

10 April 2022
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5th Sunday of Great Lent

1] 'What do you want Me to do for you?' Jesus asks the disciples, James and John. What they want is to sit in glory, one at His right hand and one at His left. Still locked into this world; still thinking in terms of a fallen world's power and glory, the sons of Zebedee seek an easy passage into the world to come. Presenting themselves as worthy of the best places in the kingdom of God, clearly, they have not yet learned the meaning of repentance in turning around the mind; they have not yet found the path of humility.

2] And how does Christ answer them? 'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?' Because our presumption, eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, has woken up a world of suffering; and the race of Adam, cut off from the Tree of Life, has brought death into God's Creation. So it is that through the cross of Christ Death is overcome, and by the tree of suffering our spiritual wounds are healed. As Isaiah prophesied concerning the Passion, 'Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like one who treads in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me... I looked, but there was no one to help, and I wondered that there was no one to uphold; therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me.' [Is.63:2-5]

3] So it is that the today's gospel brings to our mind the Passion of Christ that we shall soon commemorate, once again entering the mystery of our redemption through the Liturgy of Holy and Great Week. That mystery is further described for us in the epistle to the Hebrews this morning. St Paul presents Christ as the High Priest, not the shadow, not the type prefigured in the temple of Jerusalem; not a member of the Sadducee party that had decided that Jesus was worthy of death. No, this is the High Priest, not drawn from the tribe of Aaron but the Intercessor for all humanity, the intermediary, God of God, sent to redeem all Creation. He offers up His own blood, not that of bulls and goats, entering the heavenly tabernacle, not the one of this creation that was yet to be destroyed by Titus during the Jewish War in 70 AD.

4] The Old Testament sacrifices and offerings secured remission for the sins of this life alone; sanctified believers for this life alone, brought blessings for this life alone, prefiguring, indeed, what was to come, but they could not defeat the last enemy, Death. But Christ's offering of Himself, not through fire on the altar but through the eternal Spirit, secures eternal redemption by trampling down Death by death. The whole purpose of Christ's Passion was the defeat of death, the fear of which keeps us entrapped in the webs of sin.

5] Yet this is precisely what the disciples do not understand, all of them really, not just James and John, as they make their way to Jerusalem. For the third time in Mark's gospel Jesus tells them of what He must accomplish in the holy city: that it is through a new Passover, through the offering up of His lifeblood, that Death is to be overcome. This was His purpose all along: it is why He was baptised by John in the Jordan; it is why He will share the cup at the Mystical Supper in the upper room.

6] And the time will come, he warns them, when they too, the apostles, will drink the same cup and experience the same baptism. What other purpose is there in all this than our salvation? Our own souls and bodies have gone down into that same baptism; we too have approached and drunk from the same cup of the Lord. For is not our Font the type of His tomb? Do not the antitypes of bread and wine that we offer up become the very mystical body and blood of Christ? Is not the altar behind the iconostasis an icon of the true tabernacle, of which the epistle to the Hebrews speaks to us today?

7] Here we see nothing but the loving purposes of God. Here is the gospel, the very proclamation of His Holy Church to a world caught up in conflict, warfare, rivalry, ambition, suspicion, vainglory, self-indulgence and pursuits that Satan has on offer, all his works, and all his angels, and all his service, and all his pride? Instead of the tyranny of desire, we offer freedom through the ascetic path, the way of the cross. It was the way we see exemplified in the life of St Mary of Egypt whom we commemorate

today, this fifth Sunday of the Great Fast. She came to live the desert life as if already dead to this world. As her troparion says, 'Through thee, the divine likeness was securely preserved, O mother Mary; for thou didst carry the cross and follow Christ. By example and precept thou didst teach us to ignore the body, because it is perishable, and to attend to the concerns of the undying soul. Therefore, doth thy soul rejoice with the angels.'

8] You and I might still be tied to so many things in this world; we are not free to live with the same radical detachment that we witness in her, bound as we are by so many duties and obligations, relationships and responsibilities. But the apostles and great saints have shown us how 'to purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.' But they could only do that because God acted first, as St John says in his first epistle, 'In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' [1Jn.4:9-10]

9] This all begins with the incarnation of God in Christ. If you cannot believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation, if you cannot affirm the Ecumenical Councils, if you cannot say in the Creed, 'and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man,' then none of this makes any sense. If God did not become man and share our condition, then we, in turn, cannot become divine by adoption and grace, to find eternal life through participation in the divine energies.

10] Yet it was in His incarnation that the second person of the Holy Trinity took to Himself a human soul and body: one person in two natures, divine and human, uniting heaven and earth in Himself. This was not, as misunderstood and misconstrued in later western theologies, so that the Son of God could be punished in the place of man, implying that the Father is some kind of ogre! Rather, we stand with the Church Fathers, like St Gregory the Theologian, who wrote that the Incarnation happened, 'because humanity must be sanctified by the humanity of God.'

11] This truly rewrites the rules, as they say; this has changed forever how we are to understand our own human nature. No longer is our relationship with God to be founded on the former law, the 613 mitzvot, the commandments given under Moses to His old people, the children of Israel, though they did prepare the way for that which was to come. For what we have found is the renewal of the old Adam in the New, that is, Christ. The mode of our humanity has been resurrected in baptism. Thus redeemed, we must live now for Him who has opened paradise for us once again. That is how we shall be judged, not on our own notions of goodness and self-esteem, but on whether we have the humility to receive the grace of God and live accordingly.

12] So what does this demand of us? Let us begin with humility and the surrendering of our self-will. Giving up, at least, the presumption of James and John, who claimed pride of place before the rest. In fact, there awaits us a great liberation from the common stresses, anxieties and irritations, of which people complain so often. We only give free rein to the demons that would destroy our souls by first relying on our own will. Like Adam in paradise who, abandoned the command and will of God, beguiled by his own will in pursuit of an illusory and fatal self-determination. But in as much as we abandon ourselves to the loving hands of our God the demonic powers can have no power over us.

13] We can be free from our own wicked thoughts, and all those schemes, false hopes and time-bound dreams that we devise to satisfy ourselves, and that so often only exhaust and frustrate us. It is hard to do this, we must admit it. From infancy we learn to pursue our own will and to turn from all that seems like madness to those without humility. Yet if we are true to that upward call in Christ, true to that life which is hidden with Christ in God, then the mind, at least, the highest faculty of our soul, will know something of that life in the kingdom which is to come. Even while our body of flesh here must pass through its many sufferings, fading away to shake off the old Adam, the soul can be renewed daily, awaiting the redemption of the body, transfigured in the grace of God. 'Therefore we do not lose heart,' says St Paul. 'Even though our

outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.' [2 Cor.4:16]

14] While even humbled and chastened through our sufferings, we can know joy and the presence of God in our life. For we are not here to dedicate our lives to the enjoyment of good times, of strength, wealth or power to achieve our own end. Our purpose, in humility is to establish a living and eternal communion with God, that is, the life in Christ.