

*'I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.'* So writes the apostle Paul to St Timothy, and one might be forgiven for thinking that the blessed apostle is showing a certain egotism here. He calls himself *the foremost*; worthy of God's *perfect patience*; that God has specially chosen him, Paul, as an example of Divine mercy.

But on closer examination we realise that this is, in fact, an expression of St Paul's real humility, for looking back on his own experience he was able to analyse his life through the mind of Christ; to see and examine himself through God's eyes: and change his mind. It was only because he now knew himself to have been *the foremost of sinners*, as he says; only because he was, in his old life, spiritually estranged from God; the very last in line to receive any grace from God, that when he did encounter the Christ, he stood amazed! His whole mind, his whole world, his whole purpose had been changed now and, as an apostle, he was an icon of repentance, an image to bring others to the same eternal life. This is what we mean by repentance, this change of mind about our life, not just feelings of shame for past actions, but the renewal of the mind.

He saw this as true for all the apostolic witnesses of the resurrection of Christ, as he tells the Corinthians, *'For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.'* [1 Cor.4:9] No wonder that Ananias in the Acts of the Apostles, when told by God that he must baptise Saul of Tarsus, was very wary and answered, *'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem.'*

But Saul of Tarsus, the learned man, the maker of tents by profession, a Hebrew of the tribe of Benjamin and a citizen of Rome no less, circumcised on the eighth day, a pharisee and strict observer of the Torah, a persecutor of those who followed The Way, the one who held the coats for those who stoned Stephen the deacon to death, has dropped all this, let go all these points of pride, because now he knew Christ. And all this confirms for him a fundamental teaching of the gospel with which he begins this passage of the epistle we heard today, *'that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.'*

Well, we are among those to whom he referred, *'...those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.'* That is us; that is who we are: the ones who now believe. Let us think back on our own life, think of where we now stand, where we find ourselves now, here in this holy temple, a symbol of the kingdom of God; in the Church herself, built from the living stones of the actual lives around us: can we discern anything but grace; are we too, like Paul, able to re-evaluate all we have been through and, similarly, give glory to God? *'To the King of Ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory to the ages of ages. Amen.'* Thus, the purpose of our existence is changed, thus we become, whether we are together or alone, an icon of thanksgiving to God, that thankfulness, that eucharist, of which Fr Filip spoke last week.

There is much that we might say about the healing of the blind man at Jericho in today's gospel. This is just a chance encounter, or so it appears at first. Soon Our Lord will meet Zacchaeus up in his sycamore tree, but for now He meets a man who can only live by begging; a man with one wish in life, that he might see again. And having heard of Christ's power and authority to heal and restore, the only thing he seems to have is his faith.

We notice that he is not to be distracted from achieving his aim: he wants to get Jesus' attention and he calls out over the noise of the crowd. He makes such a commotion that they tell him to be quiet. More embarrassing still, he uses a title that is full of political baggage; an incendiary title, certain to stir up the zeal of those

longing for the end of Roman rule and the coming of the Messiah:  
*'Son of David, have mercy on me!'*

The rest of the incident we know; he has his sight restored. But there is something even more important than that at the end of the story. He can indeed see now and can labour and earn his own living for the rest of his active time on earth. But this gospel tells us that, *'Immediately he received his sight and followed Him, glorifying God.'* We can picture him walking along in ecstasy, gazing at the back of Christ as He walks on ahead, and now calling out, *halleluiah*, in place of calling out for mercy.

Again, therefore, as with the blessed apostle Paul, we see only grace; not a chance encounter but rather the providence of God. Named in St Mark's version of the incident as Bartimaeus, like St Paul, he becomes a chosen one, foremost among the wretched poor of the earth, the grace of Christ elevates him into an example of faith for those who will believe in the gospel of salvation.

So what do we glean, what do we gather and learn from this story? We who stand together in this same grace, we too have been enlightened, having had our own eyes anointed and opened at Chrismation; we too follow Him along the road, not on our way to the earthly Jerusalem, as Christ is here, but rather to the heavenly city. Our lives too are to be grounded, fixed, and given purpose in the worship of our gracious God. Whether here or out in the world, as far as in us lies, our attention must shift from the ego, from the self, onto the One whom we glorify.

We know and believe that Christ will come again, this time in Glory for Judgement. But He is also with us, nonetheless. He is coming again, on His way, even now. And He commands us to watch and pray, for we do not know the day or the hour. But He also tells us at the end of Matthew's gospel, that He is with us always, even now, until the end of time. In other words, we have to be ever ready to encounter Him, whether praying in the Liturgy or at home, in those who need our help, in the stranger and among our own family, in the Church and outside the Church, in our life

and in our death. *'Seek the Lord while He may be found,'* says the prophet Isaiah. *'Call upon Him while He is near.'* [Is.55:6]  
So, let us follow Bartimaeus, let us be persistent in our prayer and never give up.

No wonder that life in the Orthodox-Catholic Church of Jesus Christ is centred on Liturgy, on the Holy Mysteries, the daily offices and hours, Akathists and canons, blessings and petitions. And when not present here, in our own homes, at our icon corners too, our prayers must ascend on high. But what if this were taken from us; what if evil forces, demonic powers were to forbid our assembly, our congregating? Then we can still stand before the icon of Christ in our hearts. For when the renewed mind enters into the heart, when our mind is the mind of Christ, then we shall by His grace overcome all that the enemy can do to us.

Although, like the blessed apostle, we might know ourselves as the foremost among sinners, we know also the same patience of God in all our strivings. Think of those words we say before we approach the holy chalice: *'We believe and confess Christ to be the Son of the living God who came into the world to save sinners,'* just as Paul tells us in today's epistle, of whom, each of us confesses that *we* are first, competing, as it were, in humility. Yet for those who receive Him in the Holy Gifts, knowing their own true *unworthiness*, once again, all we see is the grace of God for the remission of sins and life everlasting, to whom be honour and glory to the ages of ages. Amen.