

Fr Chrysostom
3rd Sunday after Pentecost (Matt.3)

25th June 2017

“Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

‘Do not be anxious:’ is this a commandment of our Lord? I mean a command so that, if we experience anxiety we fall into sin?

Yet it’s natural to be anxious; there is much to be anxious about. It is part of the human condition, to be anxious, to be afraid. We share that with the animals, for life is precarious. In fact, you can examine any of your fears, your particular phobias, whatever they are, they all relate to the fear of death, our own annihilation.

No one has a fear of flying...yes, really! Whether it’s the nervous passenger waiting in the airport departure lounge or the high flying young business executive going for the latest promotion, they do not fear flying, they fear not flying, of coming crashing to the ground.

But what of those people in the gospel, what were they anxious about? It was the basic things of life, of survival: of having sufficient food, drinking water, clothes to cover their backs. They were the oppressed, over-taxed, beaten down crowds of the poor in the ancient world, the common people of the early Roman Empire. But they were also God’s old people, the lost sheep of the house of Israel, among whom was born the Christ from the line of David. But He saw them behaving like gentiles, running anxiously after what the world might offer them.

These people could not afford the luxury of our modern anxieties: the disorientation that comes to people when they leave their mobile phone at home; the constant need to reappraise your profile on Facebook. They did not have to bother about things like that. They certainly did not fear being blown to pieces by a terrorist’s bomb but they did fear the

next time a patrol of Roman soldiers passed through their village and how safe their daughters might be.

In fact, *do not be anxious* is not a command: it is a reassurance. Like when you were little and were bothered by something or other and your mother or father said, “*Don’t worry; it’s all right*”, to boost your confidence. We have, Christ tells us, no need for anxiety, for we have a relationship with a loving Father-God who knows what we need in this world and beyond.

What we can do instead is pray. Instead of being a bundle of fears and agitation we who are temples of the Holy Spirit can pray the Lord’s Prayer in the Spirit. Beyond the clauses of that prayer we have no needs; strictly speaking, anything else is superfluous.

Christ tells us that what we ask in faith will be given; that our prayer of faith will move mountains. There is a story of an old Scottish lady whose cottage window was blocked and overshadowed by a hill, just beyond her garden and it spoiled her view. In the kirk one Sunday she heard the words of Our Lord about moving mountains; so that night she said a prayer and she asked that the hill might be removed. The following morning she drew the curtains aside and looked out. The hill was still there. “Aye,” she said. “Just as I thought”.

Her prayer was not the prayer of faith. In fact it was magical thinking, a conjuring of God, to bend His will, perhaps even putting God to the test. Our faith is not to be in powers: powers to heal, powers to change things, powers to enrich, to empower and to move mountains. We are called to put our faith, our trust, *in God*. We don’t have faith in techniques of praying or in manufacturing within us the right kind of fervour of emotional expectation. Simply, Christ tells us to have faith in our heavenly Father.

I have said it before, and so again: real prayer changes us, it does not change the world. Is it to be thought that by prayer we can change politics? If you wish to change politics, then, *carpe diem*, become a politician. But if you change yourself, you will have moved mountains.

Does this mean that we practice a mindless approach to the future? That we blank out all thought for tomorrow; that we make no plans. Do we take out no insurance? Of course we do, for we have to live in this world and we are to be practical. There is wisdom, be it never so worldly. But it is not our *first* concern. *“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”*

There are those who are unemployed and they must seek work and I am not saying that they cannot pray about that, only that their faith must not be in economic change but must be *in God*.

There might be those among us who are ill, beyond the competence of medical science and who long to be whole. In St Mark’s gospel Christ commands his disciples to anoint the sick with oil; St James directs the same. Certainly, we must do that, only, our faith must not be in the oil itself but must be *in God*, for are saved not *by* the oil but by the one who works *through* it; if we have faith *in Him*, God will save.

It is common for the spiritual eye to be unsound, to be full of darkness. There are plenty of people who put their faith in religion of whatever kind. But Orthodox Christianity is not an end in itself: we serve the Liturgy; we practice asceticism. Is that in order to be liturgists? Or in order to be ascetics? No! It is in order to be *in Christ*, to keep in step as we seek the kingdom.

“Let not your heart be troubled,” Christ tells us in St John’s gospel (Jn 14). That is, do not be anxious. *“You believe in God, believe also in Me.”* He continues, *“I go to prepare a place for you.”* And he did that in his dying and rising again. *“I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”* If we are truly kingdom-seekers, if we really seek first the kingdom of God, then we shall know that, meanwhile, what we need will indeed be added: *“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”* The question for each of one us is, do we actually trust that promise, that providence?

The first clause in the Lord's Prayer that concerns ourselves is, *'Give us this day our daily bread.'* And the first bread we take this day, our first and prime need, is in fact the bread of tomorrow, the super-substantial bread of heaven, partaking of the kingdom that is yet to come, even now! Fr Dc Filip and I have that honour and blessing: ministering the Holy Gifts in the household of God. *"Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?"* (Lk12:42) Through this allowance, through this grace, through this viaticum, our food for the journey, we have no need for anxiety for this assurance is more sound than any other that this world has to offer.