

1] The question for us, the issue with which we are concerned, is not whether human beings evolved over time from apes or not, but rather, whether we live as beasts? Whether we are bound to this fallen world or not; whether we are in the world but not of the world; whether our Christianity is but a thin veneer covering our shame, like the skins given to Adam and Eve in Genesis, hiding our essential paganism? That is our question.

2] If this season of the Great Fast is to be used well; if this time of grace is to profit us, this *kairon*, this opportune moment, to use the Greek, is to have any purpose at all, then the choice lies with each one of us.

3] We know what becomes of all living creatures on this earth. Speaking of the grass of the field, Psalm 90 says, 'In the morning it flourishes and grows up; In the evening it is cut down and withers.' And speaking of the natural cycle that changes all living things, the vesperal Psalm 103, says of God, 'You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth.'

4] This is the way with all plants and animals, that the earth reclaims what it has given, and from what is dissolved in the ground, new forms emerge, to end in dissolution in their turn. So it is that we who exist here, now, might ask ourselves the same question: undoubtedly, we are here, but is that all of our destiny, to amount to no more than a sad mound of earth at our own end?

5] The wages for sin for Adam is death. Sin, which is the pursuit of our own way, rather than the path laid before us by God, corrupts our nature. But although what is earthly in us returns to the elements from which it was taken, the soul of man remains for ever, to face the consequences of what we have done in this life, for good or ill. We are told in the book of Genesis, that our form was taken from the dust

of the ground, and into our nostrils God breathed the breath of life to become living beings. (Gen. 2:7) But the problem for so many of us on this earth is that our understanding of what constitutes Life has become darkened. The question for us is not whether human beings evolved over time from apes or not, but rather, whether we live as beasts?

6] Though in our quieter moments we might reflect on these things, most of humanity, for most of the time, inevitably drifts along through this life, drifting, rather than seeking. In the face of a seemingly boundless and random universe their existence must be rendered meaningless in the end, and most will try their best to ignore the only destiny that they might have foreseen: that the ultimate goal is the grave.

7] I have great respect for Science, for the pursuit of knowledge about this physical universe. But in the end, such a pursuit must become limited in its achievements. Science may well preserve our time for a while in this life, but not for ever. Science may ask whether time and space are infinite or not; how subatomic particles might be identified; how energy might be extracted from nuclear fusion. But it cannot respond, it can only be silent, before the apparent meaninglessness of human life, even the life of the scientist who delves into such questions.

8] But what of all those named in the epistle this morning, those saints of the Old Testament who were aware that, despite their own mortality, they could strive through great suffering for something better. And even then they had to wait for the fulness of the revelation of glory, until they were joined to us in the dispensation of salvation. 'And all these, having obtained a witness through their faith, did not receive the promise, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.'

9] Whereas the scientist is absorbed in the forms and workings of this creation, it is the philosopher who must sift through our experience for any hint of meaning. The poet, Philip Larkin, although a non-believer, could still contemplate a church building, as a

manifestation of something beyond that usual, mundane course of life. In his poem called 'Church Going,' he writes,

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet...
...Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in, If only that
so many dead lie round.

10] Yes, this place is serious earth. We have come here to be serious in this season of the Great Fast, a serious time. Knowing that so many dead lie round, we have gravitated to this ground, where it is proper to grow wise in.

11] We must not become fooled by the culture around us. The antidote to the revelation that we have received is the addiction to what is so readily offered by this world, the pursuit of pleasure, power and wealth. Very early in life we can become fixated on these things; so many distractions create a noise that absorbs our attention. They are everywhere, specially in these days of ubiquitous media to which so many have become almost enslaved. How easy it has become for the Evil One, our adversary, to employ our own technology against us, to block out our real need for reflection and prayer, to turn the poetic mind to mere prose, to sink down into an unserious life, in order that people may not ask the question, not whether human beings evolved over time from apes or not, but rather, whether we live as beasts?

12] It was among a distracted people, a people oppressed by conquerors, a people divided into factions and parties, God's old elected people, the Jews, that He came who first breathed Life into the earth from which we were taken. 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Nathaniel asks, with a hint of world-weary sarcasm. 'Come and see,' Philip replies.

13] So it is that we who have come and seen and moreover, have believed, are compelled to use well this season of grace. There is much that we must do; there are duties and obligations to which we

are bound to attend. There are many concerns, burdens and anxieties that, obviously, draw our attention at this time. But let us not become distracted by peripheral things. The three ascetic disciplines that we take up at this time, of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, will give the soul command over the body, as long as we do not lose heart. For too long our brains and bodies have been given free rein, like spoiled children who have never been corrected. And the schism that is there since our Fall, between the soul and the body, makes us the victims of our own appetites, whose indulgence we imagine to be freedom when, in fact, it is slavery.

14] But this is the season of the soul, and the mind, the highest property of the soul. And that Christian mind, that mind of Christ that we have through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, must take the lead.

15] And today, that mind that takes us to the commemoration of the restoration of the holy icons, also celebrates the restoration of the image and likeness of God within ourselves. These holy images are not just accidental reflections of their prototypes. All that we do religiously: the signing of the cross, the repetitive calendar of feasts and fasts, the incense, the icons and vestments and prayers, the serious house of our church building, all serve to connect us mystically to God's kingdom.

16] On Lenten Sundays, we offer the Liturgy of St Basil. Towards the end of the service, after the prayer on the Amvon, O Lord, who blessest those who bless Thee..., the priest goes to the prothesis table and prays quietly on behalf of all, saying, The Mystery of Thy Dispensation, O Christ our God, hath been accomplished and perfected, as far as is in our power, for we have had the memorial of Thy death, we have seen the type of Thy resurrection, we have been filled with Thine unending life, we have enjoyed Thine inexhaustible delight, which also in the age to come be well-pleased to vouchsafe us all. What we do in the Liturgy is connected with our whole endeavour in Christ. As far as is in our power, our part is to offer the Liturgy to the glory of God, and to strive through asceticism that Christ may be formed in us. And in turn, by His grace, as far as lies in His power, may what He has begun in us be accomplished and perfected Amen.