

1] K'ung Fu-tzu, better known in the West by his latinised name, Confucius, was a great Chinese philosopher, sage and political figure. His teachings are being revived and re-appreciated in modern China. Born around the year 551 BC, his teachings, recorded in what are called The Analects, focus on a general love for other people, respect and honouring of the ancestors, respect for elders, social traditions, self-discipline and conformity in matters of ritual. Of course, Confucianism is not, strictly speaking, a religion. It aims at harmony in human life as it is, rather than offering any form of eternal salvation.

2] It is clear in Confucius' teaching that, although we owe duty and care to all humanity, love and duty towards family takes priority. This after all is natural to most people's way of thinking. But let us contrast that idea with what we heard in the gospel just now. No one can doubt that, generally speaking, filial love and family ties come first in our cares and concerns. So what does Christ tell us? Speaking during the Sermon on the Plain in St Luke, Our Lord tells the crowds around Him, 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?'

3] The earthly Christ, the man, Jesus of Nazareth, most probably would never even have heard of K'ung Fu-tzu yet a superficial reading of the gospel might suggest that there were certain similarities between Christianity and Confucianism. But look deeper into what Christ is saying. Duty and love for family is most important, says K'ung Fu-tzu, and love for humanity, second. But Our Lord goes beyond family loyalty. The family is indeed the place in which we first learn to love, in a properly functioning family, that is; one where we are socialised and discover how to get along with other people. But for Christ it cannot end there, not if we are to be perfected in the love of God. Call to mind what St John taught us in his first epistle last week: 'God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.' [1Jn.4:16]

4] Confucian social harmony is a fine and good thing; few people, unless they are confirmed misanthropes and consumed with a deep social pathology, would disagree with him. But Christ asks, 'What credit is that to you?' 'Skin for skin,' as Satan tells God in the book of Job (2:4) For in life we also learn the meaning of mutual self-interest. There is a fine balance, perhaps, between an altruistic and pure love for others on the one hand, and knowing how we can serve our own needs too. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, as we say.

5] In other words, the Christian concept of ἀγάπη (agape), Love, goes beyond mutual social duties. Into this natural vision and longing of harmony and dutiful cooperation Christ suddenly throws in a command, yes, a command: 'Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.'

6] Here is disruption; here is a stumbling block - a skandalon in the language of the Greek New Testament! The point here is that Christ's teachings have little to do with harmony on earth. Why! He even says in St Matthew's gospel, 'Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword... And a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.' [Matt.10:34-39]

7] Does not the Orthodox Church honour and revere the family. Yes, indeed it does; what we call the natural, the traditional family: one husband united to one wife, and their children and other relatives after the flesh. Of course we do. And in Christ, moreover, marriage is a mystical union; a living icon of Christ the bridegroom and his bride, the Church. As I speak the children in The Followers course are learning about our understanding of Orthodox Christian marriage, not least to counter the dangerous nonsense that so often comes under the heading of Relationships Education in schools today.

8] Alongside the ascetic vocation of monastic life: men living on earth as angels, St Basil calls them, the Orthodox Church has always

revered the communion of marriage, the only way of life, created and blessed by God, for the intimate relationship between a Christian man and a Christian woman, and for the raising of children in the Orthodox faith. Our Rite of Marriage makes this very clear.

9] But for everyone in Christ compassionate love, agape, caritas, must be boundless, unlimited by family, locality, nation or even our own species. For our compassion must extend even to animals and beyond, to the whole Creation. For in this way we reflect what we have known of the love of God and remain in God. Think again of that kenosis, that self-emptying love of God, of which we heard in St John's gospel on the Sunday after the Elevation of the Cross: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.' [Jn.3:16] That love was first revealed under the Old Covenant, where the Bible talks of the lovingkindness of God towards Israel. But in the New this is extended to the whole world.

10] What credit is it to you? asks Christ, if we merely reciprocate kindness shown to us; if we only give, expecting a return? What if we, like God, were kind to the ungrateful and the selfish? What is this 'credit'? It is none other than the grace of God in us, lifting us beyond our natural self-interest, the mutual exchange of social benefit; nothing less than a participation in the love that is divine. Yet for the sake of the gospel there are times when the love of God constrains us, when seeking first the kingdom of God even family loyalty might be surpassed, even to the point of conflict if we are to be worthy of that love of Christ: 'Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.' [Matt.19:29]

11] For our final destiny is not harmony with the world but communion with God in the kingdom of God. And the means to that end is the same self-emptying that we see in Our Lord's taking on of our flesh, and in the offering up of His life on the cross, that coming to share in his death in a mystery, we too might attain to the glory of His resurrection. The heart of each one of us has to grasp what has happened to us in our Baptism into the Name of the Holy Trinity. As

St Paul tells the Galatians, 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.' [Gal.2:20]

12] So we are no longer to be conformed merely to what I might call the social morality of this world. For from now on, what we do for the least, we do for Him who has overcome this world for us (cf Matt 25:40). Paradise is open once more. We still remain to struggle here, bearing, till we depart, our own cross under the form of the Old Adam. But we no longer have to be bound, shackled together with the Old Adam, but even now, we have put on the New. 'For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.' [Mk.8:35]

13] The uncreated light of God, that energy of God that He poured out upon creation in the beginning (cf.Gen.1:1) before the created light of sun, moon and stars: that same light, St Paul tells us today in the epistle, has shone in our hearts. It is the same light that shines upon us when we stand in humility before the holy icon of the face of Jesus Christ. Even in these earthly vessels, as Paul calls them, we possess this treasure. Only, we are to let this same light shine on others as well, as it shone in the face of Moses; as it shone in the face of St Seraphim of Sarov.

14] 'Arise, shine,' the holy prophet Isaiah announced before time, prophesying the coming of Christ. 'For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you... But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. [Is.14:1-2] And as Christ Himself tells us in St Matthew, 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.' [Matt.5:16]