

17th June 2018  
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

3rd Sunday After Pentecost

*The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be full of darkness.*

We are in the fast of the apostles, Peter and Paul. Neither of them founded the Church at Rome but bore witness to Christ there, dying under the emperor, Nero. From its beginnings the church at Rome served its Liturgy originally in Koine (common) Greek, not Latin. That is not such a surprise. The first Christians there were diaspora Jews and they conversed in Greek, the lingua franca of the ancient Roman world. Eventually, of course, as more and more locals came to Christ, so Latin took over as the local language for the Liturgy, as we would expect, quite rightly.

Paul, naturally wrote his Epistle to the Romans in Greek. He had, though, a real problem with a certain party among his fellow-Jews, Jews who had accepted that Jesus was the Messiah. They held to a particular view of the relationship between the Law of Moses and the mission of Christ. These particular Jewish Christians would oppose Paul with their different understanding of the mystery of Christ. We can see here, that from the very beginning, from the Ascension of Christ indeed, the gospel of the kingdom was under attack. The era of the apostles and their successors was no earthly paradise, no idealised image of perfection; of ecclesiastical harmony.

Paul's opponents were called Judaisers: they taught that when gentile men became Christians they still had to receive the covenant of circumcision in order to be part of the Church; baptism was not enough. Their thinking went along the lines of saying that gentiles must become converts first, under the covenants with Abraham and Moses and *then* they could be baptized into Christ.

Well, we know what St Paul, a Jew himself, made of that! We know how he even shamed the other apostles at the council of Jerusalem, when these arguments were troubling the Church in its early days: You can read about that in Acts chapter 15.

Paul's letter to the Romans is indeed the greatest of his writings, defining his vision and understanding of Christ. It is, in the purest sense a work of Theology. There is, of course, a perfectly respectable academic subject of Theology; I know, I studied it at University. It is intellectual and philosophical and systematic and analytical and historical. It is not, though, necessarily what the Orthodox Church means by Theology.

We expect our clergy to be theologically literate, to have passed through that academic course at a proper level: that is necessary in these days of general education. But beyond that, there is another definition of Theology, one which we understand in the Orthodox Christian tradition. Literally, the term itself, Theology, means *God-Word*, the understanding of God which, in itself, is a paradox: who understands God? We can never definite, delineate, encapsulate the divine essence. Anything we can construct and name as *God* will be inadequate, a mere idol. And that only serves to make us marvel at the very idea of incarnation: God contained within the womb of the Theotokos. No wonder that the Akathist hymn speaks of philosophers becoming dumb as fish before the mystery! But a theologian does deal in such matters, in so far as they are revealed by God Himself.

Few saints have the title *Theologian*. You might recall the apostle John, or perhaps, St Symeon the *New Theologian*, the new St John, as it were. A theologian in our Orthodox understanding, is one who, being baptized into Christ, prays in the Spirit; a prophet who has finished talking *at* God (as with so many of our prayers) and listens and hears God instead. A theologian is One who knows God and can converse in communion with the Divine and can teach others the way. Such was St Paul and he saw the world differently.

Our Lord tells us this morning of the eye, the lamp of the body. In a parable He explains that the way we understand anything is similar to how we perceive the world about us, just as the sense of sight opens up our mind to the outside world. Poor eyes, of course, mean a poor perception of what is around us. As our eyes fail, so does the reliability of our sight. It is the same with all our inner understanding as well. For we have an inner, a spiritual eye, what

Orthodox theologians call in Greek, *Nous*, the Mind. But like the eyes of the body, the inner eyes are part of our fallen nature and since our fall there is a *dis*-integrity, a rupture, between our soul and mind and body, so that they do not work in harmony.

St Paul realised this regarding the Judaisers, how their minds were not yet fully converted. He understood that if they had their way, Christianity would remain a mere sect of Judaism to this day. He could also see that, if gentiles were obliged to keep the Law, the Torah and so make their own righteousness by obeying 613 commandments, then the redemption and justification in Christ becomes pointless. Anyway, he argues, no one can keep the law to perfection and even if one did, how holy would you be before the utter, awesome and appalling sanctity of the divine?

St Paul's inner eye was that of a true theologian, for he had the Spirit of God within. He saw clearly that Christ, the sinless, had died the death that was our due because of Sin but had defeated death in rising again. And for those born again in baptism, those who live the resurrection of life in Christ, there is no man-made righteousness through works of the Law but rather, a new creation where our sanctity is a gift of grace. The challenge for us is from where, from which source, does our life now come: from the drives and demands of the body that lead us to death, or from the Spirit that gives eternal life?

In the gospel today Our Lord uncovers the darkness that wraps up those who can only see things in worldly terms, the carnal, the physical and the insatiable demands of the body. Such a way of seeing can only lead to anxiety, over matters of eating and drinking and clothing and stature. These things are needed but they are not to be dominant. Indeed, He asks us to believe that our value to our heavenly Father is such that we need not be anxious over much. If our inner eye is sound, if the *Nous*, the Mind, be the Mind of Christ, we can dismiss the fretting Martha, anxious over many things and become instead the Mary who has chosen the better part.

There are those people whose public identity insists that their food must always be gourmet, their clothing fashionably labelled,

their social stature assured on the moral grandstand and, no doubt, must be confirmed with 'selfies' on social media. These are the concerns of the worldly. Is it wrong to enjoy a good meal? No! Is it wrong to dress well? No! But to imagine, to imagine, that these things ultimately matter is to have ones inner eye darkened, to idolise the temporal; to be unable to pass beyond the things of this world, like those Judaisers whom Paul challenged as being stuck within the Old Testament and unable to move into the New.

There is a story about the famous American Protestant preacher, Henry Ward Beecher (brother of Harriet Beecher Stow, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). After a morning service he was greeting the congregation at the church door. One of them complained that there were twelve grammatical errors in his sermon. Another worshipper, however, greeted him and announced: '*Today, I found God.*' They had both listened to exactly the same sermon. Last week I said that, when it comes to explaining our faith to others, '*You cannot give what you haven't got.* Well, it seems also that, when it comes to our understanding, *you cannot receive what you cannot see.*

For most of us, of course, we are only too aware in our minds of the fight, the struggle, between the soul and the body. And even if our inner eye be only half-opened, let us use this time of the Apostles' Fast effectively. Let us pray that we may arrive at the time of the feast and that by this ascetic training we may grow in the things of the Spirit; that our eyes may be open and that we may come to know fully our real Life in Christ. Amen.