

Homily

7 February 2021

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'Working together with Him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.' [2 Cor.6:1]

If your car has a flat battery you will need a friend who can recharge it, using jump-leads. The boost of electricity will soon get you going again. But that extra power you need does not come by itself, leaving you to do nothing; it does take effort on your side; you do need a friend; you have to be connected to the other car battery.

I find this a useful analogy for what we mean by grace in the Christian life. The great work of our salvation, where each soul comes to participate in the Divine nature, is a work of grace on God's part: it is an uncreated energy of God that reinvigorates fallen souls to reach up and ascend from the earthly to the heavenly. But as with flat batteries, it does not leave us passive for our part; it does take effort; we have to remain connected to God.

Orthodox Christianity has always maintained a middle course between those who, on the one hand, see believers as quiescent, passive receivers of salvation by irresistible grace; by the pre-destination of the elect, and on the other, the opposite heresy of Palagius (a Briton by the way) who taught that we could only be saved by our own good works and personal effort. But the way of True-Glory (Orthodoxy) calls us to *Synergy*, which in our Theological language means that we must cooperate and work with grace in our own salvation. This is what St Paul means this morning when he writes, *'Working together with Him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.'*

Who would recharge his car battery only to leave it idle again; that car must immediately be driven to recharge fully, otherwise, the battery dies again? It is the same with the grace that God gives us, that we must actually use what has been entrusted to us.

It is indeed true that the initiative, the dispensation, the economy of salvation, is at first the action of our saving God. It is the Lord who seeks us out. As St John says in his first epistle, *'We love Him because He first loved us.'* [1Jn.4:19] Whether this grace came to us first as infants, brought to baptism as babes-in-arms by our parents, God working through them to begin this work, or whether later in life grace surprised us or found us wandering astray. Either way, we have all been entrusted with the

grace of God to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul says, *'But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."*' [Eph.4:7-8]

Bearing this in mind we can better understand the parable of the talents in today's gospel. We do not enter into the joy of our Master automatically: we are called to serve, using the spiritual gifts with which we have been entrusted. Our Lord tells this parable after condemning the hypocrisy of the scribes and pharisees, and after predicting the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The parable follows on from that of the wise and foolish virgins, and it is followed by the parable of the Last Judgement, the separation of the sheep and goats.

In its original context we can assume that today's parable was aimed at Christ's own people, especially the leaders and teaches of Israel. They had been entrusted with the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises (cf. Rom.9:4); all the grace of the Old Covenant. Called to bear fruit, called to profit spiritually from this investment, but they had not. As John the forerunner had told them, *'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father."*' [Lk.3:7-8]

Even more so, the parable is addressed to us; we who have been endowed with the New Covenant, Holy Tradition, The Orthodox Faith, the holy mysteries, the Divine liturgy, the sacred ministry, the Holy Scriptures, the teachings of the fathers, the communion of the saints and life eternal: the same message is addressed to us.

Interestingly our translation of the gospel has the man giving the talents to three *servants*. In fact, the original Greek calls each of them δούλος (doulos), that is, *a slave*. The origins of slavery go back to the earliest stratified societies of ancient Mesopotamia, around 3,500BC. Whether captives or by accident of birth, slaves were at the very bottom of the pile. Even the great St Patrick, apostle of the Irish people, had been a slave. Captured by pirates in his native land of Wales, he was taken to Ireland. But he escaped, only to return there to preach the gospel.

No one wants to be enslaved and yet, we talk of ourselves as servants and handmaids of God; yes, that is, the *slaves* of God. But this is the great paradox of the Christian life: our perfect freedom is only found

in the service of God. This is because true freedom of will, our own liberation, is to be found in what we were created for. Our free will is fulfilled when we discover our real nature, the nature created in the mind of God before our fall. Mankind, especially modern Man might imagine that freedom is doing whatever you please, be able to fulfil your basic desires. But this just leaves us entrapped in a form of addiction, enslaved in fact, to the whims and fancies of the passions within, the easy prey of demons. You might desire and gain the whole world but you will lose your soul. (cf. Mk.8:36)

Whereas for us, our emancipation proclamation, our manumission, our release from slavery to the world, is found in obedience to the will of God and in the service of the gospel. This is hard to grasp and accept, especially when we are young and only just setting out to explore this world. But we who are older should guard against any complacency. As Jonathan Swift said, *'When men grow virtuous in their old age, they only make a sacrifice to God of the devil's leavings.'*

So what must we do to acquire this mind of Christ, how do we persevere in repentance, perceiving the service of God, this spiritual slavery, differently, when compared with the mocking temptations of the world? This is as old as Adam; it has ever been thus: *'So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.'* [Gen.3:6] But there's the rub! When we are in the midst of a temptation, even when our conscience makes plain what is right or wrong, or rather, what is for our eternal good or what will harm us, it is a question of the will, and of whom we choose to serve.

Let us start by accepting that we have become God's servants, and let us accept and understand that when we fall it is our own fault in the end, blame we never so many demonic serpents with their cunning. Over the baptised the demons have no direct power from within and can only suggest from outside. And when we resist and follow the path that the Lord has laid down for us, let us give Him the glory and praise, recalling Christ's own words: *'When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do."*' [Lk.17:10] Or as the Psalmist says, *'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory.'* [Ps.113:9]

This will indeed take effort on our part; we need the Church; we must stay connected. Especially in these days when we are cut off from being together in the communion of the One Body; when few of us have access

to the Holy Mysteries and the means of grace, more than ever we must be fervent in prayer, vigilant over our souls and watchful over the needs of one another. In this way we are caught up in a circle of virtue, for it is through grace that we are inspired to good works in the Lord, and those same good works bring us growth in an abundance of grace.

For St Paul being a servant of God meant endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labours, watching, hunger. Perhaps we have not been called to such times of trial, but to be worthy of the gifts given to us we are called to be good and faithful servants, constant in prayer, steadfast in fasting, generous in charity. In that way, we also shall be able to enter into the joy of our Master.