

‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful.’

1] It might be considered strange that what we have just heard from chapter ten of St Luke’s gospel is the standard gospel for feasts of the Theotokos. After all, Our Lady is not even mentioned and, in fact, we hear of an entirely different Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus of Bethany. Moreover, there are even two verses added from chapter eleven that seem to downgrade the respect and honour due to motherhood itself. Yet, here, Our Lord is not disparaging the kindly meant comments from the woman in the crowd, rather, He teaches that the real source of blessing is in keeping the word of God. ‘One thing is needful.’

2] The old chosen people of God might rejoice in their honour and status; that is, their descent from Abraham; that Jewishness traced its origins through Sarah’s line of descent. But any nation on earth might have been chosen. But what mattered was that to them had been given the Torah, the liturgy of the old covenant, the prophetic utterances, even the temple in Jerusalem, God’s very footstool on earth, where His glory dwelt. Yet Christ said that God could raise up children for Abraham from the stones that lay along the road (Lk.3:8). The question was whether they kept the word of God? ‘One thing is needful.’

3] But delve deeper into the meaning of these words that Luke records for us, and you will see how all these mysteries are fulfilled in the life and the falling asleep of Our Lord’s holy mother. For apart from what we read in the birth stories in Matthew and Luke, the Theotokos makes very few appearances in the gospel narratives. In one instance, when she comes with the family in order to talk with her son, Christ appears to rebuff her, reaffirming the same theme: ‘My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it.’ [Lk.8:21] Yet the last we hear of Our Lady in the pages of the New Testament is among the apostles at Jerusalem continuing, as

Luke says in Acts (1:14), with one accord in prayer and supplication. 'One thing is needful.'

4] The rest of Mary's life comes to us in Holy Tradition, the mind and memory of Christ's Church. But be careful, lest any be tempted to dismiss all that as only legend: who can acquire a legend save those who are legendary, as we say; those who are worthy? So it is that we know of a synaxis, a gathering of the apostles, to bury her body when she had fallen asleep in the Lord, and of their discovering that even her body, as well as her soul, had been received into the kingdom of heaven. Herein lies a great mystery, prefigured in Enoch, in Moses and Elijah: Mary already shares in the resurrection of her Son.

5] What else do we see in Our Lady's life but the very embodiment of the true Israel, that is, she is the perfect exemplar of the faithful life; both blessed among women and blessed by all generations of the faithful, Mary personifies all the themes of the Old Testament. Her blessedness, according to the Archangel Gabriel, is not that of a mother who breastfed her infant, as the woman in the crowd thought; Not even that of any woman honoured as the mother of children in a house. But consecrated from childhood, she surpasses the second temple in holiness, manifesting in herself, body and soul, the true temple of the living God, filled with grace and bringing the Christ into the world. Therein lay her exalted status. And we can learn that, in magnifying her with all generations: 'One thing is needful.'

6] From her earliest days, waiting upon God in the temple, the blessed Theotokos learnt how to direct her entire life, her whole being, in one direction, that is, towards her vocation without any equivocation: no going first to bury her father; content to follow the promptings of the Spirit, even if it meant no where to lay her head, when the foxes have holes and the birds their nests. Where we may offer our poor excuses, Mary's life was one that put its hand to the plough and did not look back. We might, instinctively, feel a certain natural sympathy for the Martha's of this world, busying themselves with the practical arrangements, and no one can say these are not important. But when she demands that her sister should leave the feet of the teacher to help in the kitchen, Our Lord reveals that Mary

of Bethany has taken her opportunity and had made the better choice. As the prophet Isaiah says, 'Seek the Lord while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near.' [Is.55:6] I think it was the one-time Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, who said, 'Few things in life matter very much, and most things don't matter at all.' Clearly, 'One thing is needful.'

7] To keep the word of God is the one thing needful, and that is what we see in the mind as well as the womb of the Theotokos: that guarding, that keeping, of the word of God. Mary of Bethany sat at His feet, attentive and drawing in His words; And Mary the Mother of God, of her own will, by her consent, conceived the holy child of the Father, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, Son of the philanthropic God. Thus, not only her soul but even her flesh were consecrated. No wonder that she reflected the same mystery of life eternal that was proclaimed in her Son's rising from the dead. For as the Psalmist says of Christ's resurrection, 'For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption,' [Ps.15:10] so it is likewise prophesied in the Psalms of the dormition of the Theotokos, 'Arise, O Lord, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength.' [Ps131:8]

8] But what of us who must also battle through this world and struggle on our way to the kingdom of heaven? No doubt long before, but certainly for the last seventy years, there have been people whose entire lives have been bombarded with messages and entertaining distractions thanks to the rapidly increasing speed of technological developments, till the noise becomes unbearable. Yet only 'one thing is needful.'

9] There is indeed great irony in the fact that the people of Europe and North America live in the wealthiest, most technically advanced and most provided for society on the planet, heir to the richest cultural inheritance in human history, and still there are restless souls who can only seek to escape through banal entertainment, materialism or substance abuse, whilst troubled and anxious about so many things! But you and I are called to follow St Paul, who writing to the Philippians could say, 'I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.' [Phil.4:11]

10] The famous nineteenth century American naturalist, essayist, poet, and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, abandoned society for a time, moving to Walden Pond to live a simple life in the woods. He explained why he did that, saying, 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.' For him, to be rich was not how many things we own, but how many we can do without! He knew that, 'one thing is needful.'

11] Coming to the feast today through this brief fast, what did we learn about ourselves? How rich are we in the number of things we can do without? Are we poor in spirit and with a superabundance of treasure in the kingdom of heaven, or are we overburdened in our dependence upon the things of this world? Maybe we know a little better now. But let us at least learn now the message of that life; an uncorrupted life in this world, lived in total devotion to the Lord. Whilst she shared our old inheritance, the same nature as Adam, Orthodox Christianity teaches that Our Lady was immaculate, that is, without sins in this world, for she knew no separation, no alienation from the mind of God and thus, fell asleep in the Lord without fear, passing from the earthly to the heavenly life.

12] So where does our fear of death originate? Not from God's creation, but death comes from our sin, and in turn now, the fear of death leads us further to sin. As St John of Kronstadt observed, 'Death shall frighten us so long as we abide in sin.'

13] 'I will both lie down in peace, and sleep,' says the psalmist [Ps.4:8] 'For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.' So how shall we break the vicious cycle and moreover, fall asleep in the peace of the just? Only in so far as we come close to the God-bearer herself, and through her constant prayers, abide in Christ, the one thing that is needful.

