

It is interesting how common adversity and shared suffering bring such different types of people together; seeing someone who endures the same afflictions with which you are burdened can establish a common bond and empathy that under normal circumstances could never happen.

How else can we explain the presence of that Samaritan in Today's gospel? What is he doing there among them? Jesus has been travelling on the border between Samaria, the homeland of the Samaritans, and Galilee, a place where Jews and Gentiles rubbed shoulders and mingled to a certain extent. For the Jews guarded their exclusive identity and certainly despised the Samaritan line, tainted, as they saw it, with other blood since the Assyrian invasion of 722 BC.

We shall presume that the other nine lepers must have been Jews from Galilee: why else did Christ command them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests,' to confirm their cure, if they were not Jews? Yet despite the ancient antipathy between Jew and Samaritan, these lepers band together, enrolling in their ranks one who, if healthy, they would have excluded, but here a shared condition sees them as strange bedfellows.

But once the common illness is taken away, so is the bond between them. We cannot criticise the nine: they did as they were told by Christ, seeking the confirmation of their cleansing by one of the Levitical priests in accordance with the teaching in the fourteenth chapter of the book of Leviticus. Yet the tenth, the Samaritan, showed he was different in ways other than just his racial origins. His cleansing results in the outpouring of praise and thanksgiving to God, he even falls at Jesus' feet. But this is not just good manners on display. This story of the healing of ten lepers is not included in the gospel to teach us good manners; this is not etiquette and advice for the good Christian gentleman. This is the revelation of the kingdom of God!

The intimate and mystical connection between our diseases and our falling into Sin, has long been known. From those crude ideas, born from a guilty conscience, even bordering on superstition, that each ailment is a direct punishment on the one hand, to the truth that our sufferings are the signs and intimations of our fallen state, exiled from paradise on the other, all the ills that flesh is heir to call us to repentance.

In the story of the Fall in the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they discover their nakedness. But this is more than just that social embarrassment: this is about the loss of their innocence, so that the Lord must cover them with skins. But let's read beyond the surface meaning here. This is more than just outward adornment; this is about acquiring the heavy flesh of this world, for they have been stripped of their former robe, the lost glory that was theirs in Paradise. Losing the likeness of God, they evolve into the creatures that we are, hiding the glorious image of God under skin.

How cruel then that this same skin itself should become diseased in its turn; that these ten lepers should be not only exiles from Paradise, but exiles also from health; exiles even from human society and classified as unclean outcasts! But like Naaman the Syrian, who on the prophet Elisha's instructions was cleansed in the Jordan of his leprosy [2/4Kingdoms 5] so these ten are restored by the One who by His baptism has revealed the sanctification all waters on the earth. And the restoration and healing of these lepers is a sign not just of the obvious healing of their bodies; not only of their reincorporation into human society; but of that invitation to return to Paradise, to reveal, even now on earth in the days of our flesh, the True Glory - let me translate that as Orthodoxy - the glory that is ours as a gift in Creation. Yes, Adam was created in Orthodoxy and the whole mystery of Christ's dispensation in the New Covenant was to reveal that glory in us.

We have just celebrated Theophany, the revealing of God in the Baptism of Christ. That revelation touches and cleanses every-

thing in our lives, our dwellings, our souls and bodies. And this gospel of the cleanings of the ten lepers invites us to live in authenticity; to live out what we have become.

For we too have been cleansed, cured of a spiritual leprosy. We too who were cast out of paradise as unclean, have been shown the way back. Even the very skin that must cover the nakedness of our souls in this world has been sanctified as we await the redemption of our bodies. As St Paul tells the church at Ephesus, 'Remember that... you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise... But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.' [Eph.2:12-15]

It is therefore entirely fitting that we be here today, as we should be on the Lord's Day. We do not have to give proof of our restoration according to the Law of Moses, as did the nine, but like the Samaritan, we return to Christ to offer our eucharist, our thanksgiving for Redemption, our incorporation into that new humanity, measured by the stature of the fulness of Christ. That is why we offer the Divine Liturgy and must be here, Sunday by Sunday: it is what defines us; it is what we do as Orthodox Christian people. Here, where God has his presence among us on earth, we live and move and have our being. For Orthodoxy is not just a system of Christian belief, not just a way of life: it is what we are, the true glory of God.

The alternative is to return again to that old humanity, to be absorbed back once again into the world, to that decaying humanity that should have been put to death in us, as Paul tells the Colossians today. Here in the mystery of the Holy Gifts we receive grace to overcome passion, evil desire and the idolatry of covetousness; to put aside anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk. For we shall carry around with us Christ in all His fulness, not just in our souls but in our bodies too, for which constant renewal we raise thanksgiving to God.

So like fish in water, like birds in the air, the Liturgy is our natural environment. For we are that redeemed humanity, the new Israel, a holy nation, being sanctified from glory to glory and it is here that we continually offer thanksgiving for our salvation. Unless constrained, why else would we stay away, unless we hold this redemption so lightly, unless we really don't believe in the power of this redemption. We know well what happens to fish out of water or birds that can no longer fly.

As those of us, especially who are older, whose baptism into Christ was many years ago, we know that although the old skin may be ready to be cast off, we continue in hope, as Paul tells the Corinthians, 'Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. [2 Cor.4:16-18]