

28th January 2018

Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican

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The Church of Jesus Christ, the one, Orthodox-Catholic Church, founded on the teaching of the apostles, has always been entrusted with the mission to gather in the faithful, the believers, into the household of God. But what does it present before the world; what does it offer in the gospel to those who would follow Christ? Which politician, standing for election, does not entice the voters with promises of prosperity, peace, well-being, opportunity for all, freedom from fear and a future heading towards the bright, sun-lit uplands?

But this morning in the Epistle, St Paul lays before his spiritual child, Timothy, his own experience of Christ; what it has meant for him. And looking at his list it appears at first, perhaps, to be a mixed blessing. And what is on his list? We find sound teaching, integrity of conduct, a clear aim in life, his firm faith, his steadfast love. And then he adds his limitless patience, needed under so many sufferings and persecutions. And if further encouragement is needed, he suggests that this is in store for anyone who would desire a godly life in Christ.

Christ, Paul testifies, rescued him out of all his troubles, that is, of course, soon to change, for the time is coming when the blessed apostle will glorify Christ in his martyr's death. In 64AD the great fire of Rome will afford the emperor, Nero, the opportunity he desired to seize land and build his great new palace, Domus Aurea, the Golden House. Conveniently, the emperor will seize on the Christians to blame for the fire and both St Peter and St Paul will suffer death in the persecutions that followed.

If Christianity were a commercial product, which advertising agency would be foolhardy enough to accept the contract for its publicity? An unbiased and neutral observer of human affairs would be amazed, not so much at the small number of real Christians in the world but that there are so many!

What of us then, we, who stand among that great number, seeking to make Paul's experience our own? Let us ask ourselves a question about the gospel we heard just now: what is the essential

difference between the religion of the Pharisee and that of the Publican? It will help us, I think, to understand something of this conundrum: why men like St Timothy, to use Paul's words, *continued in what he had learned*.

We have opened the Triodion today, the service book that accompanies us and leads us on this great journey towards Pascha, the Lenten *Vade Mecum* of the Orthodox Church. In these days before 19th February, we are getting ready; we are to be like intrepid explorers making our preparations, packing only what is essential and about to embark on a gruelling expedition. Only, our travel is inward: for many, perhaps a strange and unknown destination; for others, an exotic land that they have visited many times before.

The difference between these two men might seem obvious. The publican we know about already - he is the same type of character as Zacchaeus, of whom we heard last Sunday. Whether he is a wealthy man and owns the tax-farming, contract like Zacchaeus did; or whether he were one of the cruel henchmen, sent out by the boss to extort money, there is no way of telling.

But what of the Pharisee: one who identified with a party that followed a strict interpretation of the Law of Moses. Here, he followed the teachings of the fathers, the Pirqe Avot, in Hebrew. He accepted a wider group of scriptures alongside the five books of the Torah. These included the books of the Prophets and the other writings like the Psalms and historical books that we find in the Orthodox Christian Bible - although, as yet, the Jews themselves had not fixed what we think of as a canon of scripture. As a Pharisee he believed in the angelic powers and crucially, the resurrection of the dead and the judgement to come.

From this you might have worked out, quite rightly, that the only thing that separated the religion of the Pharisee from Our Lord Himself taught, was the question of the Torah, its purpose, interpretation and practice.

But it is not matters of belief and doctrine that lie at the heart of this parable; the dividing line is elsewhere. Think for a moment about

what we are taught, even from an early age, by parents and teachers and the world around us: how we must be self-reliant, resourceful, ambitious, well-rounded individuals with high self-esteem. Alongside this, the world presents delightful prospects: the acquisition of wealth, the anodyne of pleasure, the power to be in control and the self-idolatry of being popular. Although we might add, nowadays, that we are enticed in the electronic cyber world to dance to the commercial music of algorithms, somehow we still imagine that we are free to establish ourselves.

It is an old passion working here. At root, it is the same cause that cast Lucifer from the heavens. You will recall that when the seventy came back to Jesus, full of self-congratulation because they could cast our demons, he told them, *"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. [Lk.10:18]* Yes, He had given them authority to trample over all the power of the enemy but there was spiritual danger in that power. *"Nevertheless,"* he tells them. *"Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven."* Pride! Pride is the spiritual enemy here. No wonder so many spiritual fathers and elders count it the worst of deadly sins; the primal sin of Satan.

It is pride that marks the difference between these two men in the gospel. For what does the Pharisee present in his prayer, what does he offer up? He tells God all that he has achieved in by his religious observance, how good he must have been. Therefore, he stakes his claim and demands from God his due, what must surely and rightly be his.

Leaving aside any discussion of the humility, the repentance, the change of heart seen in the publican - a man known for his bullying, indifferent, cold-hearted avarice - let us just note whom God favours in this story. And what do we learn, especially from where this reading is placed in the annual cycle of liturgical reading. What does this mean for us?

It means that, before we set out on the Lenten journey - only three weeks away now - we must lay aside our self-reliance. You might need that if you were to be found in some steaming jungle,

some hostile wilderness, surrounded by fearsome beasts on the prowl, venomous snakes and disease-bearing insects. But we are not having to deal with any of that. As St Paul's tells the Ephesians, *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."* [Ephesians 6:12] For our journey is a self-exploration and the dangers we shall face will not be overcome by a trusty rifle, antidotes and insect repellent, let alone our own strength.

As we embark we cast out all pride and rely instead on the grace of God. In fact, we are called to lighten our load for the journey. We can give away our wealth in almsgiving; some of the time we have left in this life can be abandoned to prayer. And we can fast from our addiction to pleasures. For in the strange, unworldly, apparently upside-down dynamics of the kingdom of God, what we surrender and abandon is returned transfigured; a spiritual treasure that cannot be lost.

Most of all, guard the thoughts that enter the heart in all this. In everything, we must be as the publican in the temple. Nothing is our achievement; all is the working of grace. If you fast well in Lent, was it you or was it grace received from the Holy Gifts? If you pray well, is it your ability to hold your attention or was it that your angel who stood with you because you repented of your pride? If you give alms above what you might even be able to afford, was it your generosity of spirit, or was it the love of God the Holy Spirit, poured into your heart at your Chrismation? As Christ says in St Luke's gospel [Lk.17:10] *"When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"*