

9th May 2021
Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

2nd Sunday of Pascha

There are many religions in the world. Some of them have mystical traditions where the believer seeks union with the Divine. There are many examples of a wonderful self-surrender to God, all bearing witness to that profound longing in the human soul to find an eternal fulfilment.

However, our faith, Orthodox Apostolic Christianity, must raise an objection with these other religions: how can a human being offer himself totally to God? How can one be rid of one's awareness of self, when even our asceticism is done for our own good? How can you offer yourself in obedience to God when you are still share the nature of fallen Adam in Ancestral Sin ?

Well, you certainly cannot without grace; no redemption, no mortification, no sanctification, salvation and communion with God can be achieved by our own efforts alone: not without the self-surrendering, the emptying, the self-offering, the utter condescension of God Himself first. We can only find union with God and the whole purpose of our existence, because God Himself in Christ showed us the way, taking the initiative first, through the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection. As St John says in his first epistle, 'In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' [1Jn.4: 9-10]

Everything in our gospel, everything in our proclamation of the Apostolic Tradition of faith, rests upon the fact of the resurrection of Christ: not just the spiritual meaning; not just the mystical experience, but the historical fact of the resurrection. It lies at the very heart of our belief that God entered the history of our race, that he passed through our death and rose again, trampling down death, for without the resurrection the apostles have nothing to say! Without the resurrection, St Paul tells us, we are still in our sins; still aspiring, still looking upward, still longing for God but achieving nothing.

You must know, I am sure, of how Paul tells the Corinthians that Christ 'Was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.' [1Cor.15:5-8]

Yes, five hundred, most of whom were still alive, bearing witness to the fact of the resurrection, and Paul himself who, to his surprise, encountered the risen Christ at Damascus. Perhaps you know too of St Irenaeus Bishop of Lyon, who knew the martyr, St Polycarp, who in turn, had know the apostle John, one who had seen with his own eyes Christ, risen from the dead; the same apostle who writes in his first epistles that he is concerned with, 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled,'

This is the apostolic proclamation to the world, and strange though it seems all these years later, this proclamation is not based on their faith but on their direct experience, for this was what qualified them to be apostles, those who are sent out, as the name implies. In our lectionary at this time we read the Acts of the Apostles. In chapter one it tells of the election of Matthias to replace the betrayer, Judas. He was chosen by lot, on the grounds that he was one of the men who had been with them, beginning with the baptism of John, to that day that Christ ascended, in order to become a witness to the resurrection (cf. Acts 1:21-22)

So it is that today in the gospel, the second Sunday of the Queen of Festivals, Pascha, that we read of Thomas. On that previous Friday, the eve of Passover, they had all fled the scene, apart from John and the Theotokos, and the other devoted women. And here the apostles were together, cowering behind locked doors, only Thomas was not with them. Had he run off elsewhere, not daring even to be found in association with the others, for fear of persecution by the Sanhedrin authorities? We are not told: only that he was not with them on that first evening after Christ's rising again.

He is called Doubting Thomas in the western tradition: it is not a title that should be pressed too far, in my opinion. After all, why should he believe? He had seen Our Lord arrested and then fled like the others. He knew very well what was going to happen to Him, once handed over to the Romans. But the point of this story in the gospel is not to disparage or criticise his lack of belief, but to show how he too is an apostle, precisely because he has seen, with his very own eyes, the risen Christ!

Do we envy them, those who had no need of faith, directly, to acknowledge the resurrection? Do we think that it was easier for those who saw: for the apostles, for the five hundred, for Polycarp and Irenaeus? Yet they were faithful; faithful unto death. But what of us, we who have received the Tradition of the Apostles? 'Thomas, you have believed because you have seen Me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.' Yes, we who must struggle in faith, we who must contend against all the powers of darkness, we are blessed, says Our Lord. For what value would there be in our faith if it came so easily; with no doubt to contrasted with it, would it even be faith at all?

But, truth to tell, we are blessed, the grace of God preceding us, with faith in the resurrection of Christ. Not the blessings of this world but, as Paul tells the Ephesians, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. (cf. Eph.1:3-6)

'Accepted in the Beloved' is the Pauline phrase, which brings us back to the beginning again, making us capable now of self-surrendering, self-emptying, self-offering, of obedience to God, of acceptance by God, in mystical communion. And fortified by this faith the gospel calls us, in turn today, to manifest that blessing to the world; to be apostolic in our own witness: that when people perceive our faith and hope for salvation, our confidence, our trust in God, our lack of fear, our taking up of the cross with a peculiar forbearance, our bearing of one another's burdens joyfully, they may ask, what is the source of our peace?

St John tells us himself that the words of his gospel were written that we may believe in Christ, and that believing may find life in His Name. Yet that blessing is not to be hoarded or hidden away from the world but, being inexhaustible, it is to be offered to and shared by, all who will receive it. Like the consecrated Lamb on the holy table, divided but not disunited; ever eaten, yet never consumed, our words, witnessing to our faith, can feed anyone without diminishing our own portion.

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!