

“*Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” So asks the man in today’s gospel. It is a good question; perhaps the ultimate question for a human being trying to make sense of our very existence. But, of course, this question begs an awful lot of other questions as well. What, for example, does the questioner mean by eternal life? What does he have in mind?

In Orthodox Christianity we teach one another that the final end, the goal, of our life is perfection and sanctification; that in this, our humanity, there is a possibility, a potential, to fulfil what we are called to be: the image and glory of God. The summons, the call, to arrive at that estate, that dignity, is there in the gospel: that each of us is to attain and be renewed after the likeness of Christ.

You will recall that episode when the pharisees asked Christ whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. And he asked them to show Him a coin, noting whose image it bore. They were quite happy to acquire as much of Caesar’s coinage as possible, but not so keen on rendering any tribute that was due. The wealth of this world bears Caesar’s image and thus, may be rendered unto him. But what about us; we who bear God’s image? We, who have our treasure in heaven, are called to render unto God the things that are God’s.

This is a fundamental idea in Orthodox Christian thinking. The proper theological term is *soteriology*, the mystery of our salvation. And this pursuit of the glory of God is bound together with the meaning of our Christian asceticism. We are now in the period of the Nativity Fast, one of four such seasons in our liturgical year. This is not a slimming diet; this is not some form of self-punishment; not some pay-back and recompense for a life of self-indulgence. Nor is it the search for a kind of individual virtue, somehow proving our moral rectitude.

This is very different from the man in the gospel who thinks he must seek individual merit through observing a code of behaviour. He has in mind the Old Covenant but something greater, something more fulfilling than the Law of Moses, is here. That is why he cannot make

sense of Christ's answer to his question. He has kept the commandments, so why should he, in particular, be invited set out on an ascetic life? No wonder he is horrified!

We shall not inherit eternal life merely through obedience towards an impersonal set of commandments, nor through conventional following authority or social mores, and certainly not through the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of this age.

If eternal life is to be our inheritance we must abandon the idea that it is an individual matter at all. Our own ascetic path is an *ecclesial* matter above all; something we undergo, engage with and share in through the Church, the body of Christ. We might see ourselves as belonging to all sorts of groups and communities: family, friends, colleagues, organisations, identities, interests. But all of them draw us in as an individual because is suits us as we are, the fallen Adam.

But the Church calls us into a personal communion and relationship with God and so with one another, not by taking us as we are, but precisely by changing our individual mode of existence. That is why you *have* to be baptised to share in the life of the Holy, Blessed and Consubstantial Trinity; to die with Christ, to be raised with Him. We have to be changed. *'As many as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia.'*

That is why we teach a dynamic ascetic approach to life in Christ, transfiguring those impersonal natural desires and passions that are found in us all. When our free, personal will naturally, or should I say, *supernaturally*, follows the ascetic path with joy, then the life in the love of God is brought into being. We see this supremely, of course, in the monastic life to which some are called. Yet, in as much as we find ourselves able to comply with the Church's traditions in prayer and fasting and almsgiving, we may assess our progress on what St John Climacus called the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. And so far as in us lies, our engagement and practice of the spiritual life will reveal the warmth of our love for God.

It is in accordance with the spirit of the present age that many imagine themselves to be autonomous individuals, free to choose what they

believe and how they should live. And indeed they are - at one level. There is a great liking for *designer religions* and ersatz spirituality. Here you can pick and choose from a range of ideas and concepts, as if filling your supermarket trolley, entirely to suit your state of mind at the time - only, you don't know that there will be hell to pay once you reach the checkout!

But this costs us nothing at the time; there need be no change of mind nor heart nor way of living; no repentance, no struggle, for any religion, of whatever kind, may be *adapted*, conformed to suit us as we are. Truly we can make our *own* god in our *own* image.

But none of this, as you know, is true in the Orthodox Christian Faith. No one, no body, no idea, can change the Orthodox Faith so as to adapt it to *their* requirements. You cannot tear the robe of Christ or cheapen the Pearl of Great Price. Then let this idea sink down into our minds: there is no changing our Orthodox faith and practice, bending it to make *us* feel comfortable. We do not change our faith: our faith changes us; the Church does not need us: we need the Church.

If any of us are still to make a real start in all this or perhaps, need, at least, to renew our life in Christ, we can begin practically. One way of participating in Christ and the transfiguring life in Christ, is to share in the Church's experience of Liturgical Time, where we no longer need to be confined by what we've always done according to *our* agenda, *our* diaries, *our* timetables. True: there are things to which we must attend in our busy lives, but how much of our time is just wasted? We can redeem the time by offering it to God. We can do this if we prayed regularly, - yes, regularly - according to the inconvenience of a rule and discipline even when we don't feel like it. Where possible, we can come together here, to pray and worship, using the liturgical books: the common mind and language of the Church. Or at home, even if on our own, we can enter into God's time by prayer. In fact, standing before the holy icons we are never alone.

Listen again to the words of the Epistle appointed for the feast of the Great Martyr, Katherine. '*So that the Law was our custodian until Christ came.*' The man in the gospel today had kept that Law. His

problem was that he could not put his trust in the path that Christ was showing him. *'But now that faith has come...'* the Epistle continues. *'We are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.'* In as much as each one enters into this, we are all one in Christ.