

We hear many messages these days, either from government or from research scientist. They tell us how to look after our health: what is good for us, and what is bad. They might relate to what we eat in our regular diet, or the amount of alcohol we might drink; how much sleep we should take each night, or whether we smoke or not. There are matters here that most rational people realise is good advice: eat plenty of fruit and vegetables; be a moderate drinker; don't smoke. Sometimes, however, the advice can change and you begin to wonder: whom should we trust? One would hope that most government advice is trustworthy. After all, those in control of public expenditure have an interest in keeping us healthy, out of hospital and free from being a burden to the National Health Service.

But perhaps it comes down to a matter of faith: not just whether you trust this advice but rather, whether you actually believe it ~ do you think it is true; factual? So there will be people who believe the experts, take the advice and moreover, act upon it. There will be those who reject it out of hand, and go on living in the same old way they have always done. Then, interestingly, there are those who indeed, believe what they are told but, perhaps because it interferes too much with their own lifestyle, they fail to act upon it. A space here for a little internal bargaining: *'it's never done me any harm; it won't affect me; well, you've got to die of something...'*

Over the last five hundred years there's been a theological debate, mainly within western Christianity, over the role of faith in our salvation. The Protestant Tradition, coming from the Reformation in the sixteenth century, taught that there was only one religious authority, the Scriptures and that the Bible, especially St Paul writing to the Romans, taught that salvation was through faith alone. There, of course, lies the problem: nowhere in the Bible does it say that we are saved through faith *alone*. We are justified by faith, indeed; declared righteous before God because we believe that that grace of Christ re-establishes our relationship with God, makes up for what we cannot achieve ourselves, *but then*, in that new relationship and

in that peace with God, we have to work out, and indeed, *work at*, our salvation.

Stranger still, the Reformers even taught that once you have acknowledged your faith, you cannot be lost; you are saved! And drifting into the realms of the bizarre, the Calvinists taught the horrible doctrine that only the pre-ordained elect would enter heaven; if you hadn't been chosen (and how could you possibly know?) then religion was pointless for you, and there, sadly, was no hope for you. It is no wonder that to the Orthodox Christian mind, to the mind of Christ, this all appears as Gnosticism - salvation, in fact, through secret knowledge.

St Paul, in dispute with his one-time fellow-believers, the Pharisees, argued that they had tried to declare themselves righteous before God merely by keeping officiously all 613 commandments in the Torah. That by their own religious works and efforts, rather than through Abrahamic faith and trust, God would judge them righteous. So, he pointed out that the Law of Moses cannot bring anyone to final salvation; it was never intended to. It was there to teach the children of Israel obedience and to mark them out as God's chosen ones. And it was only for this life. Christ, however, had brought eternal salvation, for the Jew first but also to the gentiles. And Christ Himself established, having fulfilled all righteousness as demanded by the Law, that it was only by faith *in Him*, it was by being *in Him*, that we can even start upon the way that leads to salvation.

Those men in the gospel this morning: they had faith in the healing power of Christ; they believed that he could restore their friend, heal the natural man. The details have been paired down here, but this is the same paralytic whom Mark and Luke tell us was let down through a hole in the roof. It took effort, even work on their part, those friends of the paralysed man. This bearing him on a litter, this carrying, is an act of faith: we see their faith, their belief, in and through their actions. Their actions are their faith made manifest. If they had just sat around, commiserating with their friend in his condition, just telling the poor man, 'Oh yes, we believe that Jesus of Nazareth could cure you,' what kind of faith would that be; what kind of friends would they be? Faith here is more than mere intellectual

ascent to an idea: it is bound to action. Indeed, the act *is* the faith. And moreover, the faith is not the private possession of the individual: here it is corporate, it belongs to them collectively, like the faith we share when we baptise an infant, baptise it into the faith of the Church herself; the faith we confess in the Creed. And here we see in this story the Christ who reads the very thoughts in the hearts of scribes; who with authority forgives sins; who, by a word, restores and heals His creature: all the marks of God, as we know and believe.

Recall what St Paul teaches us today: the faith that leads to righteousness is not mere thoughts that hold sway in our heads; it is not somehow affirming under oath that we think something is true; that our own individual thoughts and values correspond to reality. Yes, faith begins there, but where does it lead, what does it demand? Real faith demands action, and that we live out our faith in the body of Christ, the Church, as Paul writes, using the gifts that come to us through the grace of Christ: prophesying, ministering, teaching, exhorting, giving liberally, leading diligently, cheerfully showing mercy. This is not passive or quiescent faith.

Paul tells us to love without hypocrisy, abhor evil and cling to the good, to show brotherly affection, serving the Lord in a fervent spirit, steadfast in prayer and service to the saints of God. This is what we are to do in our life together in the Church. This is not some institution that we attend from time to time, as if going to a theatre or a great opera house. Here we constitute the household of God, that in the Liturgy we can realise and make present in this world, the life of the world to come. This is the faith we live and share in right belief and right worship. And in sharing the mysteries of the faith, the sacraments and signs of the kingdom, we hope by God's grace to come through the judgement and find salvation, the fulness of our humanity reached in the image of Christ.

It is perfectly possible to acknowledge government advice; to know and realise what parts of our own way of living need changing and yet, it is also perfectly possible somehow, to ignore the advice, to do nothing, sweep it, as it were, under the carpet. Yet it is right that we care for the body. Man, being in this world, is the image, the very icon of God. But there is something more for us who have been

justified through faith in Christ: that the body, which since our baptism has been joined to Christ, should be venerated and honoured and maintained, not used or joined in any evil, cared for as holy, even in death. And the faithful soul, along with the sinful, must still come to judgement. Recall that parable of the sheep and the goats that we hear on the Sunday before we begin the Great Fast. How we may in the faith of mind and lips indeed call Christ, *Lord, Lord*, yet ignore Him in the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the destitute, the captive.

Governments might even go so far as to compel their citizens to follow their advice, even when they don't believe it. There are laws governing our own health and safety, and in the past there were even laws attempting to govern people's salvation. There is in this country the dreadful history of the Reformation and its struggle; how governments of all shades imposed the state's religion on a religiously unsettled and divided nation, threatening fines or even worse for non-compliance, whether Calvinist or Roman Catholic or Anglican. Such were the days when loyalty to religion and the sovereign went hand in hand.

But Orthodox Christianity cannot and should not do that, though it has been tried. Our very purpose here is to stand as a sign of the kingdom of God; to preach Jesus Christ, the conqueror of death, reconciling all to God the Father through faith in Him. The gospel we proclaim to all is not good government advice, though it is a warning; it is not intended for a long and prosperous life, though it is for eternal salvation; though it be for the conversion of the mind, it is also for the conversion of life and we call all men to repentance, again and again, offering in this life only the way of the cross, which once begun and undertaken in faith and united to Christ, sets before us the way that we should walk, that with the help of God, we may arrive at our destination.