

**What shall we do? What are we doing?
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**Thirteenth Sunday of Luke
24th November 2019**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God. Amen.

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when they [the crowd] heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

It is a natural thing to ask, “what shall we do?” In this quotation, from the second chapter of the Book of Acts, the Evangelist Luke records the end of St Peter’s first sermon and the response of the crowd. The crowd are saying, “we believe you, that Jesus is the Christ, what should we do now?” You can read the Apostle Peter’s response from verse 38.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what shall *we* do? What are we *doing*? We have heard the Good News, the saving death and resurrection of Christ and that as many as believe in his name shall have eternal life. We can believe the truthfulness of this word: eye-witnesses of the risen Christ were willing to endure torture and the most horrible deaths for this truth – not merely a small band of a dozen men but the Apostle Paul tells us over five hundred saw him risen from the dead, many of whom became martyrs. This number has been added to down twenty centuries where countless numbers have been so alive to Christ in their lives they have added their own witness, their own martyrdom, to the evidence. What shall *we* do? What are we *doing*?

A ruler came to Christ and asked him this important question, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” This is a seemingly simple question. We do not know why he came, what was his purpose nor what was his “angle.” It would seem he wants a way to set aside the Law of Moses so he could have an easier life: “I am not content with the Law,” he reasons to himself, “I will ask *this* teacher to give me a more manageable rule.”

Do you, my brothers and sisters, do the same? Do I? Do we look for the Church, the elder, the priest, who will give us the easiest route to Heaven? Do we “shop around” in the spiritual life to find the easy route? This ruler appears to be doing so: “this rabbi is preaching an easier way to get to God, I’ll ask him and check out the difference.” Are we doing the same?

The Lord answers the ruler but in a way he does not expect. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” He does not ignore the ruler’s comment – and thereby enflaming the Pharisees who would murmur “Look, he is accepting praise only worthy of God!” – nor does he deny it; instead, the Lord points to its true meaning, “you have called me Good, and that is appropriate, because I am the Son of God the Father.” The ruler’s flattery of Christ directs us to have faith in him.

The Lord continues: "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.'" The Lord says to him, "You know what you should do, do not come to me and look for a way out, an easier way, a more lazy way. You know what you should do." And he says the same to us! My brothers and sisters, we are taught again and again what we are to do: ours is only to *accept* it, to *take* it and to *do* it.

What happens next? This shows that we should be careful for what we ask. The ruler responds, as if to justify himself, to show that he has a reason for the question, "All these I have observed from my youth." We should, dear brothers and sisters, accept this statement: he had kept the Law of Moses perfectly from his youth until that very day. But this exchange tells us that he is, perhaps, tired of it: "Do I really have to remain faithful in marriage? What if I kill someone by *accident*? If I *really* need it, is it *alright* to take it? Are *little* lies okay? What about when my parents are really *demanding*?" He is trying to find the boundaries of the Law: "exactly how much do I have to love God?"

And the Lord replies with two commands, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." We could summarise this as "sell all and follow me." Christ tells this ruler, and he tells us, that the way of the Gospel is not an easier way than the Law of Moses, nor is it easier than other religions or philosophical systems. All human religions say,

"Do this, this and this" and you will be a member in good standing, "Do this, this and this" and our god will protect you from poverty, hunger, defeat in war and natural disasters.

Religions are easy, you follow the rules and hope for the results. Even atheists believe the same, "Do this, this and this for a better life, a healthier life, a more fulfilled life, a more peaceful life." Religions are easy. And the ruler came to the Lord looking for an easier religion, one which would impinge less on the rest of his life. "All these I have observed from my youth: now give me a less challenging regime."

Religions, and I include atheism, promise us much but they have not solved the problem of death. Whichever religion you choose, whatever benefits it brings to your life, you will still die. Some may have a concept of an after-life but these are somewhat nebulous, a release of a spirit from the bonds of a body as if our body is unimportant and something to be discarded.

The Gospel is different. It is in this sense that the Gospel is the end of religion because it transcends religion. The Gospel says that no matter how "religious" you are you cannot expect entry into the Kingdom of God. The Gospel says that even when we die, which *will* happen to us all unless the Lord returns first: even when we die we do not die, that your body is integral to who you are as a person. The Gospel is not a set of teachings but is faith, hope and trust in a person, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the incarnation of God's teaching to

us, he is the Word of God. The Gospel is not easier than religions, as thought the ruler in today's reading: the Gospel is more challenging because it is not only your "religious self" which you need to offer but your entire self.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what shall *we* do? What are we *doing*? The Lord told the ruler what to do, "sell all and follow me:" and he says the same to us: for how many of us do not own our possessions but our possessions own us? Are your possessions for the glory of God or the glory of you? Am I the same? Do we see all our life as an opportunity to love God or to love ourselves? The Lord tells us not to be possessed by our possessions, but to be free. For some, like this ruler, it may mean to sell all for the sake of the Gospel.

The ruler asked for what he should do and the Lord gave him instructions. There are some outside the Orthodox Church who try to contrast *works* with *faith* – they would say that salvation is achieved solely through *faith* in Christ. They would take a verse we have heard in today's epistle reading as a justification of this view, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast." For them, the interpretation is clear: it is only what we believe, not what we do, which leads to us being saved. The Orthodox Church, however, takes Scripture as a whole and this is not the example given: the ruler was not instructed merely to believe in Christ, but to do something about it: "If you believe I am the Good Teacher," he is saying to the ruler, "then sell all you have and follow me." The Orthodox Church would read the words of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, "not because of works, lest any man should boast," and add to them the very next verse, "For, we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Created to *do* good, to *act*. So, for the Orthodox, we are saved by our *Faith* but the *sign*, the *symbol*, the *truth* of our *faith* is seen in what we *do*. "Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor," the Lord tells the ruler, "and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

"But when he," the ruler, "heard this he became sad, for he was very rich." And the Lord offers some consolation, "'Then who can be saved?' But he said, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God.'" For the Lord receives even our *weaknesses*, when we *accept* them *yet still offer* them to God, and blesses us for them.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what shall *we* do? What are we *doing*? Do not withhold anything from the Lord, offer not only our "religious selves" but our entire selves to the Lord. The Lord has blessed us with many blessings, offer those blessings back to him and to our neighbours, that we may truly not be possessed by our possessions but live our lives as conduits of his grace.

That we may commend ourselves and each other and our whole life unto Christ our God, together with the unoriginate Father and the All-holy, Good and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.