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Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

The Samaritan Woman

An interesting report in the news media last week concerned a survey taken of 2,101 adults in the United Kingdom. It reported that 44% of people here claim that they pray, and that 5% of people say that they have begun to pray during the current pandemic. Furthermore, 20% of the people interviewed say that they have asked others to pray for them during the current restrictions.

Such reports, of course, raise a number of difficult questions, though many of us might not be at all surprised by this. As old soldiers know, under fire, there are no atheists in a foxhole. We might, naturally, welcome these findings, resisting the temptation of those in the parable who complained that the eleventh-hour-recruits had received the same reward as they (Matt.20:1-16). But on the other hand, there is that old piece of verse which runs, *'When the devil was ill, the devil a monk would be; when the devil was well, the very devil was he!'*

In other words, it all depends on what happens with these people after the crisis is ended. All along those who read the affairs of men from a spiritual perspective have seen something more in this pandemic, as with all disasters that befall us. At one level what we are facing is RNA (ribonucleic acid) interacting with the cells of the human body: dangerous for the bodily systems, but RNA has no mind; it is not a conscious 'enemy' out to destroy us. This is not a war against the natural world that has conspired against us. Yet such thinking is common, a modern form of primitive Animism, pure magical thinking. Yet this is, perhaps, why so many seem so fearful; why 5% have begun to pray.

But those who can perceive from a spiritual perspective will discern this pandemic differently. In as much as the Living God speaks to us in the providential events of our own lives, and in our common life as well, we have a call here to repent once again, for most people in the western world have largely forgotten the God of their fathers, whilst many in the rest of the world have yet to come to the knowledge of the God of Truth.

We might well ask, therefore, to which god are these new suppliants praying? As the Ethiopian eunuch said to Philip when asked if he understood what he was reading in the prophet Isaiah, “*How can I, unless someone guides me?*” (Acts 8:30-31). In other words, the call to repentance is not only proclaimed to the unbelieving world, but is addressed to us, the faithful as well, in as much as we are being asked, what are we doing to preach and teach the gospel? So, if you encounter someone who asks you, why does your God allow such a thing as this disease to exist, tell him, He is calling you to repent!

Our reading from St John’s gospel this morning is the story of Our Lord’s encounter with Photini, the Samaritan woman at the well. According to the mores of those days, such an encounter would certainly have raised eyebrows: apart from being female, she was a Samaritan, a mixed-race heretic. And moreover, she had something of a reputation: she had practiced what in the polite terms of the sociologists is called ‘serial monogamy.’ She is racially *outside*, theologically *outside*, and morally *outside*. But, once again, the outpoured humility of the Saviour is revealed for the incarnate God, in order to draw all men to Himself, makes Himself, once again, vulnerable, dependent and here, asking for water. So repeats the pattern, from the moment He became conceived in the virginal womb, as a child dependent on his parents, as a grown man casting Himself upon ministering angels in the wilderness, as one preparing for death and being anointed for His burial, as a victim offering Himself on the Cross, even as a corpse awaiting burial by Joseph and the Myrrhbearers, He lays aside His power to disarm our pride and win our souls.

What do they want, those who have newly come to prayer in this pandemic; what are they seeking? Is it not protection from an imminent physical danger, or perhaps the inner strength to deal with the social and psychological pressures they are undergoing? Interestingly, this week we have been reading in St John’s gospel in the Lectionary where Christ has been teaching about the Bread of Life (Jn.6). But the crowds had been coming to Him, not because they were seeking eternal life, but because they had been fed at the feeding of the five thousand, thinking that the Messiah had come to

establish an earthly kingdom, like King David, like King Solomon, and that the Romans would depart, Israel would be redeemed and life would be secure from now on.

It is no different for the Samaritan woman who, at first, misunderstands the idea of living water. “*Sir,*” she says. “*Give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.*” She imagines a supply of free-flowing water that she does not have to draw up from the well. Her vision too is limited to this world. Practical matters are important, as we found on the Sunday of the Myrrhbearers, but they are not the point or the purpose of our life; they are not our goal. So, He gently draws her upward, He gently rebukes her, He gently corrects her. It culminates in a description of the quality of the liturgy in the kingdom of heaven: ‘*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*’

Then let us start with ourselves. How have we used this time, these strange days, this being alone? Have we been among the statistics, perhaps? But let us be honest; let us lay our cards on the table, as they say. A Christian is expected to pray, to pray constantly, to stand before the Lord and pray for the coming of the kingdom. Yet there are those with us who never pray but who perhaps even attend the Divine Liturgy regularly. There are those who pray only when in difficulties and amidst their problems, perhaps especially now, facing fears, real or imaginary. And there are those who continue as ever, offering the traditional devotions, morning and evening, preparing their souls for communion, repenting daily, seeking out their confessor from time to time; interceding for others, praying in the midst of these days with patience and waiting upon God.

And God as ever addresses us with His Word. How will people have responded to it when the situation draws to its conclusion? Will they continue, those 5% who began praying so recently? Those who observed religion at a distance in the virtual world, will they enter in, body and soul, once the doors of churches open once again? As ever, it will be as Our Lord taught in the parable of the Sower: as the Word is sown, the harvest will be varied; many called, and few chosen. How shall we respond when we encounter Photini at Jacob’s well? Shall we be able through our own vulnerability, our humility, our

charity, our Orthodoxy, to draw in those who are socially, theologically, and morally *outside* us? Remember, the grace of the Holy Mysteries is still administered in our parish, if only by appointment at the moment; we can still commune with Christ. And if in these peculiar times we have strengthened our faith through prayer, it is that we might point the way, not only to the 5% who have just began to pray, but also to the remaining 56% who in that survey claim not to do so. There are plenty of them out there, who now live lives dominated by what is, for the most part, irrational fears, who have developed ritualised behaviour reminiscent of ancient superstitions. Will they see in us a resilient faith? Who among them might come eventually to say with the Samaritans, *“It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.”*

Meanwhile, we shall go on praying: that very soon we may all be together once more, body and soul, in every Orthodox Parish Church of the Living God. Agabus, we read today, in the days of the apostles warned of a famine (Acts 11:27-30). For most of us our depravation, our want, our hunger, has been not for the bread that perishes but for that food which endures to everlasting life (Jn.6:27). And as in the days of the apostles they all determined to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea, I know that so many of you have also cared for one another, keeping in contact, assisting and helping in case of practical need and, of course, persevering in prayer for one another. For if we continue steadfast in prayer, we shall be drinking from that spring that wells up to eternal life, whilst around us there are those who, spiritually, are dying of thirst. But as Our Lord told His first disciples, *‘Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest. (Jn.4:35)*