

2nd May 2021
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Sunday of Pascha

Our God is the God of Salvation, for Jesus Christ is our Saviour. Throughout this past season, we, the great body of the Orthodox, have taken up the cross and followed Christ, and we passed through the mystery of the Passion to arrive here and enter into the joy of the resurrection.

As we were reminded last night in the catechetical homily of St John Chrysostom, the joy is for everyone, whether we came at the first hour or whether we came at the eleventh. It might well be that our portion of joy is measured by how far we bore the cross in prayer, fasting and almsgiving, but we are, nevertheless, all invited today, and indeed, throughout this paschal time, to enter into the joy of Our Lord.

Our God is the God of Salvation! But here, we must be very clear as to what we mean by that. What are we saying, both to ourselves and to the world, when we say that Jesus Christ is our Saviour? From what are we being saved?

Should we imagine that God is just there for us, to rescue us from the dangers, the suffering, the illnesses, the misfortunes and difficulties of this life, then we have reversed the cosmic order, where God becomes our servant, to do our bidding, rather than we, serving God, to know and to do His will.

Indeed we live alongside our guardian angels, and within the intercession of the saints, but if our idea of salvation is fixated on our well-being in this world, then we have lost sight of the meaning of salvation. St Paul, as ever, is very clear about this: Our salvation is to be found in the resurrection of Christ, for without the resurrection, the cross and the passion of Christ are meaningless, as he tells the Corinthians, 'If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.' [1Cor.15:17-19]

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we shall hear the mocking voices of the worldly minded. That skeptical philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume, asserted that God could not be both all-powerful and all-loving at the same time. If He does not intervene to stop human suffering, then he is either unable to, so He cannot be all-powerful; or he does not want to, so he cannot be all-loving. It is a petulant argument in a world where we are moral agents and have free will, rather than being just toys, manipulated and moved about by the hand of a divine player.

But our God is the God of Salvation! Salvation, that is, from that distortion of our life, that disintegration of mind, body and spirit that makes us the victim of our sins, the sins that we fall into from the terrible realisation of our own mortality. Caught and embroiled in this condition, one from which we cannot rescue ourselves, the worldly mind can only put its trust in systems of philosophy, systems of politics, systems of social order, systems of technology, education and science. But which of these can save from death eternally?

If our faith is in a religion that preserves us here from earthly evil and the troubles of this world, then it is manifestly a failure, for who among us does not suffer? But this is not the purpose of our religion or our faith. Our fall was a fall into death, not just death as a biological process, but that spiritual death, eternal death, that losing of one's very soul. It is that death that would make this life, in the end, meaningless; our own existence no more than a mere flash of light in some infinite space and eternal time.

It is not fear or weakness that drives us to seek salvation, as the world imagines. Fear and weakness before death, indeed, drives us into sin. Rather, it is the weak and the fearful who seek those time-limited consolations and powers and wealth and pleasures in this world. The better part that we have chosen, is to be found in the very restoration, redemption and, in the end, salvation, of what it means to be human, made in the image and likeness of God.

Our God is the God of Salvation! And our seeking salvation is a sign not of weakness and fear, but of our strength and courage; of claiming what God has offered to us in His Son. For the Son stepped

down into this world, into our condition, and through death, a death through which we too shall pass, has made manifest that new Life in God. As St John says in his first epistle, 'The life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us.' [1Jn.1:2]

Our God is the God of Salvation! And He has saved us not by His almighty power, not by exercising His authority, not by bargaining with, or dealing in, this world, but by emptying Himself and entering into our life and into our death: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.' [Jn.1:14]

For Christ, being raised from the dead has trampled down death itself, and for those who have entered into His death through holy baptism, who now live by faith, death will have no more dominion over them than it has over Him.

Our God is the God of Salvation! And that life of salvation is found here, in the Church. Even now in the communion of Christ, through the mystery of the Holy Gifts, we feast already in the kingdom of God, for here we find the everlasting life that St Paul calls, 'peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' [Rom.14:17] For Christ, having risen from the dead, has trodden down death and even those lost in the tombs have heard His voice. And to those still entombed in this world, where death still reigns over them, must hear the words, "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light." [Eph.5:14]

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!