

'We have... a High Priest, one Who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.'

1] There are those whose religion tells them that they have immediate access to God. In their own imaginations they appear to be on an equal footing with the Divine, suggesting that they have an intimate and fixed relationship within the utter holiness of the Godhead. They think that they have no need for any intermediary, advocate or intercessor to go before and plead their cause with God.

2] Yet the natural religious instincts of mankind had even taught the ancient pagans that any approach to their gods required sacrifice and appeasement. The later mystery religions that appeared within the Roman Empire, required adherence to a demiurge, hero-saviour or enlightener to lead the initiates up to their destiny.

3] And, of course, there were those whose experience of the God of Israel is recorded in the Old Testament. Among them there were those, indeed, who were intimate with the LORD; who were known as the friends of God: Enoch who walked with God and was not, Abraham, Moses the Lawgiver, the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah; Daniel, the man of desires. But these were chosen by God, touched by God according to His purposes, whilst their own approaches to Him were in humility and self-abasement. Moses, for example, '...Hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.' [Ex.3:6]

4] There are forms even of Christianity, perverted in their own way, that in the name of, and obsessed with, inclusion, offer communion with God, saying come, just as you are. No need for humility; everyone is just okay; the ancients were not as knowledgeable as us now, they will say: they were mistaken in what they called sin and there is no need for repentance. Such is the delusion, the demons appearing as angels of light, the apotheosis of Californian psychobabble. Meanwhile, the humble Psalmist proclaims 'Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret

faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me' [Ps.18(19):12-13]

5] The final revelation of God to mankind, the fulfilment of the Old Testament, is indeed ours in Christ. He in whom all the fulness of the Godhead dwelt bodily (cf. Col.2:9) is the only way, truth and life; no one comes to the God Father except through Him. (cf. Jn.14:6) 'Now the point in what we are saying is this,' St Paul tells us in the epistle this morning, 'We have such a High Priest.'

6] It is the function of any priest to intercede for souls; a go-between who, by virtue of his office, offers prayers and oblations to God on behalf of the people. St Paul is telling us that Christ is that priest on our behalf who, though God from all eternity, became Man to incorporate our fallen human nature into God. As our priest He offered up His own life, bearing our sins on the cross, renewing His creation through His resurrection, and raising our humanity by His ascension.

7] Then let us be in no doubt that our message to the world, our good news, is that everyone is called into newness of life, but something is required of us! The very first words of Christ, recorded in St Mark's gospel are, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.' [Mk.1:15] Without acknowledgement of sin, without repentance, there is no automatic access to God; there is no guaranteed salvation. As St John says, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' [1Jn.1:8]

8] Today we commemorate St John Chrysostom, the golden mouth. Born in Antioch in 347AD, he studied rhetoric under the pagan teacher Libanius, who said whilst he was dying that John would have succeeded him, 'If the Christians had not taken him from us.' Indeed, it was the saint's eloquence and golden speech that not only charmed and engaged his congregations with power of his homilies, but was also to land him in so much trouble with the imperial authorities and his own enemies.

9] We know, of course, St John's liturgy that he brought with him from Antioch when He became archbishop of Constantinople which, since the thirteenth century, has become the usual Sunday service within the Byzantine tradition of the whole Eastern Orthodox Church. Between 390 and 391 St John wrote a treatise called, On the Priesthood. Here he outlines, in exalted terms, the glory of the sacred ministry.

10] Here, we do indeed have to be very careful in our understanding of Orthodox priesthood. As the late Metropolitan Kallistos of blessed memory, once suggested, there is only one priest and that is Christ; then, yet again, there are men ordained as priests within the Church, as icons of Christ's priesthood; and finally all the baptised are a nation of priests and a holy nation.

11] From this we can learn that our whole approach to the mystery of the Godhead, our entire seeking of the kingdom of heaven, is established through Christ, the God-Man. The Orthodox priest is not like the pagan priests, appeasing natural forces, masquerading as gods. He is rather a presbyter, an elder of the community, serving under his bishop, reflecting the fatherhood of God as a pastor, and in the Liturgy serving as an image of Christ incarnate, making present by anamnesis, remembrance, the mystery of Christ's own eternal sacrifice that reconciles us to God through the Holy Gifts.

12] All the infamous heresies that the great Orthodox fathers like St John battled against so vehemently, would have undone our way to God through Christ. Diminishing His status as eternally divine, they would have removed Him from His relationship with the Father; denying His sharing fully in our human nature, they would have prevented our recovery of His image and likeness in us. Salvation would have been impossible with no redemption and no way into the mystery of life eternal.

13] We do not need to compromise in any of this; we do not have to accept what passes for modern religion, thinking all is well and all are accepted in the kindly indulgence of an ineffectual god. People have lived in worst times, in more dreadful conditions, with more frightening uncertainty. But we live here in dire times when we

consider the lost state of so many, the deadness of souls, the moral indulgence, the godlessness of today. A land where the elites despite their own history and their very identity has long abandoned any search for God in pursuit of other things. No doubt, the two are connected.

14] Who knows if these are the end of times; who knows when Christ will come in judgement? We certainly do not, but we are still here and for each, our priesthood, our mediation in the world, is to bear witness to that better way: through us to Christ and through Christ to the Father. Even we ourselves often have access to God's mercy through the intercession of His saints, in whom God is glorified.

15] The message of Christ's Church is certainly good news of salvation, but it is also a warning. Those who can only indulge themselves, whether for pleasure, or power, worldly wealth or vainglory, mark their own souls, for what is done in the body of flesh reflects the soul and the spiritual reality of what it is to be human. And if they imagine that death will end all their responsibility, we can inform them, quite inconveniently, that the soul is eternal in the mind of God and bears the result of what it has become for ever, whether as heaven or hell.

16] How we can do all this, how we reveal Christ the mediator to the world, is shown in the parable in today's gospel. Not only does it demonstrate the nature of the true neighbour, his practical compassion for one in need, but it also portrays the condescension and loving purposes of God in Christ, the true good Samaritan, who finds the fallen, wounded soul and, being alongside, works its cure. We even find, here, reference to the mystical nature of the sacraments through which we are touched by God, there, in the washing of the wounds with wine and oil.

17] In short, as Christ is alongside us, bringing us into the kingdom, so our religion is to bring us alongside others who do not know the love of God. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this, St James tells us, 'To visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.' [Jm.1:27]. Through humility and repentance we shall draw near through Christ. But let us

also be careful to avoid all hypocrisy in the practice of our faith. As St John Chrysostom once preached in a homily on St Matthew's gospel (50:3-40) 'Do you wish to honour the body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked... He who said: "This is my body" is the same who said: "You saw me hungry and you gave me no food", and "Whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me"... What good is it if the Eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.'