

‘The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light.’

1] An old English proverb or saying claims that, home is where the heart is. It is perhaps difficult to translate this idea into other languages directly. A house is just a building, no matter how grand, but add people in relationship with one another and, over time, it becomes what we mean by home. Here the heart has an emotional attachment to a place.

2] For most modern people the word heart is usually connected with someones emotions or feelings, and that is all, so much so that the heart-shape has become a symbol for romantic love. But it will not surprise you that this is not exclusively the biblical, and therefore, Orthodox Christian, understanding, of the word heart. For us, the heart is so much more than merely a metaphor; and certainly more than a bodily organ essential to the circulation of the blood.

3] Each one of us shares our common human nature: that is what we are as the creation of God. We are human by nature, whilst God is divine by nature. And each one of us is a particular and individual example of that human nature; in Greek, the hyposasis, the individual person. And in turn, each person is expressed in the physical body, the symbol of what is within, that is, the soul. And the soul has the life within, that is the spirit. Body, soul and spirit: the tripartite being that we are, made in the image of God. Think of that! Mankind as not just the ambassador of the divine; not even just the priest, leading the worship of the Creator, but Mankind as the very icon of the Triune Godhead.

4] What a privilege; what an awful responsibility, what an office and vocation belongs to us in all creation! And yet few are aware of the implications of this dignity. As St Paul laments at the beginning of his letter to the Romans, ‘Because, although they

knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened... who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.' [Rom1:21,25]

5] In our Orthodox understanding of Mankind, the heart is of central importance, especially when we try to enter into a spiritual manner of living. For the heart is the centre of the soul, and is meant to be the location of the mind of Man. In the same way that electrical energy can be manifested outwardly in a glowing light bulb, so it is with the heart, the inner man; the spiritual energy that is expressed outwardly by the body. And it is in the heart that we find, each one of us, our feelings certainly, but also our thinking and our will.

6] Imagine that state of bliss, the mind, the will and the emotions all in perfect harmony! That is the state that the New Testament calls the peace of God that passes all understanding, and yet it can be known in the heart. This is nothing less than the goal of the spiritual life in Christ. This is what the blessed Augustine of Hippo meant when he wrote of God, 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.' But since the fall of man, that harmonious state has been disrupted. I cannot call it our natural state, as intended by our Creator, but I shall call it our habitual state of being.

7] We have all known this state of affairs, where the mind, our highest faculty, knows well enough what things are noble, what are just, what things are pure, what things are lovely. (cf. Phil.4:8) But the feelings and the will surrender to the body, like Pavlov's proverbial dog reacting to the bell. It is through this fractured heart of ours that temptations enter the soul.

8] What a work is set before us! What labour lies ahead of us in the Lord! What exercise and training we require in asceticism, in prayer, in almsgiving and detachment, and generosity of spirit. This is nothing less than taking up the cross, for through these means the heart is purified, and being pure in heart, we shall find the

kingdom of God within us (Lk.17:21), that is, Christ enthroned and ruling our life.

9] This is what St James is referring to in his epistle when he writes, 'Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.' [Jm.4:7-8] And there is the problem, the double-mind, the divided, schizoid mind, as Paul himself found: '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]

10] We can leave it to the heterodox among the various denominations of Christianity to imagine that being religious is about sending out signals of virtue in espousing the currently popular causes. But for Orthodox believers, it is essential that we maintain the heart of the gospel: that renewal of the mind we call repentance and that we do not lose our focus on our primary objective, our priority; what Christ calls in today's gospel, seeking first the kingdom and its righteousness.

11] Our Lord also gives us in the gospel today a different analogy for that idea of the split mind, that fracture in the heart of man. He calls the eye the lamp of the body. For just as the eye brings in the light and enables us to see objects in the world, so the mind can enlighten the soul with an understanding of the truth. But as with unhealthy eyes, so it is with an unsound mind: perception is everything.

12] But there is our difficulty: like the man in St John's gospel, spiritually, we are born with a kind of blindness. That is what Saul of Tarsus came to realise by revelation on his road to Damascus. As he tells us in Romans, since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, His eternal power and Godhead (cf. Rom.1:20). Yet we do not so view the world; Sin has distorted what we perceive. We are still human since the Fall; human nature, made in God's

image, has not changed, but the soul within has become debased, like coinage that has lost its full and original value.

13] Spiritual writers in the Slavonic tradition call this affliction of man's soul, prelest, which means, delusion or beguilement. It can also mean positively, being enchanted by something. But that has ever been the devil's way, as in the story of the beguilement of Eve, taking the loveliness of Creation and perverting its meaning.

14] If we are to overcome this, if we are to progress spiritually, if we are ever to become integrated once again, finding our heart's rest, we shall need to be serious in our religion. Churches have always had members who reveal different levels of understanding and commitment to what our faith involves, as if they occupied a series of concentric circles, some towards the centre, others on the periphery. It has always been like that and we accept them all, but we invite all to attend and find wisdom. For everyone, even the newest catechumen and hearer of the Word, or one who is baptised yet rarely enters these sacred courts, the house of God, can make a beginning. As soon as someone makes a start, engaging in the spiritual warfare against habitual sins, and starts to practice the holy commandments of Christ, the eye of the soul is being cleansed, healed and enlightened, and the heart itself is being purified.

15] There are, though, two errors to be avoided in this great work. To imagine that we are OK already, we are safe, we are saved; we do not need to change in any way: that is prelest, a delusion. Or, on the other hand, to say we can never win, we are not worthy; there is too much despair in the soul to find the energy to improve. Both of these are dangerous demonic delusions. And none of us need think that this is beyond any of us, for what we lack in any spiritual growth can be completed by the grace of God, that divine energy that brings all to perfection: only, it requires that we have faith. 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,' Christ tells us in the gospel. [Matt.6:21] And our treasure is the Pearl of Great Price, the kingdom of heaven, our true home, and home is where the heart must be. This is why the grace that comes to us through communion in the Holy Gifts is so central to life in Christ.

‘Justified by faith,’ Paul tells us in the epistle today. ‘We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.’