

1] If you had been one of those people in the gospels who met Christ in the days of his incarnation, who would you have wished to be? One of the apostle, perhaps St John, who leant next to Him at the mystical supper? Perhaps, Mary Magdalen, equal to the apostles, as she is called, who encountered the risen Christ in the garden? Maybe one in the crowds who were cured with a word or healed by touch? Thinking of the coming feast, we might offer our adoration and gifts as one of the Magi who came from the East or, yet again, we might choose Nicodemus, who came at night to learn the mysteries of rebirth in the kingdom of God.

2] More personally, what if you were to meet Him in the flesh, as yourself: what would you do? Would ask for an answer to this or a cure for that; a blessing on some project or for help with a difficulty? As some latter-day Job we could even say, 'Yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another.' [Job 19:26-27] But what if we did, would we ask Him to change the world, end an injustice, reform a system, rid the world of this disease, this scourge, this natural disaster?

3] How we answer those questions will reveal a lot about ourselves, the nature of our prayers and the state of our souls. There are, of course, situations in which we find ourselves, that crush our spirit; that so weaken us that we can only cry out to God when all other help fails. But if that is all that our faith in God turns out to be: a mere support, an opiate, a relief in our sufferings, then God is no more to us than the supernatural division of social services department, or the National Health Service, called upon, as and when necessary.

4] Not so, of course, the woman in today's gospel who was bent over, unable straighten herself. Others had been healed on a Saturday: did she fear to ask the help of the healer from Nazareth, aware of the stern gaze of the ruler of the synagogue? Did she even know who this man was who addressed her quite formally and politely, Woman, you are freed from your infirmity? She

actually asked for nothing, up there, separate from the men, in the women's gallery, or behind the lattice screen, sitting and listening to the Sabbath day service, bent forward, staring at the floor. She asked for nothing but encounters the Christ, and is healed of her infirmity.

5] Our religion is personal; our God is personal, in fact, God is tri-personal in One Being; not some divine force or power; the 'god' of philosophers and scientists, loose in the universe; not the object of some cult, nor the figment of our own imagining, as if God were only personal, in the sense that He is our own privately chosen god, created after our own image.

6] An encounter with God, as with all those who encountered Him in the gospels, is personal, that is, a meeting of persons. That is why Christ is indignant this morning, that a someone, a person, and a daughter of Abraham no less, might be left in such a condition, even for a day longer. An encounter with God is always personal, a meeting of minds, face to face: I and Thou, as the Godseer, Moses found when He encountered the Lord in the Burning Bush: I am who I am. [Ex.3:14]

7] What do you see when you walk in the streets, crowds of people who block the path, or this, a person before you, made in the image of God, the icon of Christ? You might as well complain about the volume of traffic on the road when you are the traffic! Yet each of the cars contain at least someone, a person like you and me.

8] Our own problems begin, so many of our own sins begin, when we objectify the other; when we see the rest as but objects before us; when we see objectively rather than personally. But our religion demands that we see personally, because it is only at the level of the personal that we can enter into communion. If this is hard to understand at first, consider a small child. Does it see its teddy bear as a mere object, a fabrication from soft materials, or as its companion, a someone to whom it gives a name; to whom it relates? Assuredly, I say to you, says Christ in St Matthew, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no

means enter the kingdom of heaven. [Matt.18:3] As they grow, children lose that innocence, as they must. They grow out of their toys, beginning to objectify them, putting away the childish things, as St Paul says. Yet overwhelmed by the conglomeration of things that surround us, we lose sight of the personal. Why else do those individuals find objects to condemn on the Internet with such moral certainty, unless at first they dehumanise the objects of their scorn?

9] Recall for a moment what you did when you first entered the temple this morning. Were you just the object of some observer's study in Anthropology, recorded as having bought candles, bowed, made the sign of the cross, and kissed images on stands. Was that all there was to it? Or was it personal, an encounter through a holy icon, between you and Christ, His mother, or one of His saints? A meeting of faces, pressed together, faces with names, coming together in communion, meaning more than any observer could ever know.

10] Have you ever attended Orthros, Matins, on a Sunday morning before the Liturgy? One of the eleven resurrection gospels is read and then the book of the gospels is venerated by the people and finally, placed on the stand. Why? Is this meaningless ritual? No, far from it! It is an encounter with the risen Christ; in Spirit and in Truth, an echo through the Liturgy, of those very same encounters in the gospel. Here, personally, we greet the risen Christ. Like Mary Magdalen, for whom Our Lord is unrecognised at first, seeing Him to begin with as just a gardener, until He called her by her name. Or the disciples on the road to Emmaus who only realised that He was no mere stranger when once again, as before, He broke the bread before them. For the other disciples He was only some stranger on the shore, until a miraculous catch of fish brings back personal memories, and they recognised that it is the Lord.

11] So, what if you were to meet Him, as I asked you at the beginning? But you shall! Differently, no doubt, but no less real than those who met Christ in first century Palestine. For the ascended and glorified Christ comes to us personally still in the mystery of the Holy Gifts. What if some famous, some august personage, perhaps

royalty, were to call at our house, would we want them to find us in disarray, unprepared in our shabbiest clothes, the house untidy, in the midst of a family row? No, we would prepare, sweep the place clean, dress in our finest and put away our quarrels.

12] So it is when we come to this encounter, we of the Orthodox, who will approach the sacred chalice this morning. Have we prepared, have we prayed and fasted, but most of all, do we come repentant, like Peter, who said, after witnessing the first great haul of fish, depart from me, for I am a sinful man? [Lk.5:8]

13] Of course we may bring our petitions to the Lord. Indeed, here we offer them up, each one praying the general petitions of the litanies, making them personal and specific to us when we cross ourselves devoutly, whether it be for peace, or health or a good defence before the terrible judgement seat of Christ.

14] It is only as persons, one to one, that we can experience communion. We cannot commune with objects. That would be to make a false idol. Whereas, in fact, our veneration is far beyond just bowing or kissing or crossing oneself. When we discern, when we can see, the true person beyond the object, beyond the tired habit, or the mindless repetition, the grace of the Holy Spirit will complete what is still imperfect of our worship, and as the Fathers have taught us, the veneration of the image passes to the archetype. But let us be sure, as well, that this veneration spills over into our daily encounters for the sake of Christ our Master. When the clergy cense you with the incense in the Liturgy they are venerating and blessing the image of Christ within you. May we worship God in return, venerating that same image in every person we encounter in this life, and in this world, in charity for all, seeing the person beyond the group, the tribe, the affiliation or circumstance, converted, once again, to become His children that we may enter into His kingdom.