

What was the earliest of the religions of Man? Certainly, for those early people who wandered the earth, hunting and gathering in small tribes, there was an awareness of the spirits in nature, in the plants and the animals on whom they depended for life. For anyone really alarmed about an ecological emergency, that is the only way of life you might follow with any integrity, to avoid harming what they call 'the environment' - we call it God's creation, by the way.

It is when human beings became more settled, located, fixed in one place, that they became more aware of their line of descent; who had gone before. Their religious sense involved now the veneration of the ancestors: those great earth mounds and long barrows, spread over the countryside, marked the graves of the venerable dead of the Mesolithic and Neolithic times. Think of Stonehenge, not far from here, where the vast standing stones, most probably, represented the guardian ancestors, to whom, those who exerted such efforts in construction, looked for assurance at the winter equinox: that the sun would return to give heat and light and life.

Perhaps it is only man with his superior brain among all God's creatures, who can contemplate his own finite nature, but can also know and take comfort in the fact that the tribe is greater than the individual; that it lasts longer than one life and that any one of us is just the latest of a long line, with many before and many yet to come. It is deeply human to be aware of where we have come from and where we belong. But think of those ancient beliefs, founded on anxiety: will we eat? Will we survive? Will the sun rise tomorrow? They all become but temptations for us whose religion is founded not on fear but faith. It is no surprise that there has grown up among us - the latest generation of this human tribe - a whole industry devoted to tracing ones ancestors. Before the times of common literacy, societies depended on memory in ways that would astound us who increasingly must be connected on-line to know anything at all. Think of those genealogies recorded in the holy scriptures, or those patrilineal surnames that record exactly whose child you are.

I sometimes wonder what will become of future generations, their sense of identity or belonging, with their reluctance to marry and establish their line; with the legal fiction of their same-sex marriages that must, naturally, be sterile; with their artificial fertilisation with donation from anywhere. Shall we all in the end be mere sparks from the fire that fly upward for a while and disappear into nothing? Whatever befalls the human tribe, you know, and I know, that it cannot be so with us, Orthodox Christian people. We, whose tribes and clans and members have been reborn in Christ, transfigured in Christ, know our provenance, know where we come from: the fulfilment of that ancient instinct, so obvious in our earliest ancestors, to know where we belong in this creation.

Today we complete the feast of the princes of the apostles, Peter and Paul, with the Synaxis of the Apostles. The word *Synaxis* means a *gathering together*. It is an old term for the first part of the Liturgy, when we hear the word of God in the scriptures. Just as our ancient forebears might look to their own ancestors for their security in this material world, so we who walk in the Spirit and long to settle in our heavenly homeland, are assured that our faith is founded upon the experience, the knowledge and teaching of the first apostles of Christ, what we call the Apostolic Tradition.

We are not a spontaneous, single gathering of a few like-minded individuals, a few of the Christians currently on earth, who come together for some common purpose, just for a time. Our roots are firmly planted in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ-God, witnessed by those same apostles we venerate today. Our own parish churches are presided over by bishops who, in turn, were appointed by local churches that trace their origins and mission back to the five original great patriarchates of the ancient world: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem (the mother church) which were themselves founded by the apostles. For about sixty generations the same faith, the same Theology, the same doctrine, the same commission has been handed down, as it lies in our hands, today. One faith, one Lord, one baptism, made manifest, as ever, in the liturgy, the gathering together, with Christ among us.

And lest anyone think that this procession of former generations upon earth makes us out to be the church of the dead, let us remind ourselves that Christ has conquered death, that God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, God of the living not the dead. Any who think of the apostles as dead men from the past has not even begun to grasp the basic, the fundamental, principles of the Christian mind.

Do not imagine that we, standing on this earth, at this moment, is all that the Church is. We are contemporary with the apostles, the prophets, the saints and martyrs, the great cloud of witnesses, that were and are and ever shall be. The archetype of the Church is Christ's own ascended and gloried humanity. That is the unity of the Eastern Orthodox-Catholic Church, as we say in the Creed that there is but one Church. The One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is not only spread throughout the earth, it is spread throughout time as well, as one continuum.

On the Sunday of Pentecost, we celebrated the birth of the Church. Here in the gospel today we see that same Apostolic Church in embryo, conceived in ancient Palestine when Christ called the twelve, the image of the New Israel. Christ Himself calls them to a synaxis, a gathering together and ordained their first mission: at that time only to the lost sheep, the house of old Israel. It is very clear from the gospels that Jesus restricted His own ministry to God's old people, Jews like Himself. Apart from His compassion for certain among the gentiles that He came across: the Canaanite woman, the Centurion's servant, the Gadarene demoniac, his redemptive life was lived out among the tribes of His own ancestors according to the flesh, bringing the Torah, the Law, to its goal and purpose.

It is only after the resurrection, when he had won the victory over Sin and Death, that the disciples, those who had been gathered together, now became apostles: the Greek, *apostolos* being, *one who has been sent*. There were the eleven who remained, along with the seventy and the holy myrrh bearers; even the five hundred, whom St Paul tells us saw the risen Christ at one time; all were witnesses of the resurrection, not through faith like us but by sight; even the so-called doubting Thomas, even late in time, Paul himself, who

encountered Christ at Damascus. It is these who founded the ancient churches throughout the known world; these saints of the apostolic age, who have become our ancestors, not after the flesh but according to the Faith, establish our own communion and set the pattern of our own mission and purpose.

We too come together: a synaxis, a gathering of the apostolic Church. Here in the Liturgy the mystery of Christ is made manifest exclusively for us the Orthodox, who participate in the offering and share in the Holy Gifts, just as the first disciples shared the Mystical Supper and then witnessed the crucifixion and the rising of the Master.

But from this conglomeration, this joining in unity, we are then dismissed, sent out into this world, not merely to get on with our private lives, for what then was the purpose of our gathering? But like the apostles dispersed in all directions, wherever we find ourselves in life, by our way of life, by our peacefulness, our prayer, our compassion, our integrity, we must draw in and gather back the lost souls for God.

Today also we commemorate All the Saints of Britain and among the first in this land we may cite Aristoboulos, one of the Seventy, mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Romans. According to tradition he was sent by Paul to Britain, where he planted the very first seeds of the church in these islands: one who was gathered in and then sent out. It is no different for us gathered here, for He who has called us sends us out likewise, strengthened in the apostolic faith. *“The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”*