

1] 'O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?'

At the end of all our theologising, at the heart of all our liturgy, our ascetic struggle, our communion and fellowship, our acts of mercy, what is demanded of us? Is it not faith, the prime quality that Christ seeks from us? His cry of exasperation in today's gospel is expressed in front of His own generation; aimed at the descendants of Abraham, whom He chose as His own, long before. But that cry can ring in our ears, also; we who are the New Israel, the Church and household of the living God: we too, by extension, might hear them addressed to us.

2] We can be very clear in the Orthodox Church: as we say in the Creed, that we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. There is only one Church of Jesus Christ, and although the heterodox are bound to view matters differently, we affirm that that Church is here, among us.

3] We pass no judgement on the denominations which have proliferated throughout history. As St Paul says in Romans, 'Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.' [Rom.14:4] Nonetheless, we can still affirm that the Holy Tradition, handed on from the apostles, maintained through the apostolic succession, interpreted by the fathers, guarded by the bishops, affirmed by the faithful, has only been maintained intact among us.

4] But that exasperated cry of Our Lord to a faithless generation, still descends through time to us; not to the Church of the saints, not upon the rock of faith, not to the bulwark of the Truth, the heavenly Jerusalem herself; not to us as the body of Christ. But it does address us as the individual we are. In the Church before the living God, none of us loses the person, the hypostasis, we are. Though we are being saved in common, yet we each maintain our integrity and come to know, in relationship, the love of God. We certainly know this when we sin, when we fall away from the peace

of Christ. For if we had perfect faith, where would we sin? For then God would rule our hearts and minds, and we would deny ourselves daily and take up the cross, as we were instructed in last Sunday's gospel.

5] It is, of course, true that we strengthen each other in faith; that the communion and fellowship of life in Christ, the faith we see in our fellow-Orthodox, can support our own. Think of when we baptise infants, babes in arms who have no understanding, yet they still pass through the same mystery. For it is the faith of the Church into which they are initiated; it is Christ's death into which they are baptised. How awesome, how fearful, therefore, are the responsibilities of godparents in nurturing faith!

6] However, when we sin, we do so outside the Church by degrees, for the Church herself is pure and holy, the bride of Christ. And there are sins into which we can fall that cast us out of communion entirely, that require we be placed under a ban from the Holy Gifts for a time, and be, eventually, restored through confession. In the case of apostasy it can even require Chrismation once again.

7] But for all that, God will not let us go, for He knows each one of us better than we can understand ourselves, as the psalmist says, 'O Lord, You have searched me and known me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me... Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.' [Ps.138:1,6-10]

8] It is, therefore, one thing to give intellectual ascent to the Creed, to affirm the teachings of the Ecumenical Councils. We each attest to what is understood as Orthodox Christianity, in order to be on the way of salvation. Who would set out on a journey with no faith in the accuracy of their map, or being doubtful on the guidance from the satellite navigation system? But what about our

own inner faith; faith as trust; a faith where we find our individual assurance?

9] The Church herself is confirmed in faith and nothing will prevail against her, even the gates of hell. But what of our own hearts? 'For He knows whereof we are made, He has remembered that we are dust,' again, the psalmist says [Ps.102:14]. Our difficulty is that we can put our faith in things of dust. Is it not true that the ultimate temptation here is to hedge our bets, as they say; that we seek the Lord and supplicate Him and hope in Him indeed, but half-heartedly: the mind soaring into the heavens but holding desperately onto the earth for all we are worth?

10] It has been commonplace for preachers to draw attention to our idolatry, drawing comfort and security among all the false gods: power, influence, wealth, pleasure, group identities, philosophies, politics, strength and possessions. Truth to tell, these are mere props, the scaffolding that supports the ego; that allows the ego to assert itself. Ever since Adam fell, that is, since you and I fell, for we share the same nature as Adam - ever since we have been turned inward, trusting in ourselves and what we are and what we have. But what if we were to deny ourselves, believe and trust in God? That is a risk! For the ego always wants to assert itself, to show that it exists; to reassure itself that it exists. Who would risk that loss of self, who can be so humble, really?

11] In paradise, in Adam, we were wholly turned toward God, a communion of love sharing in the energies of our Creator. We might say that Adam had no need of faith for he knew God as his life. But if we are to regain paradise and moreover, find the kingdom of God within, we know what we must believe, and we know in whom we must put our faith. We know also those things which we must let go, those parts, affections and attachments to our life that have not yet been surrendered.

12] All through our journey on these Lenten Sundays we are accompanied and admonished by the epistle to the Hebrews. Here St Paul reminds his fellow-Jewish believers in Christ of their own sacred history, of patriarchs, prophets, kings and martyrs:

individuals who had put their hope and their trust in a future glory, discounting the beguilements of this world. 'They were stoned, they were sawn in two,' Paul says. 'Were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy.' And he goes on to say, 'And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise.' [Heb.11:37-39] And yet, astoundingly, he ends up adding, 'God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.' [Heb.11:40] Well, we have received those promises and we have come into the inheritance for which they longed and strove. Therefore, let each of us check where we really take our stand; what we really put our faith in.

14] The holy martyrs were faced with that question; the true ascetic monks and nuns were faced with that question. And I know we live in this world, and that we must make our way through this world, and must deal with this world, but we need not be owned by this world. But we are not alone in this, we are in good company with the saints. Why! Even St Gregory the Great, the Diologist, as we call him, was burdened in the same way when he left the monastery to become Pope of Rome. He writes in his homilies on the book of Ezekiel, 'I have been unable to keep steadily recollected because my mind is distracted by many responsibilities... I am forced to take part in certain civil affairs, next I must worry over incursions of barbarians... now I must accept political responsibility in order to give support to those who preserve the rule of law; now I must bear patiently the villainies of brigands, and then I must confront them, yet in all charity... When I try to concentrate and gather all my intellectual resources for preaching, how can I do justice to the sacred ministry of the word?' Yes, I know what he means, even if you don't!

15] In the end, what does the Lord look for from us? 'When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?' Christ asks in Luke's gospel [Lk.18:8] But it is not just our faith. If Great Lent teaches us anything at all, it is that He will look for fruit, the fruit of repentance: what we become and do and say and think when our minds are changed, when we acquire the mind of Christ.

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. [Lk.3:8] What John the Forerunner said to the Jewish people to prepare the way for Christ, applies also to us, the New Israel.

16] 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting,' says Christ this morning of the demon he expels. The demons are no longer in us, not since our baptism, that is, but they still bother us, they still beguile, they still tempt and delude us from outside. So let us continue in prayer, let us keep on fasting, let us prove ourselves in charity. Bit by bit, step by step, by faith we shall advance, with the grace of God bringing all our strivings to fruition.