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Pentecost 21 Luke 5

If you are an Orthodox Christian there are two things that make you the same as every other Orthodox Christian: your Orthodoxy, certainly; and the second is your redeemed humanity, that fallen human nature into which we are born but has now been baptised; that has already died with Christ and been raised up with Him. Our common faith and our regenerated nature are the two that unite us in one. As for the rest, we are all largely different from one another. There might be commonalities of culture, language, education, relationships, origins, but our inner experience, our involvement, our relationship with our God, belong to ourselves alone.

This is why the Church remains holy, the immaculate bride of Christ, against which the gates of hell can never prevail, yet when we sin, we sin alone. For sins, according to their degrees of evil, are like footsteps wandering away from the kingdom of God, which is why we have the redirection of our steps in the healing of repentance, confession and reconciliation in the Church.

St Paul reminds us today that individually we are members of a body, each one being a necessary part, and with a necessary part to play. Already, around the years 53 to 54 AD, in the Church of Corinth he could cite apostles like himself, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues; a hierarchy of gifts and ministries needed in the body of Christ. We see the same variety here, among us: presbyters, pastors, readers, chanters, teachers, administrators, helpers, intercessors in prayer, and many languages as well.

But for all our similarities and diversity, one gift, Paul says, must be sought by all. For without Love (Agape in the Greek) this body of believers is dead; without Love, this building is an empty shell. For the apostle St John, God is love, that is, as the fathers teach us, God is known through love, not in His essence, of course, but in that supreme energy of God that binds all things in Christ.

It is this love of God that builds up the body of Christ till we all attain spiritual maturity, as St Paul Says in Ephesians, *'Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.'* [Eph.4:13]

Two Early Christians who found their own path in Christ, their own particular vocation and calling, are celebrated and commemorated today: the saints Cosmas and Damian of Asia Minor. They lived during the third century and are not to be confused with the saints bearing the same names, two from Arabia and two from Rome; each pair with their own feast day. Of those we celebrate today, the Synaxarion recited at Matins says, *'The brothers were from Mesopotamia in Asia Minor. After the death of their pagan father, their Christ-loving mother Theodota reared them in piety and in all manner of virtue, and had them instructed in every science, especially that of medicine. This became their vocation, and they went about healing every illness and malady, bestowing healing freely on both men and beasts alike; because of this, Cosmas and Damian are called "Unmercenaries." They fulfilled Christ's command: "Freely have ye received; freely give" [Matthew 10:8]. And thus, having completed the course of their life, they reposed in peace. Even after their deaths, Cosmas and Damian worked healing miracles for all who called upon their names.'*

When the priest prepares the bread and the wine at the Proskomedia, the preparation service in the altar before the Divine Liturgy, he places on the Diskos the nine small triangles of bread, each representing a different type of saint: the angels, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, for example. And there are also the Holy Unmercenaries, like Cosmas and Damian. This action confirms our belief that, though having passed from this world, yet they still minister among us; that the saints, having attained to *the perfect man*, to use Paul's phrase, are no longer limited to the contingencies of this mortal life. The Prophets still point to the coming of Christ, the apostles still preside over the churches, the fathers speak to us still in their writings, and the blood of the martyrs yet cries out in witness to Christ. And these unmercenary healers may be called upon to this day in all our illnesses and sufferings.

Let us consider today what our attitude should be towards our physical sufferings. All of us have, and no doubt will, suffer. Every ache and pain, every fever, disease, ailment, condition, and contagion is a reminder of our mortality. Even those chronic conditions that we bear as a cross through this life serve, like the slave, who accompanying the victorious Roman general in his chariot, as he made his triumphal passage through the imperial city, whispered into his ear, *memento mori*, 'remember, that you are mortal.' In the mysterious mercy of God, even in the days of our youth and strength, we are denied the illusion that our useful time here will continue forever. St Paul knew this too, who, you recall, asked God to remove his own thorn-in-the-flesh three times, only to be told, '*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*' [2 Cor.12:9]

Having undergone procedures to remove a tooth twice last year, I am extremely grateful to live in an age of effective analgesia. Orthodox Theology considers pain an evil and death as the last enemy. I have little time for those attempts to justify and explain the existence of physical suffering because they are, somehow, a hidden blessing, build character and encourage sympathy. Those things might be true in certain circumstances and instances, but the experience of pain and distress is still horrible.

