

Ever since the start of the glorious feast of Pascha, the Church has systematically been reading in her liturgy two New Testament books: the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of John. We shall continue that through the season.

This was no random choice of the fathers who framed and established our liturgical rule, *The Typikon*. If you pay careful attention to the stories chosen from St. John's gospel for following Sundays of Pascha, you might notice that they are linked, in some way, to the holy mysteries of the Church, often called, the sacraments: the paralysed man at the pool; the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well; the man born blind: all bring to mind the regeneration of Holy Baptism. We might also recall other links in St John's gospel with the way in which the Church dispenses the ministry of grace: the miracle of water into wine at Cana and Christian marriage; the miraculous feeding of the great multitude and the Holy Eucharist; Christ's breathing the Holy Spirit upon His apostles with authority to bind and loose and we recall confession and absolution.

This is by design, not by accident. The services of both Great Lent and Pascha have in mind the reception of the Catechumens and their initiation into Christ. Indeed, these two liturgical seasons themselves find their origins, not just in the Gospel story of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ but also in the early Christian practice of receiving converts to Christ by baptism into His Body, the Church at this time of the year.

It is no surprise, therefore, that by the end of the fourth century the Church had come to a common mind as to which Gospel books bore divine authority as the Word of God, truly reflecting the tradition of the apostles, rather than the fantasies and heresies of the Gnostics and their later compositions. St Mark, whom we heard just now, bearing the memories of the apostle Peter; St Matthew, a Jewish *Midrash*, or teaching handbook, on how to put the commandments of Christ into practice in daily life; St Luke, a full account of the Christian faith and its story, set out for an individual enquirer.

And finally, St John, which might even be, in part, a treatise on the mystical experience of Christian initiation and the incorporation of the believer into the Body of the Church.

Today, though, we heard from St Mark, not John, as we commemorate those equals of the Apostles, the Myrrh-bearing women. Together with Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, they span the faiths of the Old and the New Covenants. They come, in today's Gospel reading, to fulfil the burial practices proper to the Old Covenant. Believing that there would be a resurrection of judgement at the end, they regard the human form and body with great reverence and respect. Even when empty of the soul after death, the physical remains, the relics that once gave lively expression to the person within, are still honoured with a ritual care, washing and anointing.

These everyday, religious, cultural and social duties - which they have learned since childhood, having observed the women of their community - are appropriate to burial for the chosen people of the Lord God, just as Abraham and Sarah, the ancestors of their faith, were buried. But these rites belonged to the Old Covenants of Abraham the Patriarch and Moses the Lawgiver. But suddenly, on this occasion, they are no longer appropriate! For with the Resurrection of Christ the rites cannot be carried out; He is no longer there. Informed by an angel, no wonder they flee in fear. As such, these burial rituals still belonged to the fallen Adam, still bound by the law of sin and death; as such, they looked forward, anticipating what *was* to come and *has now* come through the New Adam; as such, they are fulfilled in Christ.

Most of us, of course, have been initiated, incorporated, baptised into Christ - perhaps for more years than we care to remember. But it is good, salutary, useful for us to be reminded of these things from time to time, from season to season, lest our religion become just habit, simple custom or, God forbid, mere cultural identity! No, our faith has to be far more dynamic than that if we are to be saved.

The early converts to Christianity, especially the gentiles, spent a good deal of time, whilst they were catechumens, hearing

the stories of the Old Testament read to them. In that way they would understand better how the New Covenant in Christ brought the story of salvation to its full conclusion. Remember, this was at a time when ordinary people did not own books and the Church herself did not define the limits of the canon of Holy Scripture until she had to, at the end of the fourth century. This was so that the Orthodox would know which writings were apostolic and which were heretical.

Catechumens might spend up to three years as learners of the faith, dismissed from the Sunday liturgy with prayer and blessing after the homily. But now, at Pascha, they could stay for the whole service, be given the Creed, the symbol of faith and receive the Holy Gifts for the very first time. This experience was echoed and reinforced by readings from the book of Acts and St John's gospel.

The situation is, of course, different in our day: there are baptisms in this place every other week. We had one yesterday; we have two next weekend. It is relatively easy for us to own the whole canon of the Orthodox Bible; to study both the Old and the New Testaments. And it is important that we read them regularly, to feed our spiritual and inner life. It is even better if we follow the daily readings in our lectionary. It is important that our children are read the stories from both parts of the Bible - a background store of knowledge from which they can draw, as they grow and build and mature in the faith.

If you come regularly to Vespers and Orthros you will find hymns and verses full of references to the Old Testament. But we read those sacred writings always looking forward: where we find the Book of Exodus has had the crossing of the Red Sea under Moses, in the New Covenant we have baptism into Christ. The Old had the Passover with the blessing of bread and wine; we have communion in the body and blood of Christ. The Old had the people of Israel; we have the Church. The Old had the temple in the earthly Jerusalem; we have our churches, symbols of the heavenly kingdom. They had the hereditary priesthood of Aaron; we have the sacred ministry of the deacons and presbyters in Christ, after the or-

der of Melchizadek. Their covenant was through the Law for this life: they had to await its fulfilment in what we are now entering: eternal life in Christ.

In summary, let us be reminded and renewed by these joyful Sundays as we pass through Pascha. Our spiritual, that is our real and everlasting life, is lived out, even now, through the holy mysteries of the Church. Think what that means! The Holy Mysteries of the Church are the Sacraments, the manifestations, of the kingdom of God on earth; like the holy icons, they are doorways even now into the life to come. Every time we participate worthily in any of the sacraments our souls stand with Christ in the heavenly places. Let us handle them with care; let us approach them in awe; let us worship in wonder. For blending our bodies with the body of the Lord, we are not anointing the dead, we are not dwelling in the tombs. We are revealing, we are manifesting that, through repentance, Sin has become powerless and death has been trampled down. Christ is risen!