

In all the religions of the ancient world there was nothing quite like the faith of the House of Israel. For that faith, recorded in the scriptures of the Old Testament, tells the story of universal salvation; a tradition that passes on the religious experience of both individuals and a nation. It is a sacred history rooted ultimately not in the powers of old gods; not just in the appeasing of wrathful deities; not even in the moral demands of justice nor the beauties and wonders of the Creation. First and foremost, Israel's experience is founded upon the personal God and a relationship, person to person, with God.

This is not faith in the multi-faceted gods of Hinduism, or the impersonal Nirvana of Buddhism; neither is it faith in the solitary monad of Islam; it is not the child-devouring Moloch of the Canaanites, or the fertility god, Dagon of the Philistines. And the faith of Israel was far removed from those fickle, unpredictable gods of the Greeks, that revealed how man can make gods in his own image; psychological types, reflecting the passions of the human heart.

The problem with making gods in our *own* image is that we start with a faulty plan, an imperfect icon, a reflection in a cracked mirror. Whereas, the God of Israel, the True, the Living God, made us, in Blessed Augustine of Hippo's phrase, *for Himself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him*. He made us, the scripture tells us, in *His* image, made us in liberty, even to the point where we were free to fall away from knowing Him; as St Paul tells the Church at Rome, *'Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.'* [Rom.1:21-23]

So, the salvation story of the Old Testament is the story of revelation and response and, of course, many failures to respond.

There were those face-to-face relationships of spiritual intimacy: Abraham called by name blessed as the father of faith; Moses, called the God-seer, who received the Law on Sinai; Jacob, who slept at Bethel, the house of God, and realised in dread that this was the gate of heaven. Or think of the prophet Jeremiah, given the Word of God who, despite the dangers it put him in, felt it burning within if he did not speak out (Jer.20:9). Or the prophet Hosea, who saw God's love for Israel as a marriage, even if Israel was the faithless one.

But it took exile to Babylon from the year 597BC, it took a national disaster, to give them pause, to pull them up short; to make them all stop and think over their history. Their promised land gone, their temple destroyed, their sacred treasures looted: all that was left to them were the sacred texts. And pouring over them, editing them, reflecting on them, they began to reinterpret their story. They turned to penitence and rededicated themselves to the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They yearned to return, just as God had yearned for them.

Among the early Christians, when they were instructing pagans in the Apostolic faith, a great deal of time was taken up in reading these stories from the Old Testament, as well as imparting the mysteries of Christianity. And in these days of religious illiteracy, it is, perhaps, becoming necessary once again. For you cannot understand Christianity, the gospel, and the New Testament, what they are and what they are for, unless you know the basic story of salvation as recorded in the Old Testament.

It is, therefore, in this context that we can read and understand the parable in today's gospel. For Israel's story, even its faithlessness, is also our story. Although a people specially chosen in Abraham by God, they themselves were not a remarkable people. But they were chosen and chosen to represent all humanity. And their faithfulness is our faithfulness, and their faithlessness is our faithlessness.

In many ways today's gospel parable is a shocking story for those who heard it first. Our Lord spoke this parable, having been

confronted by the chief priests and elders of the people, after he had driven out the moneychangers from the temple. And they knew that He had aimed it at them. For the vineyard is, of course, Israel, God's beloved. But the tenants, those who hold the place, are Israel's leaders. The accusations are a stern warning to any in religious authority. For anyone with the awesome responsibility of shepherding souls, yes, for our own pastors and bishops and any who guide the faithful, here is a warning from Israel's sacred history.

The time is right, Christ is telling them, the harvest is ready; here is the culmination of their story, the fulfilment of the hope of Israel, and what are they about to do? They will cast Him out of the vineyard; bury Him outside the city walls; they will reject the very One for whom they had longed and thought they were serving. *'The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?'*

But if most in Israel in those days rejected the Christ when He came; if the religious hierarchy of the day had grown too comfortable in their privileges under the Roman Occupation; if the Sadducees and Pharisees and Herodians were too occupied with their party's own interests; if those crowds who had come to be healed by His touch, if even they abandoned Him in the end, when it came to His crucifixion: yet there still remained the faithful remnant, those eyewitnesses of His resurrection, well over five hundred, Paul tells us; those who, according to the parable, would take the vineyard and invite others in as tenants.

So, if any pastors and sacred ministers of His Holy Orthodox-Catholic Church fail to be vigilant, fail to pay heed to this parable, then the sheep remain unsafe. The great nineteenth century preacher, C. H. Spurgeon, once acerbically remarked, *'A time will come when instead of shepherds feeding the sheep, the church will have clowns feeding the goats.'* Well, we might look about us and note instances of that, both within and outside the confines of Orthodoxy.

But what of us, the *new* Israel, the people of God's Church? When the bishop visits this church, at the Trisagion hymn during the Liturgy, he blesses the congregation with the Trikirion and the Dikirion, the triple and the double candles that stand on the holy table; he blesses in the Orthodox faith: the three persons of the Holy Trinity and the two natures, divine and human, of Christ. He says, *'O Lord, O Lord, look down from heaven and behold and visit this vine and perfect that which Thy right hand has planted.'* (cf. Ps.79:15-16). Thus, the bishop confirms and strengthens us in the faith of the Church. Lest we fall into the same apostasy of those of old, we must hear what Paul tells the Corinthians today, how he exhorts them towards the end of his first epistle: *'Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, and be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.'*

Because like the ancient Israelites, we can become distracted in the busy world; we can prefer the things in creation to the Creator Himself; become beguiled by the politics; sacrifice our children to false gods; anxiously measuring our children by the world's standards, rather than feeding them on truth; indulgent over our own passions and fallings into sin; hypercritical over the faults of others. We can be lazy over guarding our own souls. As the fathers teach us, it is vigilance and sobriety, combined with humility that will keep and guard us in the love of the Living God; the God who seeks us, whom He created for Himself: to restore the image and likeness of that eternal life we had, but lost, but is now and ever proclaimed in the gospel; calling us to that everlasting communion in the Holy Trinity and with one another. And if we are vigilant over ourselves, if we wait in patience and serve in humility, we shall be ready when He comes; not like the vineyard tenants of the parable but as true children of faith. As St Paul tells the Romans today, *'If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.'*