million Zoroastrians. So what? Interestingly, there were 1.2 billion secularist, atheists and agnostics, making up 16% of the world's people, which leave 84% claiming to be believers in some religion or other. So here we are, we Orthodox Christian believers, living among the oddballs, the peculiar, the weirdos who have no religion, here in the secular west where the non-believers are concentrated.

People have always taken their sense of identity and belonging from their religion. And their religion, in turn, has always given them markers, signs, let's call them badges to wear; ways of identifying themselves to others, whether crosses or skull caps, the hijab, the turban. Even within the same religion, different groups and denominations can be identified through their own aesthetic, their own forms of art and architecture.

In the end, none of this matters very much where it concerns merely marking ourselves as different from, not the same as... The problem for those 2.3 billion Christians, as with any religion, is that so much of this identifying is purely nominal, just an identity tag and that is all. It will not surprise you when I say *this cannot be so for us!* If we are engaged seriously in this journey through the forty days, it is not because we want other people to be able to identify us as Orthodox Christians. We do this seriously because we want to be saved.

Yes, it is important that we promote the Orthodox Christian faith, to make it known; make people aware. But this is not because we want the greatest share of the market, like some commercial enterprise aiming to become a monopoly. We preach Orthodox and apostolic Christianity because Christ has commanded us to do so: in

order to offer salvation to all. Another words, we need to understand that we are Christian in the first place, not to be part of our own families, not just to feel at ease here, among other Orthodox people, not even, perhaps, to be in continuity with our ancestors or our own nation. We are Christian because we wish to find eternal salvation.

Let me repeat what the Orthodox Church has always taught, that the only way to find salvation is *exclusively* through Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. This, of course, does not fit well with the modern, secular approach to social life where everything must be inclusive, where discrimination on any grounds is politically unacceptable. But what does that matter to us, for we are serious about this: where salvation is at stake we cannot be held hostage to the changes and chances of popular trends and fashions.

Although the call to salvation is preached and offered to all without prejudice, we have, in fact, always been exclusive for the sake of the salvation of souls. Penitents can be denied the Holy Gifts for a time, as they were among the early Christians; Catechumens do not receive until they be baptized; the priest has the authority to deny the chalice to any whom he thinks is not ready or prepared; we do not give communion to non-Orthodox. Yes, we are exclusive but we are so in order to save souls, for to receive from the chalice unworthily or contrary to the Holy Canons will do the soul more harm than good and as a pastor of souls the priest is charged to bind and loose, to feed the sheep and to heal as well as amend.

What, then, do we mean by salvation? Today, the third Sunday of the Great Fast, we venerate the Holy Cross. On Great and Holy Friday we shall commemorate the passion of Christ but this is different: here, we venerate the very instrument of the passion itself. The cross as the badge of Christians is very familiar by now but it was not the immediately recognised sign of the faith for the first three centuries. One of the earliest images of Christ crucified is actually an insult: a graffito from the Palatine Hill in Rome, showing Christ with a donkey's head together with an image of a man and the inscription: *Alexamenos worships his God*. We need not be surprised, as St Paul tells the Corinthians, "*but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.*" [1 Cor.1:23]

For a long time in western Christianity, from the Middle Ages to the rise of Protestantism, their ideas of salvation have been fixed, dare we say, nailed, to the Cross. Anselm who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 -1109, that is after the Great Schism, taught that God's is so offended by human sin that His justice could only be satisfied by the death of His Son on the Cross, Christ being the substitute, taking our guilt upon Himself to free us from Sin.

Such Ideas presented God as if He were a mediaeval feudal lord, offended by his peasants and demanding his rights. This is not Orthodox but Anselm's thinking largely replaced the earlier teaching of the Church in the west. No wonder by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people might begin to reject this God who must, in part, have appeared as a kind of ogre! Yet such ideas of the Cross being a punishment undergone by a substitute, a scapegoat, have, at times, at times leaked across even into Orthodox thought and teaching. Yes, Christ was punished on the cross but only legally, on a false charge of sedition. He was not punished by God the Father. So we need, instead, to be very clear about the Orthodox doctrine of salvation and how it works.

Firstly, for us, the Cross is not the end of the matter: our attention is fixed, firstly, not on Christ's death but on his resurrection. The Cross is but the *means* to that end: the raising up of our humanity from the Fall. Yes, we have sinned again and again; it is a fact of our own history and cannot be undone. But through repentance we can be forgiven and the consequence of our sin can now be removed. And what is this consequence, what is the effect? St Paul tells us: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" [Rom.6:23] So in dying and yet defeating Death, Christ has triumphed over sin. Every human life, bearing the same sinful, fallen nature as Adam, ends with death: natural now in the biological world but *unnatural* to our created nature. And Christ, incarnate as the New Adam, defeats our unintended but inevitable death through the Cross and for everyone baptised into His death there is, as Paul tells us again, a new creation. Here is obedience to the will of the Father, indeed but this is far from that ogre of Anselm, demanding satisfaction of justice.

This is the Orthodox concept of atonement, literally, *at-one-ment* with God, by being restored to our proper nature. And this underlines another point in our idea of salvation: it is not a once and for all event, though we might well remember when *first* we believed! Salvation, for the Orthodox, is a process, not a once and for all event in our own lives. And it requires grace for its completion and it requires our continuous repentance, our co-operation: the synergy of the soul with God.

It is no wonder that we venerate but also take up the Cross again today at the end of this Liturgy on this particular Sunday. For without the struggle, without the ascetic life, without the grace of the Holy Mysteries, how can we complete our course here? If we fall back into sloth, thinking our Christian identity will save us; thinking just wearing the Cross around our neck will guarantee our place in the kingdom of God, we shall have let go of the New Adam and Christ will not recognise us; we shall lack the wedding garment; we shall be excluded, yes, excluded, like the unwise virgins of the parable.

So let us hear Him today: *“If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.”* And what does it mean to deny yourself? Exactly what it means to deny someone else of course - to ignore them, to be indifferent to their suffering, to walk away from their company. This is the ascetic way: to deny the Old Adam in yourself in order to liberate the New; to let go of and dump that corpse we carry around and to follow instead the Christ who is the end of all our endeavour. Meantime, like Alexamenos, we need not worry about numbers or percentages who might mock: we shall continue to worship our God.