

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
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Within the western churches there is an ancient division that continues to this day. On the one hand there are those who teach that the soul is justified before God by religious and spiritual works that earn grace, and on the other, those teach that we are saved by our faith alone. In practice this dispute presents us with two types of Christianity: those who say we must rely on a priesthood to administer the sacraments that supply the grace for salvation; whilst the others say, all we must do is believe with the heart and we shall find the grace we need. Incidentally, neither of these ideas are actually in the New Testament or in early Christianity.

The put it simply, by the late Middle Ages, the Western Church began to see grace as a quantifiable creation of God; that the saints, being in possession of a superabundance of grace, could supply what was lacking to the sinful. Even more perversely, grace might even be traded in exchange for contributions to the institution. No wonder that Protestantism reacted against all this, but in doing so, developed a new understanding of how we are saved, ignoring the fact that Christianity had been practised for fifteen hundred years. The Reformers taught a new gospel in fact, where the believer was justified, that is, made right before God, by God's grace, through the personal faith of the believer. Their only source of authority was the Bible as a direct revelation from God, individually interpreted by each person. And the sacraments were reduced to Baptism: an external act of witness to one's own faith; and Holy Communion: a memorial act assuring the believer of his salvation through Christ's death, and in no way an offering of that sacrifice.

From our Orthodox Christian perspective this old, Reformation dispute in the West, originates in a different view

of what we mean by salvation. It comes from a different reading of the scriptures and loss of contact with the original Apostolic Tradition; and of how that tradition was interpreted by the Church Fathers. The Orthodox Church has never lost that continuity with the Apostles and their successors, nor with the Fathers and of how they interpreted the Holy Bible. Although there have been many influences and temptations throughout our sacred history, we have never lost sight of the mystery of faith that we have received and, in time, will pass on, nor of the provenance of the holy things that we handle.

I raise these matters today, drawing on what St Paul tells us in the Apostolos this morning: *'For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified.'* Think of what that means: *to be justified*; to be declared righteous before God. How can that happen? How to compare God who is thrice holy, and man when, as Genesis says, *'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth'*? [Gen.8:21]

For God's old people, Israel, chosen for the sake of the beloved patriarchs who had faith, it was the Law, the Torah, that laid down what was a righteous life before God. The 613 commandments of the Lawgiver and God-seer, Moses, set out before the people the way of life, bringing rewards and blessing *in this life*, and for trespasses, punishment *in this life*. Salvation too was *of this life*. People are often puzzled as to why there is mention of life after death in the Old Testament for, on the dismal Sheol, Hades. Of course there isn't, for as yet, there was no revelation of the Christ, no gospel of eternal life; holiness was the ritual purity and sanctification of the body alone and not the soul, for the righteous of the Old Testament had to await for the fulfilment, as Paul says in Hebrews, *'And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.'* [Heb.11:39-40]

It is faith, of course, that we share with old Israel. Faith is the context of our relationship with God. Faith is not a once and for all conversion or change in our intellectual ideas. It is not just being convinced by the power of philosophical argument that there is a god, helpful though that might be. It was basic faith that drove the Israelite to seek life in the way of the Lord by being *under* the Law. And now, for us, it is faith that moves us to seek a higher righteousness by being *in* Christ, who has recreated what means is to be human by his dying and rising again. This is the mystery of faith: in which we share and commune, one with another, and continue in, and participate in, even now: the eternal life that is in Christ-God.

This is the faith that Paul is teaching throughout his apostleship: that despite our weakness and fallings into sin, the New Covenant offers us constant renewal through repentance, as Paul tells the Corinthians, *'Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.'* [2 Cor.4:16] So it is that through striving we can reach that perfect humanity in the image, the very icon of Christ. As again, he says, *'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] St Paul's own experience of the life in Christ had taught him that the strength of God's was perfected in Paul's weaknesses. This is why we need the grace that is given through the sacraments to make up what is lacking in us, and why we need the faith to draw near to God. Remember the words of invitation to approach the sacred chalice: *with fear of God and faith and love, draw near!*

Cutting through these weary Reformation debates, timeless Orthodox Christianity has always combined faith and works as inseparable, for our salvation is worked out in synergy, working together with God's grace. We expect, yes,

and even demand that our bishops, the very successors to the apostles themselves, should teach what has always been taught; *rightly dividing the Word of Truth*, as we say, severing heterodoxy away from Orthodoxy.

For this reason, we must bear in mind that our definition of what constitutes sin is different from that still exists in western Christianity. Sin is not just the breaking or failure to keep, rules, as if it might be some forensically tested crime. Rather, we see sin as a failure to reach the mark, to miss the target; the workings out of our life as the fallen Adam; our failures to reach up that new humanity in Christ.

Our way in Christ is, therefore, through *Metanoia*, continual repentance and acquiring the mind of Christ. It is a life a prayer, communing with God, here together in the Body and also in the secret chamber of the heart. It is an ascetic life: that fasting and taking up of the cross, in that spiritual warfare against the passions that cause us to sin. And in the way of charity for all, that through compassion we can reveal the light that is within us from God.

What alternative do we have if we would find assurance of salvation? Today the gospel presents us with an image of the very opposite, the state of the lost soul, an icon of hell. These two mad Gergesene demoniacs, self-isolating among the dead, it appears! They were restored at that encounter with Christ. Do not fret too much over the poor pigs who drowned: think, rather, upon the benighted locals who, rejected the Messiah, preferred their old way of life. They remind us of those St Peter refers to in his first epistle: *'For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles... They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this reason, the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh but live according to God in the spirit.'* [1 Pet.4:3a;5-6]

Finally, let us remember, we live among such people; we pass them in the street; we work, perhaps, alongside them. As and when you have the opportunity, the *kairon*, to use the Greek word, the right time, let the light that is within you shine. Let us prepare our way in any circumstance, any encounter, before any venture, commending our whole life through prayer to God. And patience under abuse is to turn the other cheek; part of our ascetic way. And our forbearance and acts of needed kindness will reveal the God whom we serve. Who, then, will ascend to bring Christ down for them from heaven, or who will descend to bring Christ from the dead for them? *We shall*, according to St Paul! Because the word of faith is on our lips and in our hearts. For in living this new way of life in Christ raised from the dead, we confess and believe, and we shall be saved.