

6th June 2021
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Sunday of the Blind Man

“Do you believe in the Son of God?” He answered, “And who is He, Sir, that I may believe in Him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen Him, and it is He who speaks to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped Him.

It is hard to overestimate the effects of Christianity on the last two thousand years of human history. Wherever the light of Christ has shone there has been a revolution in thinking, in social attitudes and human values.

Of course, this might be said of any religion or philosophy of life, but the Christian faith has had a unique effect, not just on establishing a civilisation and a culture, but also on the very understanding of what it means to be human and of our position and purpose in this creation.

Think of that strange encounter today in the Acts of the Apostles where, at Philippi, St Paul casts out a spirit of divination from a slave girl who, much to Paul’s annoyance, could clearly perceive who he and Silas were. Clearly, St Paul had no need of free publicity, especially from the demons! But already we see here the unravelling of paganism and superstition. Not that such beliefs disappeared completely among those poorly catechised in Christianity, and surely, we see the same paganism re-emerging all around us once again in our own day.

In days of the Tudor, Queen Elizabeth I, it was an act of treason to cast the sovereign’s horoscope: not that astrology was illegal - the Tudors believed in it - but for what the crown saw as being reasons of national security. All the while, in fact, Elizabeth Tudor had her own astrologer, the famous Alchemist, Dr Dee. From the earliest days of our faith divination has been regarded as sinful: a Christian who thinks he sees his future in

reading his horoscope has, clearly, not yet acquired the mind of Christ.

And in the gospel today we see what it means to encounter Christ, whether we came to Him through what that slave girl called, the servants of the Most High God, or as in the story of the man born blind, by a direct experience of Christ Himself. Whoever those servants of the Most High were in our own life: a good Christian home, a friend, a stranger, a pastor or teacher, or whether we first heard the gospel through a church congregation, the living body of Christ, in the gospel today we see the epitome of what we mean by enlightenment: someone coming alive through the light of Christ.

In a homily on spiritual blindness, St Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724–1783) teaches that we have spiritual eyes as well as physical. Bishop Tikhon says, 'Whatever physical darkness is for the eyes, so is sin for the human soul. The spiritual darkness so darkens and blinds the eyes of the soul, that the sinner walks like the blind: he doesn't know where the path leads him; he doesn't see before him the torment of an eternal death in which he might fall; he doesn't distinguish between vice and virtue, evil from good, truth from lies, true good fortune from evil fortune, and, thus seeing, he does not see and acts by touching like the blind.'

We can learn from this that when we fall into sin, it is as if we were falling into the dirt once again; like that mud which, symbolically, Christ put onto the blind man's eyes, we too have to be washed, once again. This is why Confession is often referred to in the Orthodox Church as a second baptism. Not that you can be baptised twice, but the mystery of confession and absolution restores that washed, enlightened state that was ours when we were first baptised. No wonder (as we heard two weeks ago) that Christ said to the paralytic He had cured at the sheep's pool, 'See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.' (Jn.5:14)

We, of course, live in an age, and a location, where all of this is being unravelled. Where on other continents people are turning to Christ, here, they are largely turning their backs on Him. For here, enlightenment means not the opening of our spiritual eyes, but the concentration of one's gaze on the material world, the mundane, the secular, the physical realities, on that which is transient and is passing away; where even much education has come to mean the manipulation of once-enquiring minds and the indoctrination with anything that might undermine a Christian culture and civilisation. How ironic that, in expunging Christianity from public sphere in the western world, the fruit harvested from all this so-called progress has been the perversion of morality and a reversion to paganism.

But even if the mud is once again smeared over the eyes; even if the darkness is growing, in no way should we despair, for that would be to lose our faith; that would mean being led into temptation, against which we pray daily. The catechumens are still coming to Christ, and as in Elijah's day God had 'reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.' (1/3 Kgs.19:18) We are bold, we are confident to say this, for we are still founded on the Rock: the firm foundation of Christ's teaching, and the direct witness of the apostles themselves. As Our Lord says in St Matthew's gospel, 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.' [Matt.16:18]

Yet for this to be so, each of us must ask himself how much of our religion is only on the surface; skin-deep, only. We might grow indignant when we see the unravelling of those past glories that made up a Christian culture, but as in the past, so now: there are plenty for whom Christianity is but a culture, a kind of civilisation, a comfortable identity, and that is all! But where is the witness, where is the ascetic struggle; why are they not here, with us, today at the Liturgy? Nominal

Christianity will not save their souls, nor will it promote the re-Christening, the re-hallowing of western Europe, as they see their children gradually absorbing the spirit of this age, exchanging their inheritance like Esau for a mess of pottage.

But for us, meanwhile, these gospel readings we hear, Sunday by Sunday, through the season of Pascha are there, like those, beforehand, throughout the Great Fast, to reflect the experience of the catechumens of the Church, and to remind us, to put back in our minds, again and again the experience of our own encounter and enlightenment in Christ.

Herein lies the problem for the people of our own day, if they have any encounter with Christ at all. They quite admire Christ as an historic character. They might appreciate His message for the world, His teaching on loving one another; His acts of kindness and mercy. For them He was rather like those other great teachers of mankind throughout history. The problem for them is that He would not stay dead; what bothers them about Him is His resurrection. If only he had remained in the tomb, He would not actually be there to annoy them! That's the problem with the resurrection of Christ in the current age: belief in it forces us to change, to deny ourselves, to repent, to change our minds, to wage war against the passions, to be enlightened with the mind of Christ: a disturbing message for those of such fragile sensibilities who, ironically, regard themselves as woke. And there's a fancy piece of footwork by the devil!

We, meanwhile, cannot answer for the whole of Christian history, but we can still strive for our own salvation, our first and highest spiritual duty. As Our Lord says, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.' [Matt.6:33] This remaining enlightened, what the spiritual fathers of the 'Philokalia' call, vigilance or watchfulness, this attention to the health of our spiritual eyes, requires that we learn and absorb the mind of Christ; that we know our faith; that we take seriously our own, personal struggle against sin; that our own vision is clear and

kept washed from the dirt, as Paul tells the Romans, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.' [Rom.12:2]

'Do you believe in the Son of God?' Jesus asked the man born blind. We who believe in the risen Lord; we who have been enlightened since our own baptism; who encounter Him, especially here in the mystery of the Holy Gifts, we must also confess that we have seen Him, that we know Him, and that it is He who speaks to us, and that we worship Him.