

14th March 2021
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Sunday of Forgiveness

Some of you may be familiar with the Serbian Bishop, St Nikolaj Velimirovitch, and his book, *Prayers by the Lake*. St Nicolai, who died in 1956, wrote these prayers and meditations beside Lake Ochrid in 1922.

These prayers, which often have more in common with poetry, express the Orthodox perspective on this world, uncovering the symbolic and spiritual meaning of the creation. There is nothing new or particularly original; just the faithful handling and passing on of that Holy Tradition that we know as the Orthodox Christian faith. For as St John of Damascus wrote *'It is for that reason that I say nothing of what is mine. I briefly express the thoughts and words passed down by Godly and wise men.'*

In Prayer number 30 of *Prayers by the Lake*, St Nikolaj writes,

Do not blot out but strengthen in my consciousness the memory of the glory that I had when I was entirely with You and entirely in You before time and temporal illusions. When I, too, was a harmonious trinity in holy unity, just as You are from eternity to eternity. When the soul within me was also in friendship with consciousness and life. When my soul also was a virginal womb, and my consciousness was wisdom in virginity, and my life was spiritual power and holiness. When I, too, was all light, and when there was no darkness within me. When I, too, was bliss and peace, and when there were no torments of imbalance within me. When I also knew You, even as You know me, and when I was not mingled with darkness.

Today, before we embark on the voyage of the Great Fast, we commemorate The Expulsion of Adam from Paradise. Just before we return there in spirit, where no animal is slaughtered and we eat only the food of paradise, we call to mind humanity's fall from Life and Grace. And did you hear it, in St Nikolaj's prayer, how he describes what we have lost, recalling to our minds what we were meant to be?

For to remember is literally to put back together the members that have been taken apart; to *re-member*.

We too, in paradise, in Adam, were created as an image of our Creator; each one the reflection, undisturbed, of God: a *harmonious trinity in holy unity*, he calls us, when soul and body and the spirit of life were one, integrated, whole. St Nikolaj asks God to preserve the memory of this, to remind us of what we have lost, which is why we observe this particular Lord's Day, *Cheesefare Sunday*. Indeed, our calling, our very mission in the Gospel, is to call these things to mind and to proclaim them to those around us.

The Great Fast takes us back to the beginning; it is the most evangelical time: repent and believe in the gospel for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! What does the great apostle, Paul, say to us this morning? *'The night is far spent; the day is at hand. Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness; and let us put on the armour of light.'*

'When I, too, was bliss and peace,' says St Nikolaj. *'And when there were no torments of imbalance within me.* But poor Adam has lost all that. He lost it because, as I mentioned two weeks ago, he was created free to go his own way; to wander off before maturity, before he had gained wisdom; like the Prodigal Son had wandered off, too. And what does Adam find? That having been beguiled by the devil, he would, indeed, surely die.

But we need to be careful here. Death, as the book of the Wisdom of Solomon says in the Old Testament, was not of God's making (WSol.1:12-16). Death is not a punishment imposed by God for the sin of Adam: it is the consequence of our departure from the Tree of Life; our communion with God, the source of Life. In other words, we do not die because we sin, rather we sin because we die. We were created for life and communion, but our natural needs in the face of death: self-preservation, food, shelter, esteem, continuation, become ends in themselves and turn into passions. It is this knowledge of our own mortality, this very anxiety before death, that drives us into isolation, the lone self that grasps at anything that can

shut out such knowledge: pleasures, riches, distractions, powers, and all the passions that have been distorted from their original purpose.

It is no surprise that The Wisdom of Solomon is a book read in the lectionary of the Church. And it is of no surprise that most people in this world have no knowledge whatsoever of what they have lost and have no familiarity with God; no remembrance of what St Nikolaj writes, *'When I also knew You, even as You know me, and when I was not mingled with darkness.'*

But we need to be careful, also, when we speak of these things. When we talk of the *Fall of Man*, we must distinguish our thoughts from heterodox thinking, *'rightly dividing the word of truth,'* as Paul says to Timothy. (2 Tim.2:15). What we call human nature has not been changed by the Fall. The state we are in has changed but not what we call *our nature*. Our relationship to Creation has been damaged but not the essence of what it is to be human. Nature, *Ousia* in the Greek, is a technical theological term, meaning the essence or substance of a being; the *something* that a being is. Ours is human, and we all share that, whoever we are individually. And that has not changed. We have inherited and share Adam's nature together, and so we exist with the consequences of ancestral sin, that is Death. And sharing in death, we sin like Adam.

What is different about us in the face of Death, in the face of our Fall, is not our nature but our failure to fulfil our nature, to be what we were intended to be: *'When the soul within me was also in friendship with consciousness and life. When my soul also was a virginal womb, and my consciousness was wisdom in virginity, and my life was spiritual power and holiness.'*

No wonder that we sin. Where once we were an image of the Trinity, now soul, body and spirit have fallen out of alignment and have lost their integrity. Where the highest element of our soul, the Mind, will strive for the higher things; where it will be, in Paul's phrase, set on things above, not on things on the earth (cf.Col.3:2), the body

will go its own way. Where our minds would dwell on whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure (cf. Phil.4:8), the central cortex of the brain can still surrender us to the beast within! St Paul wrote of this conflict. *'For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice... For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.'* [Rom.7:19-23]

What hopeless creatures! What can be done for us? We might run with the rest: eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. But *tomorrow*, as we were reminded last week, brings judgement. *'Lord, to whom shall we go?'* Peter asks Christ in St John's Gospel. *'You have the words of eternal life.'* [Jn.6:68] So for a time we shall intensify our efforts; for a season we shall enter the contest once again. The general troparion for female ascetic saints sings of them teaching us to ignore the body because it is perishable and to attend to the concerns of the undying soul. That is what we shall do, and through God's grace we shall be victors.

I shall remind you that we have three weapons in this fight. We have fasting imposed on the body, but fasting without prayer is just a regimen, a mere diet. We have liturgical prayer together here, and we have our icon corners at home, and we have the continuous prayer of the heart. But prayer without charity is hypocrisy, so fasting and prayer are completed and perfected by almsgiving and kindness towards those who suffer.

Like heroes and heroines in some epic tale, we journey together to recover a lost inheritance. And each time we falter, each time we fall, we shall repent pick ourselves up and continue our way. And where our strivings fall short, as they surely will, what is lacking in us will be perfected by the grace to be found in the Holy Gifts. And even if we grow weary, and cry out with St Paul, *'O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'* We can also

exclaim, *'I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!'* [Rom.7:24-25]