

11th November 2022
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Sunday of the Forefathers

1] Is there something about you that would amaze other people? Are there memories, secrets you hold within; events in which you participated, that would impress those who know nothing about you? I once saw a Youtube clip of an old American quiz programme called, I've Got a Secret. It was 1956 and involved a guest from the public being interrogated by a team of celebrities. They had twenty questions to find out a remarkable fact about their guest. In this case, they were told that their guest was Samuel James Seymour, and that he was a 96 year old. The team eventually found out the man's secret. It turned out that at the age of five he had been brought to Ford's Theatre in Washington on 14th April 1865, to see the play, Our American Cousin. Those of you who know your History will have realised that this gentleman had been present, as a small child, when Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated. The quiz team and the audience on the programme were clearly amazed by this revelation.

2] It is intriguing to think how many, so-called ordinary people carry wonderful secrets with them throughout their lives. The very odd thing about the days in which we live is that, most of the people among whom we live know nothing of a far greater secret that they carry about with them, unknown, all their lives. The secret is that they are all sons of Adam, the son of God, as St Luke calls him. (Lk.3:38) In other words, Our God, the lover of mankind, has created humanity after His own image and likeness.

4] This love of God for His creature, Man, is not generalised, benign feeling or mere good intention: a kind of mirror image of those who say they believe in God and have faith in his love, yet do nothing about it. God's Love is directed: it calls everyone, it summons all, invites all. It is our response that makes us either children of grace or children of wrath. (cf. Eph.2:1-6)

5] Today we observe the Sunday of the Forefathers. The Troparion of the day that we heard sung, says, 'Through faith You justified the Forefathers, betrothing through them the Church of the gentiles. These saints exult in glory, for from their seed came forth a

glorious fruit: She who bore You without seed. So by their prayers, O Christ God, have mercy on us!’

6] The forefathers were those, like the great patriarch, Abraham, who lived before the Law, and those who came after the Law, like the prophet king, David. Next Sunday indeed, we shall hear the gospel of the genealogy of Christ proclaimed from St Matthew. The troparion makes clear that we too have been grafted in, betrothed as the Church of the gentiles. And these forefathers of the Old Testament now rejoice for ever, for from their line came the glorious Theotokos who, in turn, bore Christ without seed.

7] This is the underlying theme, the great open secret of the scriptures of the Old Testament; like the letters in a stick of seaside rock; like the veins in a piece of marble, Christ runs through the stories, wisdom, histories, psalms, and prophecies that will reach their fulfilment in the mystery celebrated in our Nativity feast: Christ’s incarnation, His whole life as one of us, is God’s final revelation of His love for mankind, the very gospel with which we are charged to proclaim to the unknowing world.

8] But the truth is that after two thousand years, Christianity has not shown itself to be esoteric, it has not been silent. Our faith is not obscure or occult, like the imaginings of the early Gnostic and other heretics that existed in that ancient. Meanwhile, the Orthodox, Apostolic Tradition of Faith was proclaimed to all, as the psalmist says, Their sound has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. [Ps.19:4] It is often claimed by our detractors, that Christianity was generally corrupted when it gained imperial and popular favour in the fourth century. Extraordinary, astonishing though it might seem to them, it was through St Constantine the Great that the European world was to be converted to the Faith of Christ, rather than just disappear into the annals of religious history.

9] There is much we might say about the days in which we live and the general falling away from that Faith. But the point to be made is that this is a free choice. Those who, although created as living icons of their Creator, have made a straightforward choice to lose themselves in this world, rather than respond to the call to eternal

salvation. It is all so very obvious really: the world they can see has more immediate value for them than that which is to come. It is like the famous Stanford University 'marshmallow experiment,' where small children were offered the chance to eat one marshmallow immediately, or wait five minutes and have two. Those who delayed their gratification were generally shown to have better educational attainment than those who wanted instant gratification.

10] The men invited to attend the great banquet in Today's gospel have their own priorities; matters that they consider more important for them at the time than a gracious invitation to attend a feast. The context of the parable, in fact, is a dinner in the house of a pharisee where Christ is Himself a guest and is meant to highlight the pharisees' own rejection of the gospel of the kingdom. And in our times it speaks of those who look to their lives, their families, their careers, positions and possessions, without any consideration of what God might require of them. They might indeed be normal, honourable people, but they are firmly rooted in this world; attached to the things of this world, for it is all they know.

11] They might even have, as the modern phrase has it, 'identified themselves' as Christian on the 2021 Census, one of the 46%, but that is all it is. But actually to accept the invitation of the gospel, to repent and seek first the kingdom of God, requires faith. Meanwhile, inside the soul of man, the Old Adam still lurks, desperately hanging on to what he has, claiming his rights, pursuing his ambitions, indulging his passions, enjoying his pleasures, covering his ears, shielding his eyes, closing his mind to the Judgement that is coming.

12] For us, however, faith assures us of something utterly different. In his epistle to the Philippians, St Paul speaks of, 'Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,' and of pressing 'Toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [Phil.3:13-14] That holds true as long as we hear him this morning saying, 'When Christ, Who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.' If we believe this; if it is true that Christ is our Life, have we reckoned with the real ascetic cost of our discipleship? 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you,' he says.

13] Since the days of the psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, people have concluded that the repression of our basic instincts can only lead to neurosis; that it is, somehow, unhealthy to deny what we seem to want. The whole world of advertising is constructed on the indulgence of our own gratification and pandering to that self. But that self, the Old Man, is the fallen creature: his view is distorted and his true self is hidden. His consciousness is confined and limited here. Like a householder who is unaware that in his attic there lies hidden a priceless family heirloom, but who then sells his house to another, quite unaware of what he has given away.

14] For those who believe and for those who do not, the same Christ came to be born among us, to die and rise again for us, revealing our true humanity, putting to death the Old Adam. For us who are striving for that 'New nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator,' the rest of the world might well stand amazed that we do not join them in their annual festival of dissipation; that our focus is found elsewhere. Neither should it take twenty questions, as in that old TV show, to uncover that we too have a secret; that it be obvious to all that there can be no worldly divisions among us, but that Christ is all, and in all.

15] Yet, still for those who accept the gospel, even with its ascetic challenges, even though it is contra mundum (against the world) and even though, in our times, it is countercultural, the remarkable truth is that God's grace completes what is missing, warming the heart and comforting with God's own strength the soul in its resolve. Meanwhile, we have a command and a commission from Christ in His parable today: 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled.'