

31st December 2017
Theophany

Leave-taking of Nativity & Sunday before
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

There is a strange and wonderful paradox deep in the heart of our faith; the spiritual life in Christ concerns both change and changelessness, stability and revolution, at one and the same time. How can this be?

In the sixth century, when St Benedict of Nursia in Italy established the monastic order bearing his name, he gave his monks three ideals to follow, in what he called the school of the Lord's service, namely, obedience, stability and conversion of life. But conversion is a change - how can this lie alongside stability? Benedict was aware that in his days there were monks who chose to wander from monastic house to monastic house, vainly trying to find the perfect one, or rather, the one that suited their own religious tastes. He found such monks busybodies, troublemakers, never to be satisfied with what they found. Instead, he wanted his monks to settle in one place, in one monastic house and follow his rule, so he rejected the unstable.

The point that St Benedict was making to any who would test their vocation in the monastic life, was to confront them with his third ideal: conversion of life. It was not the rule of the house that had to change but the monk himself. How different from the general attitude of many in certain types of Christianity (naming no names, may the listener understand!) where the adherents (for want of a better term) demand that their religion be adapted to fit in with *their* way of life, rather than be unsettled by any notion that it is *they* who have to convert and change the way they live.

As ever, just as in the days of St Paul, so now in our day, the preaching of the cross of Christ is a scandal, an offence. Proclaiming the way of the cross is the beginning of the Judgement: who takes it up; who does not? St Benedict understood this. His famous monastic rule avoided the extremes of the ascetic life that some undertook in order to gain kudos and the admiration of their disciples, rather than as a hidden and pure offering to glorify God. Instead, he provided for

beginners as well as the adept and spiritually advanced, so that the life in common might be preserved in stability and order.

This interweaving of those ideals of both stability and conversion of life is central to the practice and experience of our own following of Christ as well, even for us who are not monks or nuns. We, nevertheless, are called to embrace them both. Today, as well as being the Leave-taking of the Nativity is also the Sunday before Theophany. We heard in the gospel, “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.*” *John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*’ The Forerunner traditionally has his icon fixed to the left hand of Christ on the iconostasis. Pointing us to Christ, he invites us to repent, a constant conversion of our own way of life, for this too is our vocation.

We who live in the world, not in monasteries, nevertheless are called to vigilance and watchfulness, waiting on God. We who have just celebrated His first coming, still wait *for* God who is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead. We have no need to import old or new ideas from outside the Holy Tradition of the apostles and fathers in order to draw nearer to Christ. We have only to be watchful over our own lives, knowing ourselves well; what the fathers of the Philokalia call ‘guarding the heart,’ not least, aware of the machinations of the devil, vigilant for the influence of the demonic in all that goes on around us.

Great Lent and Pascha come early this year: a time of grace before the End, when we can change once more. Yet, again and again, repentance, the change of mind and conversion of our life, is brought before us. But this concerns the way we interact with the world we find ourselves in: our place, our relationships, our understanding of the world. It is because of Sin that we must be always changing, always keeping the outer man in check.

But what of the inner man? This is the resolving of our paradox that I set at the beginning. How can we be always changing and yet stable? Because we remain faithful, holding the mystery of faith and accepting what it demands of us without trying to change that faith to

suit what we happen to be. This is what we teach to those who wish to enter the Orthodox Church: though they might not understand all things at once, yet Orthodox belief and way of life must be acknowledged and practiced when they are ready to become catechumens. The Orthodox Church is not like a supermarket where we choose what we want to put into our trolley.

Yet there is something more. Though the outward man may change - as St Paul was well aware - the inner man is renewed daily. When we speak of the soul, here we must aim for stability, stability of soul, peace of soul, call it what you will. This we can possess even as the world changes around us. As the psalmist says, *'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea...Be still, and know that I am God.'* (Ps 45)

This then is the way we conduct ourselves through this world. Just as the bishop, the *episkopos*, is the overseer of the church, as the name implies, so each one of us is to be vigilant, the bishop of our own soul, watching over and aware of all the influences, noises, distractions and temptations that are bound to come our way through our outward senses. And where necessary, repenting and changing and reforming our lives. Yet within: stable, the soul's attention fixed on Christ, ever-fateful, constant and unmoved, no matter what storms and moods that bestir the emotions, like the changes of the weather.

In this way we can avoid being too elated by success or cast down too far by failure, knowing the cause of our real joy and abiding bliss. For the stable soul recognises sadness and suffering for what it is: a condition of this life but not able to snatch from the sheepfold of Christ, be it never so severe. And no triumph or worldly superiority can ever possess such a soul, being recognised for what it is, a fading laurel with no glory in eternity.

Let me end with this quotation from St Gregory of Nyssa:

'After the resurrection, when our bodies will be reunited to our souls, they will be incorruptible; and the carnal passions which disturb us now will not be present in those bodies; we shall enjoy a peaceful

equilibrium in which the prudence of the flesh will not make war upon the soul; and there will no longer be that internal warfare wherein sinful passions fight against the law of the mind, conquering the soul and taking it captive by sin. Our nature then will be purified of all these tendencies, and one spirit will be in both, I mean in the flesh and in the spirit, and every corporeal affection will be banished from our nature.'

That will be our everlasting stability with no need for further conversion of life.