

All Saints Sunday
Fr Chrysostom

11th June 2017

'If you are good you will go to *heaven*.' Do you think that is true? No! You **can't** think that if you are an Orthodox Christian. You cannot think that because of this Sunday: this is the Sunday of All Saints. There is something clearly different about those who enter into the kingdom of God.

Do not misunderstand me; there is nothing wrong with goodness. There are advantages, clearly, in being a good person, in living a good life. We will get on with other people far better; after all, more friends are won with honey rather than with vinegar. People will speak well of us; good people are likeable.

I grew up in Bristol. There is a concert hall there to which I went many times in my youth: it is called the Colton Hall. A man called Edward Colston (1636-1721) gave the land on which the hall stands for the building of a school for orphaned and destitute boys. This exists still in a different part of the city. He also left money for places of shelter for the poor. The rest of his money built Colton's Girls' School. There is now a campaign to change the name of the Colston Hall - the owners, I suspect, have an eye to the profits they will lose if they keep the name, Colston. Why? Well, because Colston made all his money from the Slave Trade.

A strange and paradoxical turn of events! Once thought of as a good man, a benefactor, a contributor to the public good; a philanthropist, the name Colston today is not politically correct. I call this paradoxical because, when young, I saw many great musicians at the Colston Hall: black musicians of the blues and Jazz world, none of whom would have existed, indeed their music would never have been created, had it not been for the slave trade!

Strange, is it not, that out of the evil with which men involve themselves, out of such dreadful suffering comes such art. Is it worth it? I do not know the answer to that question. All I know is that you cannot undo your history and to deny it is sheer folly. But my point is beyond those considerations. What we do know is that the idea of

goodness is subject to change. To be thought of as good in one age - as people clearly thought Edward Colston was in his age - is disregarded and even despised in the next.

'Goodness' is a very febrile idea, it breaks up, it changes as the days pass. Did Edward Colston enter into the kingdom of heaven because of his benefactions? Did his philanthropy make up for his involvement in a vile and cruel trade? I don't know! All I do know is that no one became a saint of God because he was just... 'good'.

Let us be very, very honest here: what saves us, what makes us saints of God, his holy ones, is not our goodness - no one is good but God alone, as one says to Christ in the gospel - but something quite different. We have no goodness capable of persuading God that we are worthy of, or equal to, God's goodness. Who can, by their own effort, rise to become like God in goodness? No possession of mere virtues will ever measure up to the unutterable goodness of the Divine. Should we be as good as angels, we cannot measure up to the blessed beneficence of the Holy Trinity.

There are good people all around you - yes, evil too, malefactors, people with evil intent, challenging our faith in humanity itself but there are also good people who, even in challenging circumstances, can rise to the challenge and help out of pure and selfless altruism.

They might put us to shame in their fellow feeling and their humanity towards their fellow man, yet they are not the saints of God. Do not misunderstand me! Without such goodness we will get nowhere towards the kingdom of God BUT IT CANNOT END THERE! 'For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.' [Matt. 5:20]

Let us, therefore, be very clear: the saints are saved because they are saints, that is, the holy ones of God. It is sanctification that saves us. 'I said, "You are gods and all of you are children of the Most *High*.'" (Psalm 81:6) It's a shocking verse, an uncomfortable idea but God addressed these words to his old people, Israel. Surely there is one God only? Yes! But the aim of our life is theosis, by which we mean

that the purpose and end of our life is to become by grace, like God, communion with God in Trinity.

This is only possible because of the loving grace of God completing what we lack. It is not just that we have sent up the optimum number of good deeds before the presence of God, as if by paying some tariff we gain a right of entry. Rather, it is by God's sanctification of us, by our baptism and Chrismation, our setting apart from the influence of this world, that we dare approach the throne of Grace and the mercy seat of God: that noetic, spiritual altar in the heavenly places, whose sacred icon stands there, dressed in glory, beyond the Holy Doors in this temple - the altar before which Christ ever lives to make intercession for the saints.

Though as human beings, limited in our ability to grasp by reason, we can never know or comprehend the fullness of God, His pleroma, yet we can share in the energies of God and it is in these that the recognised saints shared whilst yet on earth and find fulfilled in heaven. If only we might really appreciate the mystery accomplished in us by our baptism; what a radically different kind of human being we became then, with such potential! Yet two thousand years of over-familiarity have rendered us cold, blind to our sanctity. God is amazed not at the fact that we sin but that we can be so easily satisfied with that way of life.

As for goodness, there are good people in other religions. Along with the downright evil we know from the news headlines, there are good Muslims. There are good Buddhists, good Hindus and Jews; even good agnostics and secularists. They might even put us to shame. But there are no holy Muslims, no holy Buddhists or Hindus, no saints among the Jews of today, for they are not baptised...yet; not in Christ, for Christ is the only way to the Father; no one comes to the Father except through Him.

And here we are, a communion of saints, for whom, as we say later on '...are the holy *things*'. Let us begin, then, each day anew. St Anthony the Great would admonish himself each day: 'Every day I say to myself, today I will *begin*.' It is because we are baptized, because we are pardoned, with no cost to us, that we are set free of

the old Adam and can be truly good in deed and thought and word, as long as this world abides.

Edward Colston was once considered among the great and the good of this world. For many who wish to grandstand and promote the credentials of their own moral rectitude, he can now be conveniently despised. But such self-esteem cuts no ice in the kingdom of God. It is holiness that matters: our likeness to the truth and beauty and benevolence of God - which Adam knew in the beginning. Not a façade, a mask constructed to impress the world around us, but a polished mirror, radiating back the uncreated energy and Light Divine.