

12th August 2018
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11th Sunday after Pentecost

In his first letter to the Church at Corinth St Paul deals with a number of problems in the first community of Greek Christians in that city. At the very end of his letter (1Cor.16:22) he lets out a final exclamation of frustration with those who have abandoned the true Christ, preached by the Apostles, whom we know as the Orthodox Christ. He refers to those who do not love the Lord: not, here, that charitable Christian love, *Agape*, but that love of friendship and relationship, *Philia*. "*If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ,*" he writes. "*Let him be accursed.*" And then he adds the curious word, *Maranatha!*

In Aramaic, the common language of the Jews at that time, *Maranatha* means, *Our Lord, come!* It seems to have been used by Jews as a curse on the unrighteous, asking that the Messiah would come in judgement upon the wicked. Paul's use of the word here is interesting, as it looks forward to the coming again of Christ but, this time, in glory to judge the world. It is possible that the word was used as an early Christian liturgical prayer, or as a personal prayer, in much the same way as we might use the Jesus Prayer.

What I find even more interesting is that, that phrase we recite in the Creed in our current English translation, *He shall come again in glory*, in the original Greek is not a future tense at all but a present continuous participle. It should be, *He is coming again*. In other words, He is already on His way! *Maranatha*, indeed: come Lord Jesus!

You and I, of course, we know that Orthodox Christ and we love Him. We have been baptised into His death and are risen with Him; we eat and drink at His table; we have received the heavenly Spirit in Chrismation; we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph.1:3); our whole life is hidden with Christ in God (Col.3:3). And yet...and yet there is still the judgement. As I have told you many times, there is nothing magical in our religion; religion by itself is no guarantee of salvation. If we do not co-operate with the great grace that we have received and continue to receive;

if we do not change, or rather, if we have not allowed the grace of God to change us, then there can be no salvation for us.

But here is a paradox: the belief in the Judgement is good news; yes, it is part of the Gospel! Perhaps, though, the idea, the belief, the doctrine, makes us tremble. After all, who wants to be judged? Perhaps it makes sense to fear the judgement more than death. Yet in reality, it is *good* news, it is the final victory of the Good, the coming and final manifestation of the kingdom of heaven in all its fullness. It is what we pray for daily in the prayer that our Saviour taught us.

What must we do then, to be among the saved? The answer is spelt out for us in the gospel this morning. We cannot be forgiven if we do not forgive.

In any civilised nation the citizens live under the rule of law. Here the victims of crime surrender their right to retaliation and revenge and expect that the state will investigate, detect, prosecute, try and punish the guilty in a proportional way, on behalf of all. In this way the whole of society is protected from barbarity. The Law defines what is a crime and what is not, for the common good. And in protecting all from the anti-social and wicked, the state receives its authority, reflecting the justice and righteousness of God.

But our end, our goal in Christ, is not to remain citizens of this world. Having been redeemed, in our own, personal dealings with others, we are to become those who forgive offences. For those judged worthy of the kingdom of heaven, no sense of injustice, crying out for vengeance, can be so consuming as to outweigh the joy of final vindication before the judgement seat of Christ.

But to become forgiving; to be able to let go of resentment, requires that we change. And this change is not *ad hominem*, just in the eyes of other people. And its purpose is not just to help us get along better. Our whole endeavour in Christ is not that we may be judged as good in the eyes of other human beings. In fact, what does Christ tell us in the Sermon on the Mount? *'Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake'* [Matt.5:11]. But He does tell us that we must let

our light shine before men: yes, the same light that shone on Mount Tabor that we recall at this time in the feast of the Transfiguration. The end of our religion is not to create the perfect society on earth where justice and peace reign. Nothing so paltry; nothing so limited!

In the Christian religion we are called to find our purpose and destiny as human beings by sharing in the essence of God Himself; to be consubstantial with the Divine. Listen to what St Peter says in his epistle: *'His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you **may be partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption that is in the world.'* [2 Pet.1:3-4]

It is then in our hands, now, if we wish to find salvation. With the grace of God we, who are the image, the very icon, of God in our creation, can *recover* as well our original *likeness* to God, from which we have fallen. And we start to do that when we learn to forgive, as we have been forgiven.

Justice is a fine and good thing, and punishment for the criminality of man is a just and proper and a necessary thing in this fallen world. For legal punishment seeks to vindicate the Law, protect the innocent, deter the wicked, bring retribution on the guilty, restore the moral balance and reform the evildoer.

But greater than justice for us who have sinned against God, who fall a thousand times a day and trespass, again and again, against each other, is to reflect the divine likeness in forgiving one another.

In the end, our salvation, the perfection and glorification of human life, is not even *for* us; it is not directed at us but is towards God, the true source of our dignity. In this time of the Dormition Fast, as in Great Lent, we can speak of opening the doors of repentance. And a great part of that change of mind, that *metanoia*, is finding the grace to forgive, even to let go of our sense of injustice and resentment. How can we expect the infinite doors of heaven to open

for us who cannot open even the tiny gateway of our own heart to those who have trespassed against us? Truly, our salvation is in our own hands now: do we remain enclosed or open; do we value the one hundred denarii that might be claimed by us more than the eternal treasure in heaven?

Before too long in this Liturgy forgiveness will be offered to us, the Orthodox, when, through the doors of the altar, the chalice is brought, bearing the Holy gifts. At the very least let us be on our guard; let us draw near, approaching the holy cup in repentance and humility, *'forgiving all things to those that hate us because of the resurrection,'* as we sing at Pascha. In truth, we have no need to be convinced of this, for we, who receive into our souls and bodies the risen Christ today, know already that we must become like Him and conform to His image.