

March 27th 2022
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

Third Sunday of Great Lent

1] A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to watch on television the 1949 film, *The Third Man*, based on the short novel by Graham Greene. I had never been able to see the whole film, straight through before, and it is, of course, a classic of British cinematography. The film, which many of you will know, I am sure, is set in Vienna, just after the Second World War. An American Holly Martins, arrives in the city to work for his old his friend, Harry Lime, played by Orson Welles, but learns that Lime has died. In fact, Harry Lime has faked his death in order to continue his criminal life as a racketeer on the black market.

2] At one point, Holly Martins catches up with his old friend, Harry Lime, and they begin a conversation. Here, Orson Welles puts words into the mouth of his character, Harry Lime, that the author, Graham Greene did not write in the original story. Harry Lime, trying to justify his crimes to his friend makes an interesting observation. He says, 'In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace. And what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.' In fact, the cuckoo clock was invented in Germany, but we can forgive Orson Welles his error yet still understand the point he was making. It must strike us at first as ironic, but it seems to be a law in this fallen creation that great art comes out of struggle.

3] The same is true if we recall the recent protests in my home city of Bristol, where they have now renamed the Colston Hall because Edward Colston was involved in the slave trade. Yet I recall in my younger days going to that concert hall to hear so many great Blues and Jazz musicians from America. None of that music, none of that culture would have existed if it had not been for terrible suffering.

4] This is not to say that any of this pain and struggle can therefore be justified. How would one weigh in the balance the appreciation of sublime art and beauty against human degradation and suffering? In

the great Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky has the character called Ivan, who has rejected God and his Creation. Ivan tells the story of the Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition. He is interrogating Jesus who has returned to the earth. The Grand Inquisitor says that they have taken what Christ rejected: all the kingdoms of the earth [Matt.4:8-10] so that they could plan for the universal happiness of man. 'We took from [Satan] Rome and the sword of Caesar,' says the Grand Inquisitor. 'And proclaimed ourselves sole rulers of the earth...We shall triumph and shall be Caesars.'

5] In contrast, Dostoyevsky also gives us the Starets, the spiritual father, Zosima, based in part on St Tikhon of Zadonsk. Zosima teaches everyone must forgive the sins of others, yet this can only be done through admitting our own sins and our own guilt before others. He explains that no sin, no matter who commits it, is done in isolation. As if to shock us out of any self-righteousness, Fr Zosima says that everyone is responsible for their neighbour's sins. For since our Fall in Adam, we are all enmeshed in the same web of Sin and besides, we all share the same nature as Adam. You might as well unravel the whole tapestry of Life itself on this planet, for in our interconnectedness we are all involved in the guilt of all, somehow.

6] Today, the third Sunday of Great Lent draws us to the commemoration of the Cross of Christ; the Cross, which is precisely what Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor rejected. The communism that came in the century after Dostoyevsky did indeed engage in a political struggle, revolution and suffering, thinking that through the great art of politics, the perfect society would emerge; what the Poet, T.S Eliot described as people, 'Dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.' Clearly, anyone who creates a perfect human society will end up with a great many cuckoo clocks!

7] But ours is not a political struggle: ours is an ascetic struggle; ours is a spiritual warfare, a constant repentance in order to escape the web of Sin. How we do that is described for us today in the gospel. What is the point of controlling the world around you; what use owning everything there is, at the cost of your soul and not knowing

it is yours? Instead we are told by Our Lord to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him.

8] Think of what we are engaged in at this time: we are seeking to save our souls, not lose them, nor to engage in some exchange for something in this world. It is worth considering for a while what we mean by the word, soul, in our Orthodox understanding of Man. The Greek word used in the New Testament is psyche, from a verb meaning to breathe. In the Genesis story of Creation God breathes the breath of life into his creation, Adam, formed from the earth, so that he becomes a living being [Gen.2:7]. Expressed now in this heavy, carnal body, the soul is our life, and although it is not separate from the body in this world, we know from experience that being fallen creatures, there can be a dissonance, a disharmony between body and soul, especially when in temptation. So the soul is our life, will, experience, memories, consciousness, character. When, in our Orthodox understanding we use the word, person, we do not actually mean the soul. The person, in Greek, Hyposasis, is the particular, individual human being you are, an actual incarnation of the human nature we share.

9] The Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Church spoke of Our Lord's incarnation of the Holy Spirit and the Theotokos, where the second person, that is, hypostasis, of the Trinity, the Son of God, took a human soul and body; one person in two natures, divine and human, without confusion or alteration. He separated the human soul and body by His death on the Cross, but they were reunited in His resurrection, thereby in victory destroying the eternal hold of Death.

10] If these are difficult ideas for us to grasp, we can pray to be led into a clearer knowledge, for we are Chrismated; we have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit who teaches us and leads us into the Truth [1Jn.2:27]. Think what it would be, then, for your soul to be lost in this world. As the Anaphora of St Basil that we offer at this season says, 'We were held, sold into bondage under sin.' Human slavery as practiced in human history from the Bronze age is a terrible and degrading condition. But its roots lie in human slavery to Sin, in which, as Dostoyevsky's Fr Zosima says, we all are complicit.

11] But at the end of this Liturgy there is a procession of the Holy Cross, and we are invited to approach, to draw near and venerate the instrument of our liberation. But in doing this, once again we are advised that in embracing the Cross, we are embracing our own sufferings, whatever they be, and we are taking up the Cross and following after Christ, wherever He may lead us. This is an act of faith: for some, maybe, it might even be hypocrisy to do so, best avoided, perhaps, if they are not quite ready for this.

13] Did you know that in South Korea there is an heretical Protestant sect that proclaims what is called the Prosperity Gospel, believing that financial blessing and physical health can be yours if you pray and, of course, give enough money to their church. This is the gospel of demons; we need not be surprised. Does this mean what we cannot pray for health and peace? Of course we can, but the wisdom of God and the mind of God will often know a better way for us, as he told St Paul after the apostle had prayed three times for deliverance from an affliction, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Cor.12:9)

14] So it is that we follow after Christ, and as the apostle tells us today, 'Let us... draw near with boldness to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help in time of need.' So it is that at this season in the Church, we repent of all things before God and before one another, asking from God and from each other, forgiveness of our own trespasses, untangling ourselves from the web of Sin. And for that we need the grace of God, of which the apostle speaks, that bringing our lenten work to its fulfilment, our ascetic struggles may bear fruit from our prayer, our fasting and our charity. Not the cuckoo clocks of an easy life that leaves the soul deluded in a false salvation, but as St Isaac the Syrian said, 'The way of Christ is a daily cross; no one got to heaven through an easy life.'