

4th Sunday after Pentecost
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God is the Creator of all things. So we say in the Creed: '*...Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.*' And even more astounding, we assert that '*...He was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man.*' For we proclaim that He entered this creation; that he became part of it, joined with it: a marriage of heaven and earth.

Being a faith that has the Incarnation of God at its very heart, Christianity can be called the most materialistic of all religions. For us, matter, the stuff of this world, is no illusion, nor something to be despised with puritanical zeal. Although fallen, it is the destiny of this creation that it is to be transfigured, for it has been redeemed; it is to be made anew and must share in the kingdom of heaven when '*He shall come again to judge the living and the dead.*'

For us there is to be no conflict between what is spiritual and what is material, for the material things of this world can be blessed and consecrated to God: restored to what they are meant to be. Though they can be tainted and abused through sin, yet they can also be sacred, symbols pointing beyond themselves into the divine. Why else do we see around us this material house of stone, the holy images, the flames of lamps, the beauty of flowers, holy oil and the water of baptism. On the Holy table we find the Antimension, holding the relics of martyrs and the bread and wine, set apart to become the all-holy gifts in an unspeakable mystery!

It is no wonder too that in the Orthodox Church we venerate the holy relics of the saints, the visible remains of those who themselves, in their lifetimes, were sanctified by God the Holy Spirit.

Although there are heterodox forms of Christianity that will dismiss all this as idolatry, distracting us from the service of God, they forget, to their own shame and confusion, those words we heard in the Apostle today: '*Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the*

covenant.' Yes, even under the Old Testament there were relics, here, Paul lists those kept in the Mosaic tabernacle.

There still exists the written account of those who in 156AD witnessed the martyrdom of the St Polykarp, Bishop of Smyrna. They reported that, *'We afterwards took up his bones, more valuable than precious stones and finer than gold, and laid them where it was fitting.'* Thus were regarded, from the earliest days of the faith, the mortal remains of the martyrs, around which the early Christians gathered for the Liturgy on their memorial day, who to this day are venerated throughout the whole Orthodox world for their witness to Christ.

Today we commemorate the placing of the Robe of the Theotokos at Blachernae. The story is as follows:

During the days of Leo the Great, Emperor of Constantinople in the early fifth century, the brothers Galbius and Candidus went on pilgrimage from Constantinople to Palestine. In the house where they stayed near Nazareth they noticed a room where many lamps were lit, incense burned, and sick people were gathered. When they asked the lady of the house what was so special about the room, she eventually said, after much persuading, that she guarded the Robe of the Mother of God, where many came seeking miracles and healings. Before Her Falling asleep, the Most Holy Virgin left one of her garments to a pious Jewish maiden, an ancestor of the current owner. So the Robe of the Theotokos was kept and passed on in this family through the years.

Eventually, the chest, containing the sacred Robe, was brought to Constantinople. The Patriarch and the Emperor, having learned of the sacred treasure and being convinced of its authenticity, had a new church built for the robe at Blachernae, near the coast, in honour of the Mother of God. In 458, The Patriarch, St. Gannadius, transferred the sacred Robe into the Blachernae church where it was placed in a new reliquary.

So it is that the Church holds within its Holy Tradition not only the heirlooms and physical remains and relics from her past, faithfully

handed down but also the stories of those who witnessed to Christ and of the wonders God performed through them; none more so than the untold miracles and signs of the blessed Theotokos herself. You can research for yourself the stories of the miracles that God worked through the robe and the prayers of the Virgin.

But how can the veneration of the sacred relics detract from the glory of God, as some might claim? In fact, it does the very opposite and confirms our faith. For, as I said last week, our faith is not in these patches of cloth themselves, or dead men's bones or the holy myron itself, flowing from ancient icons. Our faith is in the God who wondrously works through them: the relics we indeed venerate but it is God we worship. As the sun's glory is not darkened, just because the moon shines with its reflected light, neither is God diminished when in this world his saints shine with the effulgence of His uncreated light.

Indeed, it is the entire purpose of God towards us, that he share His life with us and that we live and move and have *our* being *in Him*. And in much as the spirit and the flesh are inextricably bound in this world; that here, mind and brain, soul and body, thought and act, word and speech are all one, we need not marvel that the sacred and the profane, the heavenly and the earthly, intermingle here. For Christ God has redeemed this world and in the fulness of the coming of the kingdom, yes, these signs, these miracles and even these mysteries and sacraments will have passed away and God will be revealed as all in all.

So we need not to be surprised that those who have conquered the passions that still drive us; that those who have acquired the mind of Christ through repentance and have bridled sin, should shine already with the same light that shone on mount Tabor; whose very bones, left behind, are more precious to us than gold.

After the fall of the city in 70AD the first followers of Christ in Jerusalem had to flee the city. Who knows what they took with them? What memories, what objects? That her bodily presence passed over into that kingdom, fully redeemed as her soul, is one of those treasured memories concerning the Mother of God incarnate

(as we shall celebrate on 15th August). But if she has left us no bones for veneration, then the items that clothed that consecrated body are left to us instead, in order that we who remain in our spiritual struggle in this world may bring these things to mind; that we be reminded, that each time we venerate the holy relics and each time we keep these festivals, we inherit, even now, a blessing from what seems to be our past. For although in the world's eyes Our Lady and the saints belong with the dead, we know that, in the kingdom, they are our contemporaries and companions on the way. As we pray in the litany, in venerating their relics, once again we can commend ourselves and each other and our *whole* life unto Christ our God.