

25th August 2019  
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

10th After Pentecost

*'Though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.'*

I do not know how St Paul brought the gospel to the city of Corinth. As to where he would begin, his usual practice seemed to involve the local Synagogue of his fellow Jews wherever he went. The synagogue was a unique religious institution in the ancient world; no other religion had anything like it. It seems that the idea of the synagogue began during the exile in Babylon during the sixth century before Christ. Having lost the first temple, the Jewish deportees gathered together to preserve their traditions and edited their sacred writings, putting together the core of what we know as the Old Testament, especially the first five books, or *Torah*.

Certainly by the time of Our Lord the synagogue was not just a place where one worshipped outside the restored temple, but it was called the house of prayer (Bet ha Tefillah); it was not just a cultural meeting place for Jews, but it was the house of assembly (Bet ha Knesset); it was also the house of learning (Bet ha Midrash). It was, as to this day, where Jewish men studied Torah and debated its meaning, and the implications of the commandments for daily life. Here, as Paul knew, was the perfect place to proclaim Christ, as he argued from the scriptures, trying to convince his hearers, that Jesus was the longed-for Messiah.

But beyond this, Paul had been entrusted by the Apostles with a mission to the gentiles. Perhaps he began with those who were called *Theophoboi*, the '*God-fearers*': that is, gentiles who had come to believe in the God of Israel and found spiritual depth in its moral way of life, at a time when Judaism did try to make converts among gentiles, which is not the case now, of course.

Whatever the case, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, sometime around 53-54AD, it is clear that he regarded himself as responsible for converting perhaps most of the people among them, and as having established the church in the city. He regarded himself as their 'father in Christ.' They had now many

spiritual guides, and teachers, he tells them, but it was he who brought them to the Lord through the gospel he preached.

There might well be, of course, many principles in general that we can draw from the scriptures, when it comes to the mission of the Orthodox Church in our own day. But we have to be very, very honest: we live in a very different world now. I am not saying that Paul found it easy, as if he had a ready audience and the perfect cultural setting in which Christ could be preached to the world. He makes it very obvious in that part of the epistle we heard this morning, that apostles find opposition, even beginning with people in the Church itself: '*We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute,*' he complains. And that is apart from what he faces out in the wild world!

One thing, however, needs to be settled from the beginning, we have to put things the correct way round: it is the Church, the Orthodox-Catholic Church, that preaches the gospel; it is not the gospel that proclaims the Church. Our primary task in bringing people to the Church is not to increase the numbers, Sunday by Sunday, standing in the nave - wonderful as that might be; wonderful indeed if we had a congregation each week the size of the one we have at the Paschal Vigil! We are not even inviting people to discover the Liturgy in the first place. We are not aiming to improve their social life, or to give them a sense of purpose; to help them find peace in their hearts; not even to improve their way of life or foster some new sense of identity. Our primary task is to preach the gospel and the gospel is that Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, has defeated sin and death and invites all to repent and seek eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

The Liturgy is beautiful, but it is beautiful not because it is the product of cultured aesthetes and connoisseurs of the fine arts. It is beautiful because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit Himself and is offered in Spirit and in Truth. How could anything that reflects the life of the Kingdom of God not be beautiful? But more than that, its beauty and truth abides because Christ is here: He is among us; He is and ever shall be. But we do not invite people here primarily that they may know beauty, but to find the risen Christ, then the beauty will be their own as well.

People come here, as to any of the churches, for many reasons: for cultural belonging, nostalgia, reminders of home, seeking something deep in their lives, family reasons, seeking the company of other human beings. None of them is a bad reason. But whatever brings us here, let us fix upon the prime objective, for if we do not fix upon the prime objective, then surely those outside these sacred walls will fail to find Christ among us.

Furthermore, late in time now, after so much history has been stacked up, so many years have passed, do not forget that this is a very busy age; these are technologically distracted times. This era, so blessed with available knowledge, so lacking in wisdom, will regard us as something remaining from the distant past, left over from the ancient days. Yes, we should and we do use technology to announce our presence, to proclaim our faith, to put forward our teaching and doctrine. Why would we not? After all, the world wide web is the modern forum, the modern equivalent of the Areopagus where Paul preached in Athens; it is where the people are.

However, we need waste no more time in appealing to the public in general, adapting ourselves to attract groups or types of people, be it youth or age, the financially solvent, the professional classes, the educated, the elite, the poor, the lonely and vulnerable, the incomer or the indigenous, not even the lapsed or the godless, the pagan or the heathen. In short, we are not here to preach to *the public*, we are here to proclaim the risen Christ to people, the very persons whom we encounter every day. As the American Orthodox writer, Frederica Mathewes-Green, recently wrote: *'I don't expect we will be able to reach "the public" for Christ. The time is past for reaching "the public." Now we are going to have to reach "people." One person at a time. Reached by one person at a time.'*

There are indeed those who have been given the apostolic commission to make Christ and His teaching known, as was recorded of the apostles at the end of St Matthew's gospel. There are indeed those able to broadcast the gospel, like a farmer broadcasting seed into a ploughed field, using all the latest technological means. But no one scatters seed without preparing the ground and ploughing the field, which is where each one of us comes in. *'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has*

*been making it grow,*' St Paul also tells the Corinthians (1Cor.3:6) but before any of that, the grace of God calls us all to put our hands to the plough.

Each one of us, therefore, needs to examine how we have witnessed to Christ outside these sheltering walls. If we claim to be the ones who belong to Christ, what kind of example do we set, even to our own children? Is it obvious to those whom we encounter that we are Christian, in our comportment, our behaviour, our way of life, our speaking, our thinking; that our citizenship is not of this world? We need not waste time trying to 'make the world a better place' like the virtue signallers. As ever, we begin with examining and correcting ourselves in the first place.

St Peter writes, *'in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.'* (1 Pet.3:15) Remember, honey attracts more than vinegar, as they say. In talking with the heterodox, do not condemn their errors but seek out from them what they have taken from our original Orthodox Christianity and share in common with us. Do not get into pointless arguments with unbelievers but ask them questions so that they must justify their position.

In the gospel today the disciples fail to heal an epileptic. Lest we also prove to be part of a 'faithless and perverse generation,' let us be wise in dealing with this age. If this, likewise, takes a great deal of prayer and fasting to cast out the demons, so be it. But whoever we are, whatever our office or role or ministry in the Church, our primary objective is not just our own salvation, but also to be ready to reveal the grace of God in Christ to all we meet: the same Christ who is risen from the dead and has defeated sin and death, and who invites all to repent and seek eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.