

Sunday, May 31, 2020
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Sunday after Ascension

During forty days we celebrated the resurrection of Christ; forty days during which time we affirmed our faith that He truly rose from the dead, rose body and soul, conquering death. And we are very clear in Orthodox Christianity: it was the integral Christ, the whole Christ, God and Man who rose, not in the soul only but in the flesh as well. This was not merely some spiritual experience, perceived subjectively by the apostles within the confines of their own minds. They knew the risen Christ; what they had seen with the eyes in their heads; whom, like Thomas, they had handled; with whom they had communed at table with this world's bread.

Now we are in the midst of the feast of His Ascension: not merely His spirit passing into heavenly realms, but the whole Christ, body as well as soul, translated into the glory He had had from eternity. The One in whose image and likeness our humanity was created in the beginning, has now drawn into His kingdom that same manhood, for in His ascension our own humanity has been taken up, elevated, offered up, sanctified, immortalised and glorified.

This is the witness of the apostles themselves; this is also the testimony of the fathers who received and expounded the self-same Holy Tradition from the apostles. In a sermon on the Ascension, St Leo the Great (c.400-461AD) says, *'our lowly nature was raised up in Christ above all the host of heaven, above all the ranks of the angels, beyond the height of all the heavenly powers, to the throne of God the Father.'* Think of what that means: *our lowly nature!* So, what has been raised? Not just our souls, not just our spirits, not just our minds, but the flesh too! All is part of the resurrection body; all is taken up and all is transfigured in eternal glory.

And earlier still, St Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202AD), who knew St Polycarp, who in turn had known the apostle John, says that, *'Utterly foolish are those who despise the divine scheme for man; who deny the salvation of the flesh and scorn the notion of*

re-birth, alleging the flesh incapable of immortality. If the flesh is not saved, then the Lord did not redeem us by His blood, nor is the cup of blessing the partaking of His blood, nor is the bread which we break the partaking of His body. [Adversus Haereses v.ii]

Let us have nothing to do with those definitions of Christianity which seek to diminish the role of physical things in our salvation. Our Faith, after all, is founded on the idea that God, who is Spirit and is Truth, became incarnate in this, His Creation. And the current feast asserts that He is still incarnate, though now enthroned in glory, whilst still present here through the Holy Spirit, who rest now in His saints, who consecrates all we offer and all that we are, and whose outpouring on the Church we shall celebrate next week, at Pentecost.

It is in the flesh that we are baptised into Christ; it is not the mind alone that receives the Word, but the body too through its immersion in water, the very same substance that covers most of the surface of this planet. And the same body, not just the soul, is purified through repentance, through absolution, through blessing with Holy Water. The same flesh is sanctified and preserved unto everlasting life when it is united in communion with Christ in receiving the Holy Gifts. The marriage bed is undefiled when a man and a woman are united in Christ, bearing crowns as martyrs, witnessing to the love of Christ for His bride the Church. Even our very illnesses, the signs of our mortality, are blessed with Holy Oil in Anointing.

So you see! Our Faith is manifest in a religion of sacraments, holy mysteries whereby physical signs manifest and reveal the spiritual realities. As St Leo says in that homily quoted before, *'The visible presence of the Redeemer passed over into sacraments.'* Yes, Christ is still visible on earth, still tangible, still known, still handled and honoured and worshipped in the Church, for we own the holy mysteries, we read the holy scriptures, we kiss the sacred icons, we venerate the sacred ministry, we reverence the holy relics and enter into the holy temple. None of these are mere ideas; none of this is virtual reality.

No doubt on-line we can learn much and be in contact and communication, but that is all. Nothing can be substituted for being present in the body, in the flesh and the blood. Yes, indeed, there are those who are confined, restricted, limited by these days, but none need refrain from the mystery of receiving the Holy Gifts.

Yet what has caused us pain, what has stirred up our longing in Christ, is not that we have had to pray so often and for so long alone. Alone, of course we are still in Christ, still in the company of the holy bodiless powers, still in the communion of the saints. But nothing witnesses to Christ on earth better and more fully than the congregation gathered in His Name.

We have an imperative, which is to be together, that we may be one. There is no unknown, scattered Church yet to be revealed. There is only the Orthodox Catholic Church of Jesus Christ, that subsists here, at St Dunstan's and in all other Orthodox congregations. And as the body of Christ on earth we know that our Head has ascended, as at this time. Think of what that means, of what is implied by that! That together we are God's body, each a part of the whole; that in receiving communion we become one with what we receive, not in our souls alone, but in the flesh too. Look at those people walking back to their place having approached the chalice, having received from the spoon: each has become a walking tabernacle of God, like the Artophorion on the Holy Table, that holds the Holy Gifts for the sick and housebound, that they too may receive.

Even in the days of the great persecutions, Orthodox Christians still witnessed, showed themselves ready even for martyrdom, for they came together to worship, albeit in secret, through the darkest of days. Watching the Liturgy from a distance, logging on and observing on-line may be necessary for a short while. But noting with the eyes and ears, taking into the mind, is not the whole person, is not full participation. If that is Christianity, then we might as well give up venerating sacred relics and stop kissing the holy images; we might as well let go of all that is tangible and abandon Orthodoxy itself because of fear. Will virtual Christianity, will a new Docetic heresy, save us? I do not believe so! According

to the ecumenical councils, to choose a heresy is to choose excommunication from Christ and from one another; it is to break apart from the body of Christ.

In the gospel today Christ prays at the Mystical Supper for those who believe in Him, not just for the apostles who were with him but for us too, who have come to believe in Him *‘And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to Thee. Holy Father, keep them in Thy Name, which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are one.’* With His ascension Christ’s earthly ministry comes to an end but we are not abandoned; we are not left destitute. We are, indeed, still very much in the world, but the Holy Spirit, as He promised, keeps us together in Christ, in the temples that are the holy churches of God, and moreover, in the temples of these very bodies, both you and I, in which we become true worshippers in Spirit and in Truth.