

*Brethren, salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. (Rom. 13:11)*

The day is at hand, indeed! Tomorrow we begin the Great Fast and with that, the Orthodox Church returns to the beginning once again. As long as this time and this space endure, as long as the circle of the year revolves, God's mercy and long-suffering provides what in Greek is called the *Kairos*, that is, the opportunity, the season or the right time.

So it is that the Church's liturgical cycle brings us back once more; to the start once more, again and again calling to mind our prime purpose, which is to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. No wonder, therefore, that our lectionary, our systematic reading of the holy scriptures, provides readings for weekdays from the Old Testament: the prophet Isaiah for midday, and the books of Genesis and Proverbs in the evening.

The whole mystery of our salvation, of course, cannot be found, just locked into an ever-repeating cycle, for time will come to an end, and the repeating cycle of the years will end. Sure, the year continues to turn for now, but only as a wheel, moving forward. Because Time is the battleground where our spiritual warfare is fought. Thus, tomorrow evening we go back to the origin of all, opening the book of Genesis at the first verse of the first chapter:

*'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...'*

And so begins the story of the Creation and with it, our story. The human mind for all its complexity cannot comprehend, cannot encompass how this happens within the mind of God. Our thoughts are halted, silenced before the very idea of *the beginning*, for what comes before? Only God, the Ever Existing, beyond Time, contingent on nothing, depending on nothing else; the *I Am Who I AM*, whom Moses encounters in the burning bush. Whether it be a universe or a multiverse, projecting dimensions as if by perpetual motion, it matters not: everything that exists in reality, from a singularity to the most

complex organism depends on what is before. The scripture bears witness that there can be nothing without God, the *One Who Is*, giving existence to all things.

I have mentioned before how the story of the six-day creation in the book of Genesis reflects the construction of the tabernacle in the book of Exodus, teaching us that the world itself is the temple, revealing the glory of God and where God is glorified; and the temple itself, the work of our hands, becomes a symbol, reflecting the Creation, as ordered according to the mind of God.

But standing now, once again, before the start of the Great Fast, I want to consider this story of the work of Creation from a different perspective. For we must consider not just the glory, the power, the in-dwelling, the wisdom of God, told by His Creation, but also its very purpose, its end, its consummation which is, the union of heaven and earth in the kingdom of God. '*It is done!*' says the Lord in the Apocalypse. '*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.*' [Apoc.21:6]

As God works six days in the creation and then rests, so shall we. We too shall labour in the great ascetic struggle, the Lenten work of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. If in any way we are to change, if we are to be made new; if, in the words of St Peter, we are to be partakers of the divine nature, if we are to be saved: we are set to work! We do this especially at this time of renewal. We can only do this through our faith, for why bother if we do not believe? We accomplish this through grace, for where we fall short, God first inspires, then He blesses and, finally, perfects the work.

Just as the first Adam was placed in the garden to tend it and to be its master, so it is with all who follow Christ in the way of the cross, who labour in the churches. St Maximos the Confessor who was born around the year 580AD, in his treatise, the 'Two Hundred Chapters on Theology,' has given us a mystical interpretation of the days of creation. He sees the sixth day, the final day of creation, as a symbol for what he calls the *practical life*, that is, fulfilling every virtue, so that it might be said of us as well, '*Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.*' [Gen.1:31] This is the six-

day labour in which we engage during the Great Fast, working towards that end.

Maximos also speaks, of course, about the seventh day rest, which Christ fulfilled Himself when he rested in the tomb after his labour upon the cross. So it is with those who have faithfully laboured in the ascetic struggle and now rest, having regained the paradise of bliss. And there is yet to come the eighth day, not spoken about in the book of Genesis but revealed only in the New Covenant, that is, the mystical resurrection, our deification in Christ.

Coming again to the Great Fast, confronting, may I say, those weeks ahead, do we feel daunted? Perhaps making our excuses? Maybe we do not really feel engaged with it. We must certainly guard against a strain of thought that developed in the Protestant West. This proposed the all-sufficiency of Christ in everything to do with our salvation, and that all we need do is to know Him as our personal saviour and to rest in His work for us. This way of thinking imagines that we are already saved, if we believe, and that all we need do is trust unto the end. But what did these false teachers make of St Paul, writing to the Colossians, *'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.'* [Col.1:24] St Paul is teaching us that as he is *in Christ*, so his sufferings are the sufferings of Christ, for we are one body with Him.

On the third Sunday of the Fast we will be reminded that we must take up the Cross and follow Him. We are not commanded to rest on the laurels of Christ's sufferings, as it were. Christ's death is not a substitute for our own, in which we just rest. Rather, our vocation, our calling, in which we were soaked at our baptism, is to participate, to share in, to have communion with, the sufferings of Christ. We do not just know Christ, we become His body, that is, we ourselves are *'christs'* as well, anointed ones.

We are also reminded that none of us undertakes this Lenten journey alone. We are not solitary ascetic heroes, single-mindedly battling through depravations trusting in our own will power. We journey together, just as the children of Israel, together, passed forty

years in the wilderness. But unlike them, by the grace of God we shall arrive at the promised land of the eternal feast.

*'Six days you shall labour and do all your work,'* says the commandment in the book of Exodus (Ex.20:9) We must certainly do that, participating in the great labour of the Fast. But in labouring we have in mind the goal. The opportune time, the *Kairos*, must reach its end, the *Telos*, the culmination of all our endeavours. This Great Lent becomes a preparation for Christ's Second Coming in Judgement, of which we were reminded last week. There we were informed, without equivocation, that what we do and what we are now, at this time, will place us where we shall be eternally. Each hardening of the heart, each turning away from our neighbour's need; each judgement spoken in sarcasm, each thought, emanating from our self-sufficient pride; each act of disdain, sneering at others from our splendid isolation, will bring us to judgement. For a fast without mutual love is the fast of demons.

Yes, we shall deal with food, and prayer-time and the giving of money. But your stomach, your agenda, your purse, hardly make for the summit of perfection. What if I were to make it really challenging for you! Could you dispense with the babble of social media? Could you turn off the computer; liberate yourself from the television? Perhaps that is too harsh for us who must live in this world and deal with this world, who have not been called to the monastic life. But let us at least strive to live these days in peace with all, and to know something of what St Paul means in saying, *'The day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.'* (Rom 13:12)