

There is an error, easily fallen into by some religiously minded people, that skims around the edges of heresy: that is, to dismiss the physical realities as of no significance; that the only important claim on our attention are the spiritual things. As I said in my Paschal homily, that is to fall into the Docetic heresy, whereas in fact, Christianity does not separate what we call spiritual from the physical, as if one were morally superior to the other, as if your face were somehow less *you* than the conscious person within.

Let there be no doubt! What we call the *spiritual things* most certainly take the lead; they give the principal direction to how we should live our lives. *‘For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’* [Mk.8:36-37]

And we know that in this fallen world all creatures are driven by self-preservation; the instinct to survive in this, the only life that we seem to know. Nutrition, shelter, protection are fundamental needs, to which we may add kinship, companionship, meaningful occupation and even self-expression, justice, belonging and whatever else one might care to add.

The Ancients knew all about this, of course. They loved this life and yearned for it to continue eternally, only without the hassle. Think of the care that the ancient Egyptians lavished on their dead; how their anxiety in the face of death motivated them, if not to move, at least to create, mountains: pyramids in honour of their rulers. Think of how they preserved their corpses, stored grave goods and wrote magical texts to equip their departed for the life beyond. And in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, composed around 2,500 BC, the eponymous hero, king of Uruk, was on a quest to find eternal life. He meets the goddess, Siduri, who tells him he is wasting his time; that the gods had reserved eternal life for themselves and that the lot of Man was, in all honesty, just to be as happy as possible, but only for this life. She says, *‘fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be*

*fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace. For this too is the lot of man.'* In other words, just to eat drink and be merry for death is the end of this life. [compare, 1Cor.15:32]

This is all well and good, if for this life alone we have hope. But all too often Sin enters in and the passions subvert all that we endeavour. Gluttony takes over our feasting, vanity, our clothing, self-interest, our relationships and lust, our embracing. Yet all that is good in human nature teaches us to consider the needs of others, not just our own. And in order to find that eternal life, unknown to the ancient pagans; that Life which Christ has revealed to us in the kingdom of God, we know the kind of people we must become and the kind of things we must do: *'I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me... ...Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'* [Matt.25:35-40]

Today we commemorate the holy Myrrhbearers, together with Joseph of Arimathaea, and Nicodemus who came to Christ by night. Their care for others extended even to the dead, according to pious Jewish custom. The Myrrh Bearing Women in particular were the women mentioned in St Matthew's gospel (Mat. 27:55) who had "followed Jesus from Galilee and ministered to his needs." And according to St Luke, *'Mary called Magdalene... and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others... provided for Him from their substance.'* [Lk.8:2-3] In other words Christ, during the time of His preaching ministry among His own people, did not exchange making His living in the carpentry shop in order to live on light and air, but in the reality of His incarnation, was subject to the normal physical needs of the body: food, drink, clothing and shelter. It was these women disciples who, having the financial means, provided for Him. This allowing of Himself to become dependent on others is also a mark of Our Lord's humility, *'Who, being in the form of God... made Himself of no reputation... And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself ...'* [Phil.2:2-8]

Even after death, the separation of soul and body, that comes with the collapse of the bodily systems, the human body itself remains sacred, to be treated with the utmost respect and honour. Sure! These women as well as Joseph and Nicodemus, knew all about the general resurrection and, accordingly, set about His burial in as dignified a way as they could under the circumstances: Joseph, aided by Nicodemus, bearing the corpse away to his very own tomb, one prepared for his own eventual demise. Did Joseph imagine that in due time, perhaps before too long, he would lie in death alongside the teacher from Nazareth, awaiting the resurrection? And the women, marking the place, awaiting the end of the Sabbath before bringing the prepared spices to complete the rituals of death.

How wrong they were! Surprised! Caught out by events, confused even by the empty tomb; terrified by a vision of angels and fleeing in consternation (Mk.16:8). For, in this particular case, their attentions were not required. Yes, indeed, the son of the widow of Nain, and Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus of the four days had all been raised again in *this* life: but here was I AM, the Resurrection and the Life Himself! (Jn.11:25-26)

And as for us, we Orthodox Christians who are currently celebrating this joyful time of Pascha, we see here the essence of what it is to be a follower of Christ, what is of real importance in the story of our own salvation. Not obsessive liturgical exactitude, not in ecclesiastical politics, not nationalistic allegiances, not in techniques of spirituality, not in cultural customs, nor in rules of ascetic severity, but in the True Faith, in repentance and humility, standing in reverence and joy before God, and in care for our neighbour's well-being.

The Myrrhbearers teach us that our faith must be manifest in our care for one another. The idea that we need only be 'spiritual', that the physical things have no real value, can easily lead to delusion, where the mind is exalted above deigning to concern itself with the practicalities of our parish life; that such matters as the care and upkeep of our building, providing for the clergy, engaging with the needs and difficulties of our brothers and sisters in Christ, can be left to those who busy themselves with such matters. Such pride, such

sloth, such coldness of heart: how can they be spiritual? The true Orthodox spiritual life is not Gnosticism, the possession of some secret saving knowledge, supposed to liberate us from having to get involved.

But there is no dichotomy here; no sharp division between the spiritual and physical, for equally, mere sympathy, mere donations, mere assistance, devoid of all spiritual purpose and concern for the spiritual growth of others, have no more depths than the emotionally charged charities promoted by media advertising. Busyness without spiritual purpose is not of the kingdom of God. (Lk.10:38-42) For it is the Church alone that proclaims the Gospel of Christ, physically as well as spiritually. It is only here that we find the Bread of Heaven and the baptismal waters, welling up to bring eternal life.

Think of those seven appointed by the apostles that we read about in the Acts of the Apostles today. They were not, strictly speaking, the origin of the ministry of deacons that we know. Deacons were ordained in the first place to assist the Bishop in the altar and to help serve the Liturgy, leading the people's prayers. But these today are practical helpers, freeing the apostles for their particular ministry of preaching the gospel. Call to mind also how St Paul mentions all the differing works done with the body of Christ. He makes no mention of ascetics and eremites, spiritual elders, hermits or celibates. There were indeed to find their place in the Church in due time, as called by God. But St Paul speaks of God having appointed in the church apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles workers, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. (see 1 Cor.12:28) All, in fact, very practical.

The sacred ministry, the three orders of bishops, presbyters and deacons is very special in the Church and indeed, specialised. Ordained ministers are living icons of Christ, leading the liturgical worship of the people of God, rightly dividing the word of Truth from heresy, preserving the unity of the body, pastors and fathers to the children of God. Without them there is no Church manifest in all its fulness. But in order to fulfil this ministry, like the apostles before them, the clergy need to be freed from many other practical concerns. This can only happen if all of us minister to one another, for there are

other ministries within the Church, liturgical, charitable, administrative and practical. Let us bear this in mind, honouring as we do today the Holy Myrrhbearers with Joseph and Nicodemus. None of us can take refuge in the Ark of Salvation as if we were passengers on a cruise for, truth to tell, we have all been enlisted as serving members of the crew and with our own part to play.

Christ is Risen!