

12th February 2023
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

1] In his Gothic novella of 1886, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson tells of a tragic double personality: the respectable Dr Jekyll and the terrible and violent Mr Hyde, who emerges from the doctor after he drinks a chemical serum that he has developed in his laboratory. Eventually, of course, Jekyll is unable to revert to his real self with very tragic consequences.

2] Last Sunday we heard the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. If we ponder the story well, we might even see elements of ourselves in both those characters. That, at times we are the repentant publican, a tax collector, who casts himself on the mercy of God and goes down from the temple, justified. And yet, at other times we become the self-righteous pharisee. Like Jekyll and Hyde: a tragic double character.

3] We need, however, to be careful how we understand such words as, justified, when applied to the tax collector. It is all too easy to assume that all is now well with him. His relationship with God had certainly been restored; his past sins would no longer be counted against him in this life, and he was able, once more, to be numbered among the children of Israel, unlike the deluded pharisee. But the word justified does not mean saved as we understand it in Orthodox Christianity.

4] We see the same restoration of a lost soul today in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Whilst he was still on his way home his father sees him and runs to embrace him, welcoming him home. Like the tax collector, the prodigal son is an image of repentance as he returns to his right mind. 'When he came to himself he said, How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!' Indeed, realising where his life of dissipation has brought him, seeing the condition he is in through his own sinful folly, his restoration begins in his own mind, in the thoughts of his heart: 'I will arise and go to my father, and I

will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.'

5] Both these characters have experienced a redemption; they have been redeemed, that is, bought back, as if a ransom had been paid, to use figurative language. And it is figurative language. Such language is at times used in the holy scriptures of the passion of Our Lord: 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve,' says St Mark's gospel. 'And to give His life a ransom for many.' [Mk.10:45] The problem is that later minds, following their own thoughts and knowing nothing of the teaching of the Fathers and the mind of the Church in interpretation, take such language literally and become fixated on legal theories of redemption, theories that need some transaction or punishment to occur. Such false ideas about atonement are common in many forms of heterodox Christianity. Not surprisingly, they also tend to confuse the terms justification or redemption with the idea of salvation itself.

6] When two weeks ago we heard the gospel of Christ and the Canaanite woman, we heard Our Lord say, 'I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' [Matt.15:24] Indeed, he wasn't; although he often encountered gentiles, His prime mission was to God's Old People, the children of Abraham. It is only after His resurrection and Ascension that Christ sends out His apostles to the whole world. But first, He was among His own, reconciling the lost, even if in the end, most of them rejected Him as the Messiah.

7] This is why John the Forerunner was sent before Him, baptising the people of Israel, preparing the people through repentance and the confession of their sins. Moreover, John the Baptist's own father, Zacharias, prophecies this redemption in St Luke's gospel: Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David...And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins.' [Lk.1:68-69;76-77]

8] As for us, members of Christ's holy Orthodox-Catholic Church: we too have been redeemed. 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?' says St Paul in the epistle this morning. This all began for each of us when we went down into the waters of Baptism; when we were baptised into Christ's death and born anew. But whether you were baptised as an infant, or as a number of those here, today, as adults, one thing soon becomes apparent: although we have been redeemed, although we were justified, we still carry around the Old Adam. The soul may yearn to be with Christ and long for that blessedness of the kingdom of heaven, but the flesh is still of this world; the old habits, instincts and inclinations seem to have a life of their own, as always. As St Paul tells the Romans, 'For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. [Rom.7:18-19]

9] You See! Even the great Paul, redeemed from his former life, baptised by Ananias in Damascus, was not perfected at once, in the twinkling of an eye. He too had to struggle, and so do we. It is once we belong to Christ that the long road begins. Anyone who seeks eternal life, anyone who truly longs for the kingdom of God, must realise that we are what our Rite of Baptism calls, warriors of Christ. We are engaged in a spiritual warfare against our own sins. Once more I can recall my favourite quote from St Isaac the Syrian: 'The way of Christ is a daily cross. No one got to heaven through an easy life.'

10] People in Confession often realise that they are falling into the same sins again and again. This must not surprise us for the state within us has evolved, emerged and settled into this life, within this world. Though we want to change, the machine within has seized up; it has become rusted. We can pray to God and nothing happens, nothing changes, and it so easy then to give up. But that is precisely when we must persist. Like the Canaanite woman, when Christ answered her not a word. (cf. Matt.15:23) our perseverance will succeed, we shall be cleansed, and, what is more, we shall understand how superficial our repentance was.

11] In the parable of the Widow and the Judge, Christ commanded us that we ought always to pray and not lose heart: 'Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily.' [Lk.18:7-8] One of my favourite lines from the psalms that I often find myself repeating, the first verse of Psalm 39, says, 'I waited patiently for the Lord and He inclined to me and heard my cry.'

12] No one struggling in their sins need lose heart. When we were baptised, one of the blessings we received was that absolution of sins was made available to us now, through repentance. In the Rite of Chrismation, following Baptism, the priest prays that God, having given us, 'blessed purification through hallowed water, and divine sanctification, through life-giving Chrismation... grants to [us] remission of sins, whether voluntary or involuntary.' That refers not just to sins before baptism, but those that occur afterwards. There was, indeed, a struggle among the early Christians over those who sinned after Baptism, especially those who under persecution, fell into apostasy. However, the wisdom of the mind of Christ prevailed, knowing that we, who take up the cross, are still frail creatures of flesh. And it is fitting, therefore, that we eat flesh for the last time next Sunday, the Sunday of the Last Judgement. We then begin the meat-fast until Pascha, and set out on that long road of ascetic struggle, as far as in us lies.

13] But before we begin all this, let us be very careful to root out of ourselves the pharisaic mind, or that mind of the Prodigal Son's elder brother. It is perfectly possible to accept the Orthodox dogmatic teachings of Holy Tradition, to follow officiously the Holy Canons, to observe strictly the rules of the Great Fast, and yet to find fault, criticise and condemn others because we have failed to love our neighbour, so that through our pride in our own perfection we will find ourselves walking backward. Our brother or sister in Christ may well fall at the first ascetic hurdle, but if they have the love of God within them for all mankind, they will be closer to that final theosis, the deification in Christ, than the greatest ascetic whose heart has grown cold and has gained nothing.

14] Of course, all of us must exert ourselves, must labour in the Lord to keep the lenten discipline, putting to death that other side of ourselves, that destructive Mr Hyde within. But if in the end we have not grown humbler; if we have not nurtured that loving compassion of God for all; if we have not moved a step closer to the new life in Christ, then all our strivings will have been in vain.