

Without the Church there is no gospel, no proclamation of the Word of God. That is a bold claim, an audacious statement, but it has to be made. The Creed, doctrines, sacred ministries, holy canons, and the communion of this body, the Orthodox-Catholic Church of Jesus Christ, are the guarantees of the authenticity and truth of what we proclaim.

‘A sower went out to sow his seed,’ says our Lord in His parable today. In part, it is a parable about Himself; He is the allegorical sower of the Word. But He is more than just a sower, a mere planter of seeds. For more mysterious still, He is Himself the seed that is sown. As St John tells us, ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ And following His resurrection from the dead, having preached the opening of the kingdom of God to His own people, He commissioned His apostles to continue that work, that sowing of the seed, that proclamation of the gospel, in all the world.

Let us be very clear about this: without the Church there is no gospel; without the Church, Christianity becomes just another philosophy, mere spirituality; a directionless set of ideas and morals, a code to live by perhaps, but without power, without divine authority, open to being changed, useless for the assurance of actual salvation.

But we need also to be very certain about what we preach to the world, what we proclaim to others by words, by deeds and by our very lives. For we do not preach Orthodoxy as such: we preach Jesus Christ, the Son of God

the Father, risen from the dead, trampling down death and inviting all to repent and seek the kingdom of God. But our belief, our faith, is in the mode of Orthodoxy; Orthodox Christianity is the form and structure of what we believe and teach; as the term Orthodox itself means, not a simple identity, certainly not a national identity, but the true glorification of God: incarnate in Christ, founded on the apostles, taught by the fathers and preserved in the Holy Tradition of the Church. I do not like the term conversion to Orthodoxy; No one is converted to Orthodoxy. One is converted to Jesus Christ through repentance, metanoia: the change of mind. But one becomes Orthodox, ever deepening the understanding of the True Christ.

Today we commemorate the fathers of the last great ecumenical council of the Church, the Seventh Council, held in the year 787 AD. The council upheld the Orthodox practice of the veneration of the icons against the Iconoclasts. The fathers taught that the holy images were works of theology, painted rather than in written form; open books, reminding us of the mysteries of God beyond the limited powers of human reason and logic. And while God in his divine essence cannot be depicted, as St John tells us, 'No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.' [Jn.1:18] Therefore, in as much as God took flesh and became as we are, so He can be depicted in person; the icons show in material form the person of God incarnate, not the divine nature. Thus all matter can be redeemed, making it Spirit-bearing. In his book on the Holy Images, St John of Damascus wrote, 'I do not worship matter, but the Creator of matter, who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, who through matter effected my salvation.'

The Orthodox Church, in preaching Christianity, does not hold with the idea that doctrines can be developed through human reasoning, nor that we can introduce new teachings, as if there were a need for new dogmas and ideas yet to complete the faith. It is true that the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth will, as promised, lead us into all Truth. In that way we can translate and clarify the meaning and interpretation of the faith in all generations. But the human predicament, the fallen condition of humanity, remains the same. Sin remains the same disease as it ever was, and Christ remains the cure as He ever shall be.

So it was the fathers of the Council were not introducing new teachings, but were defending and clarifying the Tradition of the Apostles and protecting, indeed, the very idea of the incarnation against those who would have dragged the Church back into the limited and incomplete revelation and dispensation of the Old Covenant, that had forbidden the making of images, for it offered no image of God.

We heard earlier the words of St Paul writing to Titus, Titus was a gentile convert to Christianity who, it seems, accompanied Paul to Crete after his first imprisonment at Rome. Paul, of course, returned to the city to his martyrdom there under Emperor Nero, but Titus was left in charge of the new church on Crete, appointed as apostolic overseer, or bishop, as we would say. Titus, however, found clear theological problems within the Cretan church, such as the reversion to elements of old Judaism, and the influence of Gnosticism. Like the fathers of the Seventh Council, Paul writes to Titus, encouraging him to draw them back to the original faith, revealed to the apostles. As we hold to this day, the bishop has to be the centre of unity in the local church, and the guarantor of sound, Orthodox doctrine. There is no gospel without the Church, and there is no Church without the

bishop, so in all things pertaining to unity and belief, we cleave to our bishop.

We need waste no time, Paul writes to Titus, on meaningless controversies. Instead we must apply ourselves to good deeds, to help cases of need, and be fruitful. Each of us is called not just to be united with Christ but to be fruitful in Christ. How can we reap that harvest unless we sow and plant among those around us in this life. We must all be sowers of the Word. Once again, to that end, we need to be together here, to offer the Liturgy and to receive from the Liturgy. Last week I called the Church our refuge, our hospital, our school, our defence, our treasury, our hearts' rest. It is also our grain store, where the Word is sown in us, and we are supplied and equipped to broadcast to the world about us.

I also reminded you last week that our common endeavour was to recover the likeness of God that we lost in the old Adam. There is no separation between our own, personal salvation, and the apostolic call to proclaim the gospel; we cannot achieve one without the other. For in becoming like God, in recovering His likeness through grace and our own ascetic struggle, we reveal Christ to those around us; and in proclaiming the gospel to all we are fulfilling, making real and manifesting our calling in the new Adam to sow the Word of Truth.

Our Lord's parable of The Sower takes the form of an allegory, where the conditions of the soil reflect the various conditions of the human heart. He knew that there would be among His own hearers those who would be distracted on the way by the devil; those who lacked any spiritual depth; those who would be rootless and carried away by the temptations of this world; those who would be entangled by the cares and

pleasures of life. Not to mention, of course, those of His own nation who would despise and oppose the Word, anyway.

We who have had that Word of God planted in us at Baptism must examine ourselves, be ever vigilant over our souls. For applying this parable to ourselves, at times we shall certainly observe those different 'soil conditions' in ourselves, all of them, perhaps, from time to time: wandering onto other paths, given to distraction, attracted to a frivolous life, too occupied with worldly busyness, pleasures and entertainments. But we have repentance, and we have the means to receive the grace of God, to become 'good soil,' hearing and holding the word in an honest and good heart and, with patience, bearing fruit.

And as for those who outside the body of Christ, we shall find all sorts and conditions of men, the very same types of ground: stoney ground, rocky soil, but good earth too! There will be closed hearts, and open, honest hearts as well, those who are ready and those who are not. This is because in the unfathomable and mysterious wisdom of God, the Lord knows who will love Him, for He sees into the human heart, as he saw into the heart of the prophet and king, David, and saw Nathaniel under the fig tree before he was called and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit.' [Jn.1:47].

Each of us should be ready at least to explain our knowledge of Christ to those who ask. To this end we must, as far as in us lies, study and know our Orthodox faith so as to have the confidence to impart accurately that knowledge to unbelievers. And also to believers in Christ but who understand Him imperfectly, without the Orthodox mind, just as Aquila and Priscilla in the Acts of the Apostles, had to take Apollos aside and explain to him the way of God more

accurately [Acts. 18:24-28]. Earlier in his letter, Paul tells Titus [Titus 1:9] that a bishop must hold fast the faithful word as he has been taught, in order that by sound doctrine, he may both exhort and convict those who contradict. That 'sound doctrine,' that Orthodoxy, we share with our own bishop. And as the great hieromartyr ,St Ignatius of Antioch, called the God-bearer, taught, we too must follow after the bishop in all things, both in sowing the Word, as well as holding to the Word.