

1] No matter how much or how little we may know about the nature of God, one thing must be obvious to all who ponder and meditate upon the divine mystery: God is very patient. Anyway, that is how it seems from our experience. Albeit that God is not constrained by time and the passing ages are as nothing in His eyes, as the Psalmist says, 'A thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it is past, And like a watch in the night.' (Ps.89/90:4): we are still left in awe and wonder at the great forbearance of God.

2] It was in due time, in God's time, that Christ was born, not just as man in our image and likeness, but, more specifically, as one of that nation whom He had taken as His own, the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. It was to them, as St Paul wrote, 'Who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.' (Rom.9:4-5)

3] But when He came, how many were ready to receive the Messiah? Indeed, there were crowds who flocked together to hear him and be healed of their diseases, but so many of them were pictured in last Sunday's parable of the Sower, where the seed of the Word of God fell on rock, and it soon sprang up but withered away; or they were found rootless, or fell away in time of temptation.

4] The story brought to us in the Old Testament is, in part, a tale of God's people, falling away; their unfaithfulness, as in the books of Exodus, and Judges, and in the lamentations of the prophets who, fired by zeal, exhorted the people through the long years to wait upon God and to remember His covenant with them. But lest we imagine that we are not like them, we, the New Israel, the great body of the Orthodox, maintaining the holy apostolic faith, then let's be careful. How many of the baptised still remember God their

Saviour or wait upon and serve Him with patience? Here, though, we do not have God's eternity, and with each passing day, our time grows shorter.

5] Those people of the Gadarenes of whom we heard in the gospel just now, seemed not only to have forgotten their roots and intermingled with the gentiles, they had learned their ways, compromising their religion and its way of life. The same had happened to Israel in the time of the Judges, as had happened under all who came to rule over them; Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and now, the Romans. Constrained by time, so many people during Our Lord's days on earth had forgotten God their Saviour, had grown impatient in waiting for the Messiah.

6] No wonder that this man we hear of today has gone mad, tormented by the demons who have entered in through the cracks in his fractured life. There is, perhaps, wisdom in being sure of your own culture and origins, whereas his compromise with the gentile world, that pagan world, has torn him apart: he no longer knows who he is anymore; the demons have perverted his identity into a legion.

7] Need we be surprised at the days we live in; need we be taken aback in this land that has, for the most part, lost its own religious identity. Once a Christian country, a land of Orthodox saints, of great ascetics, martyrs and scholars; England, even called in the Middle Ages, Our Lady's Dowry! Most of that is gone now. They have grown impatient for something else and have forgotten God their Saviour. No wonder that so many have now been driven mad as well, not knowing who they are; not even knowing what sex they are. How the demons must laugh!

8] One of the pernicious aspects of this age in which we live, and which we must endure with patience, flows directly from the abandonment of the ancient faith of these islands. Sin is no longer regarded as Sin, as if it has been expunged from the vocabulary. There is crime, of course; there is offence, there are various so-called phobias; there is even inappropriate behaviour, but not Sin, for God has been forgotten. But Sin is still Sin, and where Sin

endures, there the demons linger, there they gather and prowl around, whilst we must, as St Peter teaches, remain sober and vigilant, because our, 'Adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.' (1 Pet.5:8)

9] In part that is our calling as Orthodox Christian people, not to be devoured by this world and the age in which we live; not to be driven mad by compromise. God does not call us to compromise with the way of this world; to come to an accommodation with demonic structures that have perverted the once accepted Christian mores of this country, just so that we can have a quiet life.

10] Indeed, where Sin endures, there the demons linger. And as in the gospel today, those who keep company with demons have great fear of an encounter with Christ, or find it an embarrassment. 'What hast Thou to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beseech Thee, do not torment me.' Of course the time for their judgement will come, in God's time. The call to repentance remains the same, and whether at the end of individual lives, or in the end of this world, God's patience, God's waiting, will not be eternal.

11] Again, St Peter tells us, 'The time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God, and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?' (1 Pet.4:17) Circumspection, sobriety, vigilance, attention to the heart: those virtues espoused by the fathers who wrote in the Philokalia, are required of us as well, who must find our way into the kingdom of God whilst living in this world; this is not only for ascetics and monks.

12] The Christian calling is to witness to Christ, to draw all towards the kingdom of God and eternal life. But we know that we cannot proclaim Christ with words only. We must look to ourselves first, as Our Lord says, removing the plank from our own eye that we might see clearly to remove the speck of dust from our brother's eye. We too, like everyone else, are subject to temptation, are oppressed by passions. Our great ascetic work is to overcome them through the grace of the Holy Spirit and by obedience to Christ's teaching.

13] The error we can so easily fall into is in imagining that we do not have to change; that, in some sense, just being Christian means that we have arrived. So, how do we conquer our passions and find freedom from our habitual faults? Primarily, in running to Christ our Saviour. But if we deny what we are before Him, looking away from what He sees in us, we shall find ourselves behaving in the same way as the unbelieving world that has gone mad around us. It is easy for us to become like the primal Adam, hiding his nakedness from God in the garden [Gen.3:10]. For whenever sin gets the mastery over us, we are conflicted, alienated from our true human nature that was created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the New Adam.

14] What irony! This is the one part of our following after Christ, that taking-up of his Cross, where we do not need patience; we can act now. We are not directed to change, to follow the will of God when the conditions are right; when it is convenient for us; when the circumstances of our life have changed.

15] St Paul tells us today of his past life in Judaism, how zealous he was for the traditions of his ancestors; how he was faithful, unlike many who had abandoned the commandments and the God of Israel in the past. But then, by revelation, he encountered Christ and could, as it were, hide no longer. The demon-oppressed madman in the gospel, although resistant at first, encountered Him too and was cleansed, and was sent to proclaim all that God had done for him.

16] We might not be, thank God, in such dramatic circumstances, yet we still have all we need to advance in the inner, spiritual life. We have the means of grace through the holy mysteries and, from time to time as required, repentance and confession, and through Holy Communion, partaking of the holy sacrifice of Christ, in order to find forgiveness and sanctification for body and soul.

17] Let us be in no doubt that, in so many things we are in serious conflict with the world. And truth to tell, it has often been that way. But we are called to find our way to God in this life, as it actually is

in our day, and not in some idealised past. If our Christian faith, if our life in Christ is to be judged authentic, it requires not just our denial of a world driven mad by its own forgetfulness, but that we deny ourselves as well, choosing the will of God over our own will.