

12th September 2021 Sunday before the Elevation of the Cross
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1] It is very easy to idealise the past. Any race, tribe, nation, religion or institution might have legends of their origin, great stories that establish their identity; who they are, where they come from. We Orthodox Christians might imagine that the early days of Christianity, those days when the original apostles still led the Church in Jerusalem, were somehow a paradise on earth.

2] We might call to mind the words of St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles where he describes how, 'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.' [Acts 2:42-43]

3] St John Chrysostom, looking back, writes, 'For in truth the Church was a heaven then, the Spirit governing all things and moving each one of the rulers and making him inspired. But now we retain only the symbols of these gifts... Then the very houses were churches: but now the Church is a house, or rather worse than any house... Here is great tumult, great confusion... The great Antiochian orator makes this comparison between the Church of the apostles and the church of his own day in his commentary on the First Letter to the Corinthians. This is, of course, a rhetorical device, the very rhetoric in which St John Chrysostom had been trained as a young student. Here in his commentary, St John Chrysostom sets up a contrast between the Church of his day and the early Church. We, nevertheless, know what was happening in Corinth. It was far from ideal. St Paul had to deal with all kinds of aberrations in their church life and it was far from a paradise.

4] And the blessed apostles had problems among the early Christians in Galatia as well, as we heard just now. Early Christianity, the true Apostolic Tradition, was under demonic assault as soon as it began. There were those who could not quite comprehend the world shattering consequences wrought in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ. For those who idealised their descent from Abraham, for the anti-Roman zealots, for the pharisees, for the Torah

Scribes, for those enwrapped in that Jewish culture, they might ask whether this was the Christ they were hoping for; the Christ they were expecting?

5] Yet the apostle themselves knew that Jesus of Nazareth had surpassed the Law of Moses: the *economia* of Charity had bent the rules of the Sabbath; in the Sermon on the Mount He had unveiled the inner meaning and purpose of those 613 commandments; in His very incarnation Christ had surpassed and rendered superfluous the instruction that God might be given no image.

6] And yet Paul found that there were those who still insisted that those gentiles who became Christians were obliged to keep the Torah. In other words, to become Jewish proselytes before they became followers of the Messiah. Hence, he had to deal with those who insisted on circumcision being necessary for men, before they were baptised. Our Lord Himself had taught that salvation was from the Jews and indeed, we are celebrating today the leave-taking of the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos, through whom God was incarnate as a Jewish man. Yet in addressing Photini at Jacob's Well in Samaria, Christ adds, 'But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.' [Jn.4:23]

7] And, of course, as far as the Judaisers were concerned, St Paul is having none of it! He enforces the point that there can be no compromise now; no accommodation with a kind of exclusive religious nationalism. Paul is quite clear in his understanding that after baptism, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' [Gal.3:28] Furthermore, as he tells the Corinthians, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.' [2 Cor.5:17]

8] These problems, these misconceptions about what the gospel is, never really went away. Into the second century, in his own diocese, the great martyr, Ignatios of Antioch, was not only continuing the battle against the so-called Judaisers, but also had to struggle against the Docetic heretics, who denied the reality of the incarnation.

To this day we expect our pastors and bishops to be strictly vigilant. We might well believe that the gates of hell will never prevail against the Church that Christ built upon Peter the rock and the witness of all the apostles, but it is only watchfulness, faithfulness to the tradition passed down to us, that will assure our own stability on that rock.

9] To a great extent heresies, false teaching and misconceptions among the people of God can be corrected by sound teaching. This, after all, is what Paul tells Timothy: 'Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching.' [2 Tim.4:2] But we know that the fish rots from the head downwards, as has happened in so many of the once great institutions of this very nation. But what happens when the pastors let go of their Orthodoxy; if our bishops were to sleep; what if they failed to test the spirits; what if those monks, from their exalted vantage point on Mount Athos, were to cease in their prayers for us? We know what has become of so many of the heterodox denominations, that seem to have imbibed every noxious liquor brewed in the devil's cellars under the guise that this will do you good.

10] In so far as we are able, in this congregation we have striven to avoid what happened as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, where there 'Arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.' [Acts.6:1] That is, a division between the local Jews and those of the diaspora, imbued with Greek culture. We have many nations represented here, from the different Orthodox patriarchates and jurisdictions, and we minister to all, equally. And incidentally, in the great pan-Orthodox Synod that met in Constantinople in in 1872 the wise and vigilant patriarchs condemned the heresy of Phyletism, that is, ecclesiastical racism, or "ethno-phyletism, that imagines salvation can only be found in a particular racial background.

11] But together in Christ, united in Christ, our common ministry, our mission, is to be the local Orthodox Church, here. I have never made it a secret that this parish must become a centre for the proclamation of Orthodox-Catholic Christianity in this region that was once the ancient kingdom of Wessex. The re-hallowing of this land is, indeed, our purpose, and that was so from the very beginning of what

became our Archdiocese in Britain. And, for sure, that hope, that goal, is bearing fruit now. Very soon, Fr Filip will be inaugurating a new mission at Chard in Somerset, under the patronage of St Birinus and Thecla. If you have Orthodox friends in that area you must let them know, if they are able to assist in building a community there as well.

12] Today is the Sunday before the Elevation of the Cross. So we add another fast this week on the fourteenth, alongside the usual Wednesday and Friday fast days this week. Going that extra mile along the ascetic road, that further taking up of the cross, invites us to elevate the symbol of our faith in the lives of each one of us. Paul reminds us today that our battle is against what he calls the flesh, that is, against the materialist view of life, against all those values that glory in what is worldly. However people promote themselves, whatever they claim for themselves as honours and pride and prestige in this life, for him there is only one common claim in which we can glory: 'God forbid that I should boast, except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through Whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world.'

13] All this, we are reminded in the gospel today, is through God entering the world He so loves, 'Not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.' Every teacher repeats the message, again and again, to press it home, to let it take root in the hearts of his hearers. So I shall quote again, those words of Christ that, in fact, we shall hear next Sunday, 'Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.' [Mk.8:34] Concerning which, I will remind you, Christ does not so much teach us to know ourselves, salutary though that be. He commands us to deny ourselves! That's the one thing the Judaisers, the party of circumcision that had infiltrated the Galatian church, could not do or understand. They still wanted to insist on their former Judaism, even though the Messiah had brought all that to its fulfilment; even though the Christ was risen. But in our denial of ourselves, and all the baggage we bring with us, in taking up the cross we shall follow the example of the blessed apostle. In all his struggles and temptations and sufferings, St Paul gloried in the cross

of Christ alone, contradicting and despising anything in this world that would distract him from seeking, first, the kingdom of God.