The problem for this age, one that has seen the expanding successes and results of scientific medicine, is that it has deluded many into imagining that we shall eventually do away with death. I applaud that MP who, in the House of Commons recently, suggested that the Prime Minister, in dealing with the current pandemic, appeared to be trying to abolish death. Well, good luck with that one, as they say! Let's be honest: it is largely because of the development of inoculation against disease, and the use of antibiotics, that the average lifespan has increased. Through our medical knowledge we have roughly doubled our time on earth, if compared with that of the ancient tribal, hunter-gatherer. Whether we have double the wisdom, however, is another matter altogether.

The saints, Cosmas and Damian no doubt ministered to their patients using the medical knowledge and beliefs of the ancient world, a body of pharmacology, herbalism and practice that came originally from ancient Egypt, famously practised by Greek doctors, and that draw upon the writings of Hypocrates and Galen. Their skills were founded on observation, experience and intuition, but their ministry in Christ was born out of the love of God and their charity towards the sufferings of others.

The common opinion now, of course, labours under a pernicious delusion: that science will eventually cure all diseases. Yet the reaction of the modern secular mind to the present crisis has been interesting to observe. The scientifically educated trust in their knowledge and pour over the statistics more assiduously than any ancient Roman Haruspex divining, with bloodied fingers, the entrails of a sheep. Meanwhile, the mass of the people, manipulated into a state of fear, sees the current pandemic as a battle that must be fought against an evil-minded virus, seeking to destroy us. This is, of course, pure primitive animism and magical thinking. At least in the Middle Ages, in the face of any plague, the people had the spiritual insight to repent. We have much that we might say concerning the current pandemic that has gripped politicians and the media and has reduced so many almost to state of social psychosis. But I should much rather be in the company of the Holy Unmercenary Healers and learn from them about the divine compassion for those who suffer, and which seeks no reward within the confines of this world.

There is much more that might be said about our sufferings in life: of how they may be received even with thanksgiving; of their redemptive power; of their part in our ascetic life; of their corrective chastisement; even of how the demonic mind may use them to destroy us. But there is not time for all that now. We do note, however, that the Orthodox Christian mind is not oblivious to how the demons have rejoiced over all this, not least in the disruption to the life of the churches throughout the world! How many Christian leaders, whether Orthodox or heterodox, have preferred to avoid the disapproval of the secular world by being seen only to promote public safety, rather than also perceiving this natural event as God's warning; that the time for repentance, to change the mind, is running

out. Our bishops and pastors are meant to be watchmen, guarding the city of God, teaching the mind of Christ, sniffing out heresies and feeding the flock. They are the doorkeepers of the gospel parable, waiting for the master's return, but how many of them have a truly eschatological mind, one that looks to the end and goal of all things?

For our part, let us remember, as an ancient Latin hymn says *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, where charity and love are, there is God. Both the gospel today and this feast of saints Cosmas and Damian teach us what that means. And I know that we understand that; that there is among us great help and support for one another, in any need or suffering. We know also that a Divine Liturgy served without the love of God is, at best, mere theatre, at worst, a congregation of demons. Yet, let us be very sure that in all our difficulties, in any trouble, any ailment or illness, that we seek first, as in all things, the kingdom of God and its righteousness. Though, as necessary at times in this world, we have to entrust our bodies to the physician, we must also commend our whole life unto Christ our God. We have the mystery of Holy Unction among us, we can have the blessed oils at home, and we can turn to the Unmercenary Ones and ask them to pray for us to the God of love. As St Paul writes to the Hebrews, *'Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'* [Heb.4:14-16]