

1] The whole Orthodox Christian life is lived, is experienced, symbolically. Not the cold, two-dimensional symbols of the modern mind, that might as well be just labels, standing in for something that is absent. I am talking about the true idea of a symbol, an object perceived or known to us in this world, yet manifesting something beyond. For everything in the spiritual world, is imprinted on the things of the physical world around us: the principles, the creation of God's mind, appearing as figures known to us in this sensible world.

2] Think of the idea of the holy, the sacred: what does it mean for something to be considered sacred? That war memorial at the back of our church is sacred to the memory of those men who died in the two World Wars. As a construction it is sacred because it points beyond itself; it serves to link us with their memory.

3] Think of our life together in the Church, the prayer and worship, the cycle of the liturgical year, the feasting, as well as the fasting we enter again tomorrow; the icons, the incense, the vestments, the signing of the cross, the prostrations; the very form of our temples: these holy things connect us, in a mystery, to the Divine. The Holy Mysteries, the sacraments that we celebrate, are themselves symbols in which subsists, tangibly, the grace of life in Christ. In other words, what is in heaven comes down to us on earth. It is, after all, what we pray daily: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

4] This is how we experience the life in Christ together, that is, if we can escape the worldly mind. And by that I do not just mean the indulgent, venal or carnal mind, ever seeking its own gratification. But I mean also acquiring the mind of Christ; thinking as Christ, as the apostle says in the epistle today: "May the God of patience and comfort grant you to be of the same mind with one another, according to Christ Jesus." And why does St Paul say this? "That with one accord and one mouth you may glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

5] Those men in the gospel today, are physically afflicted, like so many others mentioned in the gospels: the man born blind in John; the blind man at Bethsaida, and blind Bartimaeus, both in St Mark. Or the many to whom Christ gave sight in Luke, and was reported back to John the Baptist, as confirmation that the Messiah was among them. It might seem strange to ask what does blindness mean? Well, at one level it is the absence of one of our primary senses: but in the gospels, in the Church, nothing is merely on the physical level. We are invited to see, to perceive, beneath the surface.

6] This failure of the eyes, this decay of lenses, the damage to optic nerves, the dysfunction within the human brain, whatever the cause, this blindness is symbolic itself, revealing plainly, paradoxically, the darkness within us all. As with all disease its roots lie in human sin, our alienation from the life in God. And what is it that cures them, these two blind men at the side of the road? The very same that is working our cure as we make our way along the road through this life.

7] At first they call out, putting their trust in one they consider to be the descendent and heir of David, prophet and king; that credence of theirs is quite political as well as religious: 'Have mercy on us, Son of David,' they say. But what does Christ say to them, and what indeed does He say to you and me this morning? 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They say yes and are at once enlightened. Charged with keeping His identity secret, their all too human ebullience and joy publishes the news abroad.

8] And another man, severely disturbed in his mind and behaviour, bound by demonic power that makes him incapable of speaking out at all, his own words bottled up under an evil pressure: he too is set free, delivered, and the words flow out of him. Only the cynical, the sarcastic and closed pharisaical mind dares to criticise the healings, misconstruing the situation completely, seeing evil where there is, in fact, blessing.

9] “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” Our own enlightenment, our own deliverance from the evil one, is also dependent on this, that we believe that He, the Christ, can do this. The whole Orthodox Christian life is experienced, symbolically. And in as much as we share in these symbols, we are co-operating with the grace of God; the synergy, the working together of our faith and our labour in the Lord, together with the divine energies, till we find the perfection of our humanity.

10] But to have our eyes opened; to be delivered from the power of the demons, is that all there is to it? All that has happened to anyone who has been baptised into Christ: the words of the baptismal service make that perfectly clear. Our Baptism was the initiation, the start of the new, symbolic life in Christ. How many just get stuck there? How many fail, then, to take up the cross or labour in the Lord, or even just see it as a priority in their daily life to gather here as the Church on the Lord’s day and find grace.

11] The Orthodox Christian life is experienced, symbolically, but in practice, it is a life of spiritual asceticism. That means we are trying to be rid of everything that does not belong to our human nature as created by God. Ironically, it is usually those things that men call only natural that are precisely alien to us since our fall in Adam. But with our eyes now opened, we know precisely upon whom we should be gazing steadily.

12] If all we can do is look inward, fixated on our own ego; obsessed with ourselves, our wants and needs, comforts and importance, where will that lead us? Instead, the measure for our soul is not the pampered self that the commercial advertisers would have you believe. Our completion, our restoration and peace is to be found staring into the icon of Christ, the very image of what we must become, if we are to be authentically human. What does St John tell us in his first epistle? ‘For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.’ [1Jn.2:16-17] It is easy, you see, to be conformed to the world’s image, to live life on the surface, as it were. But our eyes have been opened: we

have been invited to see beyond the physical world of the symbols and figures to the intelligible world of the principles; to know the mind of God.

13] This is perhaps difficult to grasp, I know; it is the heavy mystical Theology of someone like St Maximos the Confessor. But we are engaged in a serious work, the very salvation of our souls. And at whatever level we comprehend this, for those matters we find difficult we can always pray that we be granted understanding and a clearer vision.

14] So what shall become of us who fix our vision on the icon of Our Lord, seeking what the apostle calls in Ephesians, 'The knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.' [Eph.4:13] But here, too, is a paradox. This stature, this fulness, is not some enormous colossus that we have to become, some giant statue to be admired by all. In fact, the purified soul is known in simplicity, in all innocence, in all purity.

15] Tomorrow we begin the Dormition Fast. Call to mind the icon of the feast. The body of the Theotokos is laid out upon the funeral bier, the sacred earthly figure, pointing to something else, beyond. It is her soul, held in the arms of her Son. Her soul is pictured as a small child, wrapped in purest white. An image too of what we must become: poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, makers of peace, the children of God: 'For to such is the Kingdom of God.' [Mk.10:14]

16] It is only the saints who have full knowledge of what we truly are; as yet, we who struggle here, below, still see through a glass darkly. Yet we possessed something of this mystery in our early days as infants: not that petulant, immature, childishness, but that of our childlike innocence, that we lost in adolescence and covered up in our adulthood. But what Abraham Lincoln once referred to as, *the better angels of our nature*, still, on our behalf, gaze upon the face of God. And no child of God should be despised, no matter how much the victim of its own sinful passions. May the fast that we begin tomorrow serve to remind us that our real food is found in what Christ

says Himself in St John's gospel: *'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.'* [Jn.4:34]