

The undeniably strange, not to say ridiculous world, of identity politics should not really surprise us. The fact that all sorts of people feel they have to present a chosen version of what and who they are, whether it be some fashionable activism, a political wing, a chosen 'gender' (as they call it) a spiritual preference, a 'foody' life-style, whatever it be, need not concern us in the end. All this is the natural outcome, the present state of a process that began at the Reformation in western Europe. I mean, of course, the cult of the isolated, autonomous individual human being; self-made, detached, free from family, history and tradition; Secular Man.

But human beings are naturally social, and such individuals naturally find themselves linking up with like-minded individuals to form what they call the 'such-and-such community,' usually with some grievance against the rest of us, and demanding compensation to ease the pain of their victimhood.

The origins of this cult of the lone individual during the Protestant Reformation can be seen, for example, in the work of man like Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer was Henry VIII's Archbishop of Canterbury in the sixteenth century. For him, Holy Communion was a purely mental activity that occurred in the true believer's mind and not directly connected with the bread and wine received during the service. Receiving '*your communion*,' in Protestant thinking, was therefore an individual pious act to remind the individual that he had been saved through the death of Christ. This way of thinking has had a profound effect, especially upon the British character, over the last five hundred years.

But profound also is the difference in the way in which we, as Orthodox Christians, think of ourselves. In fact, it is only in Western Europe that this way of thinking was developed; mostly, societies in history have not really thought of their members as lone, isolated, self-affirming and self-authenticating individuals.

5] In the Old Testament Man is seen not just as an individual, but always in relationship with *the other*, as in the story of Adam for whom it was not good to be alone, but found his completion in Eve. The ancient Israelites thought of a man indeed as a series of

relationships, like concentric circles: he existed relating firstly to his wife, then his children, then his servants and slaves, then his cattle and other animals, and the finally, his material possessions. This was a man's *house* and scholars call this a '*corporate personality*.' So when a servant is sent by his master with a message to someone else, he speaks in the first person, as if he were his master. We see this time and again in the Bible, which depicts God and his angels in the same unified way. When in the Book of Judges, Manoah and his wife are told by the Angel of the Lord that they are to have the child, Samson, Manoah exclaims, '*We shall surely die, because we have seen God!*' To his mind seeing the angel is the same thing as seeing God, for the angel was, as it were, an extension of God Himself; a part of the household of God.

Understanding this, we can appreciate better what St Paul is telling the Corinthians today in the Apostolos. Just before the passage we heard Paul writes, '*Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. [2 Cor.5:20]*

An Ambassador, as we know, represents his country abroad to another country. St Paul, though, is thinking here in terms of the ambassador in the Roman Empire; someone commissioned on behalf of the Roman Senate to negotiate or, more likely, to lay down terms for peace, making very clear the power of the Roman legions. The Roman historian, Tacitus, writes of the chieftain, Calgacus, addressing his fellow Caledonians about the Romans, *ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* - '*they create a desert and call it peace.*'

But Paul is not the ambassador of an imperial and brutal superpower, but, rather, the spokesman of a loving Father and the God of peace. As an apostle, like all the apostles, he, Paul, is entrusted with a message, the gospel, the good news, that this life, this time that we have left to us, is now what the Bible calls, *the year of the Lord's favour*. He entreats the Corinthian Christians not to accept God's grace in vain. '*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*'

And how does Paul demonstrate that he and his fellow apostles are truly ambassadors of Christ, the God who suffered on the cross? Well, not like the Roman ambassadors, travelling

under a truce for safe passage and protected by a troop of soldiers, received with dignity and respect. In Paul's ambassadorial missions he tells us he went through great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labours, watching, hunger. Truly, the disciple will become like his master, as Christ tells us in Matthew's gospel, *'It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!'* [Matt.10:25]

Indeed, The apostle so identifies himself as part of the household of God and with the one whom he preaches, that he can tell the Galatians, *'But you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.'* [Gal.4:14] But two thousand years and nothings is altered; two millennia and nothing has changed. We, too, have that same identity. We, the household of faith, the icon of the kingdom, the bulwark of the truth of salvation, the very bride of Christ, the Holy Orthodox and Apostolic Church, we too are Christ's, in that we belong to Him and, by implication, are also *christs*, that is, anointed ones, carrying on the same mission to the world and the same ministry to one another.

If we could but understand and accept ourselves to be not isolated, self justifying, self-affirming individual units of fractured humanity, but rather, brothers and sisters in the house of God, we too should not accept the grace of God in vain. That same grace appeared at the city of Nain today in the gospel. A widow's grief and isolation in this world is reversed; for a time, even in this age, the kingdom is prefigured when a young man is raised from the dead; a sign and foretaste of that resurrection which is the world to come.

Just as the ancient Hebrews thought of a man as a series of concentric circles, all inter-related to the others, so it is with us in Christ: Christ at the centre, so that the closer we come to him, the more we become like Him, the Master. And to become like Him involves us in the same apostolic mission, and involves us in undertaking the same path as the apostles trod. As Paul says, *'Treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not*

*killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'*

The Orthodox theologian, Fr Alexander Schmemmen said that in the Holy Mysteries of the Church, the sacraments, things are not so much changed into something else but rather, revealed as what they truly can be. In my own life in Christ, blessed in having received holy orders, my ministry, as with that of my fellow concelebrants in the altar, can only be proved authentic in as much as I relate to and minister to you; no man can be truly a priest to serve his own vanity. And you in turn today will feed upon the grace that is in the Holy Gifts in communion - not the private, isolated, solitary communion in the mind of the individual believer with his god, as the Protestant Reformers wrongly taught, but in communion also with one another in this body, the Church, *discerning the body, as Paul says*, and showing forth and sharing, even now, the mystical supper of the Lamb that is to come. Here we manifest our common faith, our communion with God and one another; here we are revealed as we truly are.

In the Anaphora of St Basil, when the priest prays for the descent of the Holy Spirit upon us and upon the antitypes of the offered body and blood of Christ, he asks that they be blessed and hallowed and *shown to be* what they truly are. May that same grace of God, cherished and guarded by us all, not be given in vain, but make known to us what we truly become in Christ.