

The New Testament takes its name from the idea that it completes and fulfils the *Old* Covenant, or rather the *covenants* (plural) made by God with the Forefathers and Patriarchs and finally, with Moses. But it is also new because it records the witness of the apostles concerning the good news of the renewal of our humanity in Christ.

Yet among the new ideas recorded in the New Testament there is one which, if I am honest seems, on the surface, to be very strange indeed. In chapter fifteen of his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St Paul repeats to them not only the true story of the resurrection of Christ but also, what it means for our own salvation. Then, in verse twenty-nine, whilst dealing with those who have doubts about the General Resurrection, he mentions, as if in passing, this intriguing idea: '*Otherwise, what will they do who are baptised **for the dead**, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptised for the dead?*' [1 Cor.15:29]

Whatever could he mean: being baptised *for the dead*? It is a curious idea. It appears that the Corinthian Christians themselves had invented the practice of being baptised by proxy for their relatives who had died before they had heard the preaching of the gospel, no doubt in the hope that God, retrospectively, would have mercy on their souls. In mentioning this, Paul is not giving his approval of the practice, only pointing out that it presupposed the General Resurrection and the Judgement.

Being baptised for the dead was never part of the Apostolic Tradition, though the early Fathers mention it, disapprovingly, as being done by certain heretical gnostic groups. Baptism, itself, is about *incorporation*; becoming part of the body of Christ and of entering into the faith of the Church. This is why we baptise infants and always have done, and why the sponsors bear such an awesome responsibility for those little souls as they grow in Christ.

But baptised *for the dead*? Where there is has been no repentance, there can have been no authentic turning to Christ. For those dead, the lost souls, it has been too late. And yet, as St Peter tells us, *‘For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, **by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient.**’* [1 Pet.3:18-20] So, as for the destiny of those who passed away before knowing the gospel, let us leave them in the hands of God.

But at least that Corinthian idea demonstrated a real concern for their departed and beloved ones. For us too there is that living contact, that communion with and prayer for our own beloved dead who have fallen asleep in the Lord and are still alive in Him: witness the candles that burn before the cross over there! When you think deeply about what we are: an arrangement of atoms, holding within these self-conscious thoughts. And where else can these thoughts be but in the Mind of God without whom we would have no being at all, unless He remember us. *Remember us, indeed, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom!*

Some might suppose, then, that having heard today’s gospel reading, that the rich man in the parable was of a far more practical turn of mind; he, for all his indulgent pleasures and utterly selfish life was, at least, concerned for his brothers who were still in this world: *‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’*

Admirable, perhaps, this filial concern, this family love, yet this comes naturally to us. What does Christ tell us in the Sermon on the Mount? *‘For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?’* [Matt.5:46-47] This rich man is concerned for his brothers now that he is dead: what a contrast with his indifference towards poor Lazarus whilst he was alive!

What may we learn from all this? That the great enemy of our salvation is, indeed, indifference. To be able to pass by the sufferings of others and do nothing, is also to reveal our indifference towards our own salvation. The thought of doing nothing in the face of another's pain is a scandal in the mind of God in whose image each one is created. For our thoughts and words and deeds display to the whole world, and before the Saints and the Holy Incorporeal Ones, whose children we truly are.

The great sin of the rich man in the parable is not the fact of his wealth; it is not the fact of the economic inequality between him and others; it is not even his overindulgence in gastronomy: feasting sumptuously every day; or his expensive taste for sartorial elegance: clothed in purple and fine linen. It is his *indifference* to the plight of poor Lazarus.

When we discover the living God, the communal life of the Blessed, consubstantial and undivided Trinity, we find also our own true nature, the true nature of Mankind, created in the very image of that Triune love. And we come to realise that we were created as personal beings, truly human *only* when we love, as we are loved by God.

We can be trapped in indifference both ways: towards others or towards our own salvation. It matters not a jot to the demons; they are happy to tempt us either way; it is all the same to them. For spiritual lies and falsehoods are meat and drink to the demons. Why did not the rich man in the parable help Lazarus? After all, it is there in the *Old Covenant: love your neighbour as yourself*. Because the demons whisper a lie into the ears: *You're doing just fine; you do enough; there is no need for change*. Our indifference feeds on the passion of Sloth and the idea that we are, after all, OK. As Evagrius of Pontus said, *'In every man self-opinion destroys self-knowledge.'*

On the other hand, there are also those over-careful souls who fret scrupulously and officiously over their salvation, who are also tricked, hearing another lie whispered by the demons: *There's no hope for you; you're damned already; what's the point of bothering with all this striving, this asceticism, this prayer and almsgiving; you'll*

*never make it.* So it is that indifference or despair eat their way into the soul. But both these demonic lies are themselves founded on a false idea. They turn salvation into something that it is not. Salvation is not about me, not about you: it is about being joined to Christ. As Paul says today in the Apostolos: *'God, Who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.'*

If we imagine that our final salvation is just a nice ending that is bound to arrive at the end of the story of our life, we shall become indifferent about our own salvation. We shall also grow to become indifferent to the needs of others as well. And if we imagine that our salvation is too difficult, beyond our strength and hardly worth the effort therefore, we can only fall into ultimate despair. Let us, therefore, be on our guard against the lies, against, on the one hand, indifference towards salvation, both towards our own real humanity and the real humanity of others; and on the other hand, that despair that sees salvation as beyond our capability to do anything about it. In the end it is not about us: it is about the faith that is in Christ, through which we are saved; the true Christ, the Orthodox Christ and through no other.