

Sunday after the Elevation
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'For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it.'

There is only one logic that operates in this universe, as far as we know. We can take comfort in that. Looking at the facts, from our own experience in everyday life, most events appear to us as ordered and logical: events happen because of prior causes. If I have ten pounds in a drawer and then put in another ten pounds, I know that, according to the laws of mathematics, I shall have twenty pounds. If, later on, I count my money and find that I have only fifteen pounds, then either, the laws of mathematics have changed or, I have been the victim of theft. Prior knowledge of how the universe works tells me that mathematics is ordered and beautiful, and logical and stable; it does not change: someone has taken five pounds from me!

From the beginning, from the moment of Creation, the laws of physics exercised their authority over time and space and energy. Indeed, the only creation that can possibly exist is one infused with logic. Truly, in our Science, undertaken properly, that is, with humility, Mankind can discover something of the mind of God. As I have told you before, God does not explain the fact of creation - as in that old and tedious dispute between biblical fundamentalist and atheist materialism: rather, it is the other way round, creation explains something of the Creator. As St Paul says to the church at Rome, *'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.'* [Rom.1:20]

St John tells us in the prologue to his gospel that, *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.'* [Jn.1:1-4] That logic which runs through creation is Christ, the *Logos*, the Word of God, the cosmic Christ who orders all things, so as to receive the Holy Spirit who is in all places and fills all things, the giver of life in all creation.

But, as Hamlet tells his friend, *'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'* [Hamlet 1.5.167-8] On this earth the laws of logic prevail, and like all living creatures, our ancient ancestors knew that the name of the game was survival: for anyone who would save his life, he must hunt and gather to stay alive; he must run away from predators too strong for him.

So what is this that we hear in the gospel this morning? *'For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it.'* This is contradictory, this is illogical, surely. Yes, in this world, according to the laws that move the natural man in a fallen world, we are indeed constrained by necessity. So how do we accept this teaching; how does it make any kind of sense, logical creatures that we are?

The answer is, of course, that we are not dealing here with keeping body and soul together; keeping the wolf from the door, as we say. Christ is teaching his disciples how to follow Him into the kingdom of heaven: *'If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.'* The call of the gospel is not to find security in this life: an easy life, a life of comfort, honour, wealth, self-esteem, self justification and happiness. It is not even to live a moral and respectable life, according to whatever the current social mores might dictate. Indeed, in the current age to be Christian is once again becoming despised, just as in the early days of the gospel when Paul could tell the Corinthians that, *'But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.'* [1 Cor.1:27-29]

This current feast is the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. It is exalted, lifted on high, not just to proclaim that Christ has conquered Sin and Death that held power over this life: it is exalted to draw us all to do what Christ commands us to do, yes, to venerate the holy wood of the Cross, *but then* to take it up for ourselves and to follow after Him. What's the use of religious

devotion, of kissing the holy wood, of venerating relics, if there is no conversion of the heart, no repentance, no more ardour and zeal to take the cross upon ourselves? Such a veneration such a greeting is no more than a social nicety, a politeness, like shaking the hand of someone to whom we have been introduced.

The Great Canon of St Andrew of Crete, sung during the Great Fast, is one of the greatest liturgical treasures of the Orthodox Church. It is a profound meditation on repentance based around biblical themes. But it contains a shocking passage, a staggering idea. In the Ninth Ode it says, *'The Law is powerless, the Gospel of no effect, and the whole of Scripture is ignored by thee; the prophets and all the words of the righteous are useless. Thy wounds, my soul, have been multiplied, and there is no physician to heal thee.'* The point is, all our religion, all our spirituality, our beliefs, even our faith, is of no use *if* we do not offer up our *will*, surrender our *will* to God.

We are, after all, not in the business of saving our skins; we are concerned with saving our souls! When we have repented according to the gospel, when faith in Christ has brought us forgiveness and made us stand righteous before the judgement of God, *then*, with a will, we have to take up the cross. Christ calls upon us to deny ourselves, letting go of our very selves - against all that this world has taught us - if we would find, if we have the *will* to find, our true selves. *'Whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it.'* This is the sanctification of the soul, this is eternal life; this is theosis, deification, by grace, partaking in the divine nature.

In the year 681, in response to the Monothelite heresy, the Sixth Ecumenical Council taught that Christ incarnate had *two wills*, one belonging to His divine nature, and one belonging to His human nature. We know of His struggle when he was again, put to temptation, this time in the Garden of Gethsemane: *'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'* [Matt 26:39] In the one person, here, the conflict is seen between His two natures. We have only one nature, our humanity, yet we are being adopted by grace to inherit the divine. But we have free will; God created us with free will; we are not forced to be saved, neither are we created pre-destined to be saved, as Calvin wrongly taught. But having free will, what does it

profit us to seek our own way in this world, if we lose it in the next?

We know well that same conflict, every time we are tempted. Every temptation is a test of our will. Every time we fall, we take those small steps on the way to spiritual death. But we do not accept death, as Fr Alexander reminded us last week. We reject death, and want, in stead, to follow the way that leads to life eternal. Every time we reject temptation we show that we have taken up the cross. If only we could repent, change our minds, yes, and change the very heads that sit on top of our necks and begin to understand the logic of the kingdom of heaven.

Every time we surrender to temptation, from the petty outburst of passions that come almost automatically from the fault-lines in our personalities, to the those gross and mortal sins that tear away the soul from grace, we surrender to an illusionary freedom; one that leads to a dead-end, a cul-de-sac with no other exit than retracing our steps in repentance. God is our judge, not as an earthly magistrate but because He is Life Eternal, the true image of what we were created to be. Each time we fall we cut ourselves off from that possibility. When we prefer our own will to that which leads to eternal communion with the source of life, there is our judgement! But choose life! Moses tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy [30.19]. And here is the paradox, the seeming contradiction to this world's logic: it is in taking up the cross, despite our sloth and gluttony and lust and anger and pride; it is through dying that we trample down death and come to life eternal. As Paul tells the Galatians in today's epistle, *'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me.'*