

Before the Divine Liturgy began we had the Proskomedie, the service of preparation of the bread and wine. The Lamb, the central section, is cut out of the prosphora, the offered bread, and is laid on the discos, the plate. A triangle of bread is cut out and laid on the right of the Lamb, in memory of the Theotokos; nine other triangles are placed on the left of the Lamb, in memory of the ranks of saints and angels. Wine and a little water is poured into the chalice. Small particles of bread are put below the Lamb, one for each name, commemorating the living and dead whose names have been given in before the service. Thus set apart and blessed, the bread and wine are veiled and stand ready on the Prothesis, the table of offering.

In the ancient days, in the great church of Agia Sophia in Constantinople, that service of the Proskomedie was offered in a separate building, outside the church, called the Skeuophylakion, where the holy vessels were kept. At the appropriate point, the vessels were brought into the church in a solemn procession and set out upon the holy table. The remnants of that action we still see today in the Great Entrance.

As Christ made his way to Golgotha, to the Cross, so the procession represents, mystically, His act of self-oblation for our sins. Passing through the people, the gathered body of Christ, the faithful touch, lightly, the veils or the vestments of the clergy: through the bodily sense of touch, the people associate their own prayers and needs with the great prayer of the Church, commending themselves and their whole life unto Christ our God. So all is gathered up into the eternal sacrifice.

We, who can do no more than offer to God His own, from His own, offer through the presbyterate, the Eucharistic Prayer, making remembrance of the saving work of Christ, from His incarnation to His sitting at the right hand of the Father, recalling His command at the Mystical Supper and calling down upon the gifts the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Who among the faithful does not believe that there has been a wonderful exchange of gifts? Who does not know

and perceive and confess that these offerings have become truly the immaculate body of Christ and truly His own precious blood?

It is the same with everything else we offer here with prayer and blessing, the sanctifying water of Theophany with which we renew daily our relationship to Christ; the water of baptism that transforms lives from the old Adam to the New; the consecrated Myron that anoints and seals the body with the gift of God the Holy Spirit; the holy oil with which we anoint the sick: the conduit of the grace of God, transforming our sufferings from natural decay into martyrdom and wholeness. Not least, let us recall the holy images: tones and shades drawn from the natural creation that, entering through the narrow way of Holy tradition, become the personal icons of Christ and His saints, reflecting back, as in a mirror, what we must become.

All this stands witness to conversion, repentance and change. This becomes so natural for the faithful that, perhaps at times, we hardly notice. Because, for us, this is a certainty in which we rejoice, just as we shall do at Pascha, when the dead body of the Christ was raised from the dead, where the Old Adam is overcome; where the New is made manifest. Yet, with St Basil the Great it is better to say that these elements, these offerings, are not so much changed but rather, revealed for what they are truly intended to be by the Creator; as Basil prays in his Anaphora, his Eucharistic Prayer, that the Holy Spirit may descend upon us and upon the gifts spread forth and bless, hallow and show them to be the body and blood of Christ.

Yet all this is not the end of the matter; this is not an end in itself, merely to enact mystical wonders before the congregation! The end, the purpose, the reason, is us! The One who, as we say in the Creed, 'For us men and for our salvation came down from heaven...' is here and has His dwelling among His people, for the conversion, the repentance, the change are what happens to us. We begin, certainly, with the Divine Liturgy, for here the whole of Christ dispensation, the whole economy of salvation is preached, announced and enacted; proclaiming the death of the Lord till he come, to use St Paul's words.

As a familiar signal, the reading of the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel this morning tells us that the Great Fast draws near. But

before we set out once more on that journey together, we are given the story of the man who desired to see Christ, who He was. Called down from his high perch, up in a sycamore tree, we witness his conversion and repentance; his knowledge of the truth about what he had become and his willing change of mind. And we see him change, a real metamorphosis, that alters the whole course of his life, spilling over in generosity and reparation for his former avarice. And so salvation came to Zacchaeus and all his house that day.

However it happens, we too must pass through conversion, repentance and change; all who come to the knowledge of the truth, all who hear the gospel, must undertake the same process if they really seek salvation. For our conversion is turning to Christ. Not imagining that our own moral goodness can demand a place for us in eternal bliss, but rather, our relationship to Him who is the way, the truth and the life. And our repentance is not just one, momentous occasion but is to be our whole way of life. For in our life in this world we need continual repentance, that change of mind that opens us up to the great grace of God. And it is the grace of God that changes us, not once but evermore. Indeed, in Orthodox Theology, as St Gregory of Nyssa taught, every person must grow. Even in the bliss of paradise, those who are saved, far from remaining static, ascend from glory to glory.

Once more I remind you of what Fr Alexander said a few weeks ago: we are what we eat. Indeed so! Let us, then, draw near with trembling, for with conversion of heart, with repentance, we shall be changed, receiving in humility and faith the awesome mystery of the Holy Gifts. This is our common experience, living as we do in two worlds: the one, of which we have repented, renouncing, as in our baptism, Satan, with all his angels and all his works and all his service and all his pride; and the other world, having entered into the very joy of our Lord. So why are there those who claim the name of Christian yet are rarely here, though not constrained, or who might arrive late, bored by an over-long service, or who find better things to do on the Lord's Day. Or who reach a certain point in their life and just drift away, seeking out a relationship with their more familiar old Adam or their fallen Eve?

Why? Because they, having passed through the motions, having converted, are not completing the course, falling at the first hurdle. They have not yet repented; they have resisted the grace, not letting it touch their lives lest they be changed. Yet who could encounter the real Christ, like Zacchaeus, and not be changed? It is terrible to think that Christians can go to church all their life and not move an inch, fixed in self-satisfaction. Unlike Zacchaeus, they have not yet climbed out of their sycamore trees.

It is now seventy-seven days until Palm Sunday; around twenty-one per cent of our Liturgical year is here devoted to repentance and change. As St Paul tells Timothy today in the Apostolos, 'For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, Who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe.' [1 Tim.4:10] 'Command and teach these things,' he continues, and so we do the same. Timothy had been entrusted with this ministry by prophetic utterance and the laying on of hands by the elders. So too today the elders, the presbyters of the Church of God, must command and teach these things, not neglecting the gift but attending to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. And it belongs to clergy and people alike to respond. For we too are become sons of Abraham's faith and salvation has come here to our house today.