

1] Julius Caesar was twenty-five years old in the year 75BC. It was the year he intended to go to Rhodes in order to study rhetoric. On the way he was captured by Cilician pirates and held hostage for ransom. They were initially going to set a price of twenty talents, but Caesar, being Caesar, said to the pirates that, surely, it should be more like fifty talents! After thirty-eight days the ransom was paid and Caesar went free. But Caesar, being Caesar, raised an armed force, captured the pirates and had them all crucified.

2] In his Anaphora, his eucharistic prayer that shall offer again in this Liturgy, St Basil the Great says that Christ too was held to ransom, giving Himself as a hostage. 'He gave Himself as ransom to death in which we were held captive, sold under sin. Descending into Hades through the cross, that He might fill all things with Himself, He loosed the bonds of death. He rose on the third day, having opened a path for all flesh to the resurrection from the dead.'

3] Today in the gospel, Christ and His disciples are going up to Jerusalem, and He begins to explain to them what will happen to Him there. In fact, it is everything that the great Basil has expressed in his prayer of offering. But at that time before His resurrection from the dead, it is doubtful how much His disciples understood this matter, this mystery of redemption.

4] Christ's prophecy of His passion seems to pass over their heads. The worst will happen, He tells them, but the disciples, like many people, appear to bury their heads in the sand, as we say; they do not want to face the issue at hand. Indeed, the sons of Zebedee still cling to a belief in a Messiah who will go forward as a conquerer, triumphing over all, and so they present their claim to the best seats when He comes into His kingdom.

5] But Christ's triumph, His kingdom, comes in through His own passion and death. He is the Messiah, Christ the Suffering Servant, whom the prophet Isaiah foresaw: 'He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... Surely He has

borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' [Is.53:3-6]

6] Our Lord's only concern is that he remain faithful to the mission entrusted Him by His heavenly Father. We shall see His struggle later on in Great and Holy Week, when Christ's human will as the Son of Man wrestles with His divine will as the Son of God in the garden of Gethsemane; as St Luke tells us: 'And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.' [Lk.22:44] Yet He chooses to fulfil the Divine will and saving purpose of the Holy Trinity. Let us be very clear over this point: here, He is no victim of historical accident or uncontrolled circumstance. His whole intention since His incarnation from the Theotokos is to face our death, to pass through our death, to defeat our death.

7] It is common place, of course, to say that Christ died for our sins. As again, Isaiah says, 'Because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many.' [IS.53:12] This is the sacrifice of Christ, the self-same sacrifice that is offered up on earth every time we serve the Divine Liturgy, consecrating on earth, by the Holy Spirit, His holy Body and Blood. In a mystery, what we offer liturgically, here on earth, reflects and manifests what He offers eternally in the heavens on our behalf, where He ever lives to make intercession for us (cf. Heb.7:25): for what is bound on earth being bound in heaven (cf. Matt.18:18)

8] But to whom did Christ offer this sacrifice of Himself? It is question worth considering. To the Father? But as we know, that would make the Father an offended Judge, an angry god demanding to be appeased by the punishment of sinners, yet substituting, strangely, His innocent Son. Why? Even human justice balks at the idea of any parent making his child a scapegoat for the offences of

others. This was, however, the later western approach, contrasting what was called Adam's original sin and the divine wrath. But this is not Orthodoxy, for we do not see the passion of Christ as a forensic process, a legal settlement. We see a therapeutic approach to human failing, focusing on divine compassion, healing the problem of our death rather than addressing the juridical problem of our guilt.

7] Then, to whom did Christ offer this sacrifice of Himself? To the devil? But that would be to present the evil one as having power over God. Orthodoxy does not see creation as locked in a dualistic and equal battle between good and evil, as if they were dynamic forces. God is not a force; neither is evil. The Godhead is a triunity of hypostases (persons) in one Being; the devil is Satan, an hypostasis (person) and one of the fallen angelic beings cast out of heaven who hates mankind. He is jealous of God's power but has no power over God.

8] 'He gave Himself as ransom to death in which we were held captive, sold under sin,' Basil says. It is as if Christ offered the paschal sacrifice to Death itself. He offered up His life to Death; He confronted and defeated Death by dying. Using figurative language, of course, hSt Basil describes Our Lord as giving Himself as a ransom. Death is an abstract, it is not a person, but, as in much human thinking, Death is often personified, as in the popularly imagined shrouded figure holding a scythe, eventually reaping us all.

9] Death was not God's creation, as we are taught in the Book of Wisdom. Death entered creation through our sin, when our human nature became inverted, turning away from God and trusting to itself. Separated from the source of Life, God allowed our eventual demise, lest our sin and evil increase without end in creation.

10] 'Descending into Hades through the cross,' Basil continues. 'That He might fill all things with Himself, He loosed the bonds of death.' Christ has filled everything, even Hades, even Death. As the Psalmist says, 'If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.' [Ps.138:8]

11] St Basil goes on to tell us that, 'He loosed the bonds of death. He rose on the third day, having opened a path for all flesh to the resurrection from the dead.' There, is our salvation! As I have told you before, Death came through sin, but as we are held by Death, we continue in sin. We sin through self-will; a kind of compensation, an assertion of our self in the face of our time-limited life here. We sin now because we die, rather than many imagine, that we die as a punishment because we sin.

12] The great fourth century Cappodocian father of the Church composed his Anaphora, the very one we offer this morning, in perfect accord within Holy Tradition, following what was understood and received from the teaching of the apostles themselves. And as ever, there is a Latin tag: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, the words of worship reflect truly what we believe. It is interesting to reflect that Basil composed his anaphora before the Church had even agreed, universally, the canon of the holy scriptures.

13] For us, Christ gave Himself a ransom to Death; He sold Himself as a hostage. But unlike Julius Caesar, He underwent this voluntarily, being crucified Himself to redeem us, pirates and sinners that we are.

14] Of course, we need to understand this mystery as far as in us lies. When we come to the service of the Twelve Gospels on Great Thursday, we need a mind that is aware of what it is commemorating, celebrating and entering into. We need to know what Christ's sacrifice means for us, that we may explain it to others; those who enquire into what Orthodox Christianity is; those who still walk through the valley of the shadow of death. (cf. Ps.22)

15] For all who desire eternal life in Christ, the path, the way, has already been trodden by Our Lord. It has been trodden by the holy martyrs, trodden by the holy ascetics, like St Mary of Egypt whom we commemorate this Sunday. Though we, at the end, shall all pass through death in the flesh, putting an end to sin, it has now been changed to our liberation, our healing. For we have been baptised into Christ's death, baptised with the baptism with which He was baptised. And our souls, having passed through death already, in a

mystery, all our sufferings are in Christ, and all who suffer with Christ will be raised up and shall be saved.