

26th September 2021 Falling Asleep of St John the Evangelist
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1] At first, the idea is unsettling, even disturbing, but the objects that you see around you are not the colour that you see with your eyes; there is no colour that you perceive in the objects we see around us. In fact, an object that appears red, for example, merely absorbs all light, with all the spectrum of colours, except for the shade of red that you see, which it reflects back into your eyes. And it is your brain that constructs the experience of seeing red.

2] The human brain, the most complex entity in the known universe, is the manifestation, the very incarnation of what in Orthodox theology is called, the mind; what the Greek fathers called the nous, the highest faculty of the soul. In this fallen condition of humanity our bodies are no longer clothed in divine glory. Although we remain, male and female, the ikon of God, the body in this world no longer reflects, directly, the spiritual reality. Objects that appear black to our eyes absorb, of course, the whole spectrum of light, reflecting no colour. Herein we see an image of souls lost in sin, no longer reflecting anything of God's glory.

3] 'No one has ever seen God,' says St John today in his first epistle. There is no surprise there. How can the carnal perceive what is spiritual; how can the heavy eyes of flesh, connected by the optic nerve to the brain, behold the Divine Essence? Even in the final mystery of the resurrection, when this mortal body is swallowed up in immortality, when the flesh become a spiritual body, fully manifesting the purified soul, even then the human mind will never comprehend the fulness of the Divine Nature. Why! We can hardly know and understand our very own consciousness and what it is to be human: much less what it is to be God. 'No one has ever seen God.'

4] Yet in the holy scriptures handed down to us there are patriarchs and prophets, kings and apostles who experienced God, openly declared through the Divine Energies, for just as we show ourselves through the appearance and actions of our own bodies, so God is revealed and known in His energies: His power and glory, in His

knowing all things, in being everywhere present and filling all things, and in His love, for St John says, God is love.

5] Today we commemorate the falling asleep of St John the apostle and evangelist, the only one of the apostles not to suffer martyrdom for Christ, of whom Jesus said,, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.' [Jn.21:22] St John is not such an obscure character, known only through the evidence of what is recorded in the Bible. In his letter to Florinus, St Irenaeus of Lyons, who died in 202AD, castigates his friend for falling into the gnostic heresy of Valentinianism, none of whose teachings, he writes, came from the apostles. St Irenaeus tells us in his letter that when he was young he had known and listened to St Polycarp the martyr, who in turn had know the apostle John himself, and from whom Polycarp had learned the faith directly. Here we see the very real, very historical line of true tradition upon which the Orthodox-Catholic faith is founded.

6] Our knowledge of Christ rejects all the early heresies, takes nothing from later speculations; knows nothing of reformations of the faith, and certainly nothing of the spirit of these times. What we own, what we possess, and what we in turn pass on, whether in church, in our homes or among our acquaintances, is the Apostolic Tradition, not our own opinions but what the apostles, like St John, had learned from Christ Himself, the true source of Theology. In other words, we know the provenance of our faith, when know where it comes from. As with a precious antique, buyer and seller have to be very sure that it is not a fake or a reproduction. They have to know when it was made and where; who owned it, where it came from, if it is to be declared genuine.

7] 'No one has ever seen God.' And yet, at the Mystical Supper in the upper room, as they reclined according to custom around the food, it was St John who head leaned against Our Lord's breast. Ever since, in the iconography of the Church, this leaning upon the divine breast has come to symbolise that direct spiritual connection between the Teacher and his disciple, a primary source of the mystical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

8] No other writer in the New Testament so clearly describes for us the reality of the incarnation of God; of how the unseen Divine clothes himself in our human image. As we were made in his image and likeness, so He took on our image in the flesh, as it is in this world. 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us'. So says St John in his first epistle [1Jn.1:1-2]. Or as he proclaims at the beginning of his gospel, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.' [Jn.1:14]

9] But there is a purpose to all this. Our veneration of the blessed apostle today, our fellowship and oneness of mind with him is pursued with one particular aim, one intention in mind: 'No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.' But we must be warned: one thing that the lives of the apostles teach us is that believing, of itself, is not enough. We must also be changed. As St James, the brother of the Lord wrote in his epistle, 'Even the demons believe—and tremble!' [Jam.2:19]

10] To be perfected in the love of God is our purpose. Think of all the therapies, philosophies, causes, obsessions, protests and general panics of today's world. What they all have in common is the blaming of others rather than oneself. They require no substantial moral or ethical change in the individual. That cannot be so in Christianity. One might hold the Orthodox faith with a wholehearted surrender of the mind; one might offer absolute faith and loyalty, accepting all the doctrines of the Church. Yet without change within the heart, without the mere beginnings of the perfecting of the love of God, it is all to no purpose. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, 'Christianity says that sound doctrines alone are all useless. You have to change your life.'

11] This was the experience of all the apostles. St Peter fell down before Christ, after the miraculous catch of fish, confessing himself to be a sinful man (Lk.5:8).

12] St James whom I mentioned earlier, a relative of Christ, of the same house indeed, had to change his mind. As Christ said, 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own country and in his own house.' [Matt.13:57] Was James, perhaps, among those whom St Mark mentions (Mk.3:21) from among Jesus' own people who, 'Went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, "He is out of His mind."' And yet James was given first place among the pillars of the apostolic Church in Jerusalem after the Ascension of Christ.

13] And Mary of Magdala, Equal to the Apostles, as we call her, who had been driven mad by seven demons, was also changed when Christ had cast them out.

14] And the great Paul, who encountering the glorified Christ on the road to Damascus, had his life turned upside down. As he tells the Philippians, 'If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin... concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church... But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.... for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.' [Phil.3:4-8]

15] Of all the spiritual meditations we can enter into, of all the self-examinations we can undertake, the most salutary, the most enlightening is to ask ourselves the question, if I had never known Christ, what actual difference would it make to the way I live? If the honest answer is none at all, then I must repent in fear and trembling. If the answer is I have changed and my salvation is assured, then I have fallen into presumption and have yet to learn humility.

16] St John tells us himself today, 'Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.' That confession is not just the proclamation of words, but also the repentance of the sinful, unworthy Peter, the restoration of the whole person of Mary Magdalene, the change of mind and the new understanding in James, and the struggles, sufferings and witness of Paul.

17] It is interesting that in today's gospel, presuming on the death of Joseph the Betrothed, Christ Himself dying upon the cross, now hands over the care of His mother into the hands of the beloved disciple, John; not to James or any other of the extended family, but to the apostle who imbibed the mystical knowledge of the gospel of salvation, and who understood the significance of the Theotokos for the incarnation of the Word. In as much as we have her icon in our homes, we too, like the apostle, have taken her into our hearts. But we must also come to the same knowledge of God incarnate. We can do this through the transforming bonds of love that we have for one another; the obligations of care that we are bound to share in the Church. For God is love; and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.