

The third Sunday of the Great Fast is dedicated to the commemoration of the Holy and Life-giving Cross of Our Lord. The mystery of the Cross has been proclaimed since the very beginning of the gospel. The apostles themselves preached Christ crucified: irrational to Greek philosophy; a scandal, a stumbling block to the Jews. It took until the early fourth century, however, for the veneration of the Cross to become the public symbol of our faith.

We have other feasts in the Church calendar that celebrate the Holy Cross itself by way of triumph and glory. But Holy and Great Friday and, indeed, this very Sunday of Lent, invite us to contemplate the atoning work of Christ; to enter further into the Church's own understanding of how the Cross works in the story of our salvation.

What do we understand about the atonement in Christianity? I have mentioned to you before that there exists a clear difference between Holy Tradition that comes down to us from the apostles and the fathers of the Church on the one hand, and the later interpretations that still lead the thinking of the Western confessions.

In the Old Testament the word atonement, or propitiation, refer to the sacrifices of Israel, offered to God for the sins of Israel in order to re-establish the covenant relationship with the Lord. But the offerings of the Old Testament were a figure, a *type* for things to come in Christ. And such sacrifices only applied to this world and to this life; an illustration, a symbol, pointing forward to the reconciling work of Christ, *but they do not define that work!* Christ's priesthood is not that of the Old Testament, the priesthood of the line of Aaron. As Paul tells us in Hebrews today: '*So Christ also did not glorify Himself to become a High Priest, but it was by the One saying to Him, "Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee."*' As He says also in another place, '*Thou art a Priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.*'" [Heb.5:5-6]

St Augustine of Hippo was a good and indeed, a very clever man who, after his conversion to Christ, led a holy life, serving as

bishop of that North African city. His way of doing Theology has had a great influence upon the Western confessions of Christianity. We, the Orthodox however, have studiously avoided his way of thinking. Augustine's Theology involved importing the Old Testament idea of atonement directly into Christianity, rather than seeing it as a prefiguring of our redemption. For him, Our Lord was appeasing the avenging wrath of God, offended by our sins. This is not the Orthodox view, for it is not from the apostles nor the Church fathers. These later ideas in fact affect how mankind is seen, our relationship with God and, moreover, how we see salvation working itself out in our own lives.

For myself, having been brought up in the Anglican tradition, I could never understand how this western idea of atonement was supposed to work. I heard plenty of sermons on the subject, of course. Was it a matter of legal guilt, crime, and punishment? Was Christ the final scapegoat, like the one in the book of Leviticus, carrying away our sins? What were the *mechanics* here, (for want of a better word); how does it work? How does the death of an innocent man under Roman imperial power bring salvation to the world? And it was all fixated on the crucifixion, by the way; no mention of the resurrection: that was just the happy ending of the story.

That all ended when I discovered Orthodox Christianity. For the apostles, and for us, the great body of the Orthodox, the death and resurrection of Christ is the victory over our last enemy, Death, and it is Death, as I told you on Cheesefare Sunday, that leads all to sin, not the other way round. Adam sinned, introducing Death into the world, and thus sharing Adam's mortal nature, all fall into sin. Sharing in our human nature Christ died a death like ours and rose in a resurrection that will be ours also, so that being *in Christ* through the mystery of baptism, we are redeemed and on our way to salvation. *That* is how it works!

But these two, differing, approaches have their consequences. '*Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect,*' says Christ in St Matthew's gospel. [Matt.5.48] In Protestantism this perfection comes through faith and knowing Jesus as your personal saviour; in the Latin church it is through faithful

service. In both, the believer is given moral perfection as a reward from God. This is not the tradition of the apostles; this is not the understanding of the fathers; this is not the teaching of the Orthodox Church.

So how do we become morally and spiritually perfected; how do we come to, '*a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ*'? [Eph.4:13] Our answer lies in Our Lord's command, yes *command*, in the gospel this morning: '*If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.*' [Mk.8:34] Orthodox Christianity teaches us that gaining the life of the world to come is through taking up that cross; through struggle and intense effort, by work in prayer and charity, but most important of all, by humility before God and one another. Our spiritual disciplines are a means towards this end, gradually, gradually, step by step, setting us free from our attachments to the things of this creation, and the slow mortification of the passions.

None of this, of course, comes to pass without the grace of God. And we have the whole inheritance of the Orthodox Church, ours by virtue of our baptism and Chrismation. We have the divine services, and most of all, the Holy Gifts themselves which, if we prepare by repentance, and by prayer and fasting according to our rule, we shall draw near to our great High Priest, Who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. [Heb.4:14]

But is this too much? What if we see all these attempts at fasting and prayer and almsgiving, all this repentance and forgiveness and turning the other cheek; this self-control and humility and bearing our crosses; this almost monastic life to which we are called, if this is all too much, what is the alternative? *For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?* Do we think we can hang onto the things of this world forever?

This is serious work that we are engaged in. St Diodochos of Photiki, who lived in fifth century, writes in the *Philokalia*, that since the Fall of Adam, the way that the soul perceives and understands the world is pulled in two directions; our healing involves our return

to a single purpose and perception. *'No one can realise this singleness of perception,'* Diodochos says, *'except those who have willingly abandoned the delights of this corruptible life in the hope of enjoying those of eternity and have caused every appetite of the bodily senses to wither away through self-control.'*

Well, that is fine for monastics, for those who have withdrawn from the world! Those in the monastic life do indeed provide us with an example and moreover, what seems to be an impossible ideal, as far as we are concerned, who must still live in this world. But the Orthodox Church has never taught that one has to become a monastic to be saved.

But we are not excused just because we are not monks and nuns; we have still to struggle as best we can and have to follow the commandments of Christ. And where we fall short, God's grace brings all to perfection. Yet even if our asceticism must be limited in this worldly life, continual repentance is ever set before us, and true humility are still ours to reach. We are not among those who are ashamed of Christ and His words in this adulterous and sinful generation, and who knows, perhaps there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power.