

Think of all the different people that you encounter each day: each one, like an actor playing different roles, wears a new mask, depending on what they are doing and whom they are meeting. Not that there is anything wrong in this: it is how we deal with the different demands made upon us. There is protection for us found in social convention, good manners, customary behaviour and professional conduct.

No one knows what we truly are except, perhaps, our own family. It is why, at times, we can so often talk to them in a way that we would never do to a perfect stranger. As the day passes along its course, we become successively, a series of social personalities, adapted to the role we are playing at the time, perhaps even unrecognisable to our family and friends. For an encounter to be real, complete, the two people involved must present their true selves. How rare that must be: a meeting between two souls, fully and openly exposed to one another.

In today's gospel there is an encounter between two people: Our Lord and an enquirer - we presume that he is the same rich young man of the other gospels. He approaches Christ here, assuming that in Our Lord's role as a religious teacher, He will be able to give him an answer to a question. We presume, also, that he is an honest seeker after truth and wants to know what he should do to inherit eternal life.

Christ, for His part, is not fully revealed as to who *He* is in this encounter - not as fully as when his chosen disciples saw his glory on Mount Tabor at the Transfiguration; now that was an honest encounter!

Here, the man addresses Jesus as 'Good Teacher' and of course, *His* reply is full of irony: "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but God alone." For it is God Himself in the flesh who is responding to the man's question. And the answer he receives is

quite conventional; what any Jewish teacher would have replied: to inherit eternal life, keep the commandments of Moses.

But there is something in this encounter far more dynamic than meets the eye. Beyond the to and fro of the polite dialogue between teacher and learner there is an image of the future of every one of us. It is an image of the Day of Judgement. This man presents before Christ what he presumes are his qualifications for entry into the Kingdom of God. He has, he claims, kept the commandments, even from his youth, even though the scriptures inform us that '*the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth*' (Gen.8:21). Our souls too will encounter Christ in the Judgement only, like this man too, we will not be able to hide behind the mask of presumption. Yes, we will bring with us the record of our deeds but we will stand fully revealed to God - as we are at this very moment - social convention will be of no avail before the scrutiny of the divine judge. No wonder we pray frequently for a good defence before the fearful judgement seat of Christ!

Clearly, there is more to this man in the story than a mere rich man anxious as to whether he will get to heaven. Playing the role of a religious seeker, there is underneath his enquiry a dissatisfaction. Yes, he has kept the commandments but surely, he is thinking, there is something more to eternal life than just outward conformity to the rules? And he is right, there is!

And, according to Our Lord, there is only one thing missing: of what is he prepared to let go in this life, in order to receive that which lasts forever. That is what Christ meant in saying to him in particular, '*Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor.*' There are, of course, echoes here of last week's gospel of *The Rich Fool*, the man distracted by his good fortune from what really matters in this life.

This encounter this morning then ends painfully. You can picture the scene: Christ being open and honest with him, no euphemisms, no understatement, just the candid truth. And the man himself, disappointed with the reply. The cost is too high for him; he cannot let go of his wealth - and he is very wealthy. At least here we see the veneer of social decorum slip a little. Somehow, according to St Luke,

he demonstrates sadness and, presumably, walks away from the discussion without another word. But at least this is honest. He doesn't say, *let me think about this* or, *let me work out how much I can dispose of*.

It may be a lack of faith here on this enquirer's part. Does he really believe that there is an eternal life? That it is worth more in absolute terms than enjoying the world's riches *just for the time being...*? But to prefer the life of heaven to what you have now in your hand... That *is* a matter of faith! Any worldly-wise man knows the answer to that one: *I'll keep what I've got, thank you very much*.

When we stand before God in prayer, do we do so in the guise of one of our social personalities? We are rightly careful, if we pray before an icon of Christ, which is in an authentic icon, representative of the real tradition, manifesting the holy image of the fulness of Christ; the real Christ, the Orthodox Christ. But what of us? Do I imagine because I have the charism, the grace of priesthood indelibly marked on my soul, that my own prayers are automatically authentic? What is a priest after all but an icon of Christ, standing at the head of the congregation, a spokesman through whom the prayers of the Church ascend to the throne of grace? But what about me, who am no more than any other Christian soul whose soul is an open book before God?

If our prayer before God is to be an authentic encounter, a true meeting, we need, on the one hand, to be certain that our image of God is not of our own manufacture, a false idol, a god of our own making. This is why the very idea of Orthodoxy of belief is so important in our practice of Christianity and always has been. And on the other hand, we must recognise that *our* true self is not a mere collection of social faces we wear as required; they might involve a part of us but they are not the fullness of who we are. Rather, our true self is that image of God within us and moreover, how far we have recovered the lost likeness to God. This is how God sees us.

This is how Christ saw the man in today's gospel, not as a series of religious and moral successes, of boxes ticked on the full list of 613 Mosaic commandments in the Torah. Christianity, as I have told

you many times is not a series of rules to be kept but a relationship with a person, for Christ has fulfilled the Law and in place of the Torah of Moses we have the incarnate Messiah. Well, if we want that relationship, if we want that encounter, we too must pay the price, or rather, see where true value lies.

St John of Damascus' canon, sung during the Orthodox funeral service for one of the faithful departed in Christ, conveys this beautifully. Idiomela 5 says: *'I looked again into the graves and beheld the bones laid bare and I said: Who then is the king or the warrior, the rich man or the needy, the upright or the sinner?'* Let us remember this when we stand before the icon of Christ, that in encountering Christ we too are just bones laid bare. Yes indeed, Christ said such shocking things to those who would follow Him: *Leave the dead to bury their dead; no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is worthy of the kingdom of heaven. Those who preferred their own families to Him were not worthy either!*

In this time of expectation and preparation, the season of repentance and the fast, let us seek to encounter the real Christ again for our renewal. Let's be rid of and detach ourselves from those parts of our life that, if we are honest, we still cling on to, rather than onto Him. Let us, at the very least, be detached in the way we use this world and the things of this world. And if this be too daunting, we can look to what He says at the end: *'What is impossible with men is possible **with** God.'* But we do have to be **with** Him.