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'Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.' [2 Cor.7:1]

It must have felt strange, even beguiling and, of course, certainly dangerous, being a member of one of those first Christian churches in the Roman Empire. Your conversion to Christ had brought you into a new religious world. Gentiles would have seen you as belonging to a breakaway Jewish sect; Jews would have regarded you as a heretic. You would have let go of your old certainties, whether you had come from Judaism or gentile paganism. Your social circle would have altered, letting go of old attachments, even your family perhaps, yet finding fellowship in a new body of people. You might be an outcast from the old chosen people of God, yet now finding yourself in the New Israel. Or maybe, a gentile slave who, though in bondage, has found freedom in the Lord; or possibly a citizen under the emperor at Rome, who despite the political advantages, is now a servant of Jesus Christ.

What has become of you because of your baptism into Christ's death, has left you in two worlds at once, the two kingdoms: of this passing world and, at the same time, of the eternal kingdom of God. The old kingdom, the old world was still there for those early Christians, just as much as the old Adam in the flesh was still there. And there precisely was the cross you bore, for having put on the New Adam in Christ, you had still to wait and watch and be vigilant until the end, the Parousia, the revelation of Christ at His second advent. Yes, as if the old Adam, though dead in Baptism, was still slumped across your shoulders, to be carried around until your redemption.

There is an early piece of Christian writing, perhaps as early as 130AD, called the Epistle to Diognetus. It is an explanation to an inquirer, of the Christian way of life. Half-way through, the anonymous author says this:

‘For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe.... They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners... Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.’

But why am I talking to you about the experience of the early Christians? You have no need, necessarily, to revisit this history of the people of God, because this is our situation; we are no different; their position in this world, in their own day, is exactly the same as our position in these, our days.

The difference, however, between those early saints who now rest in Christ, and us, their successors on earth, is not just the current state of the kingdom of this world, but the fact that we are here after two millennia of Christian culture; a view of the world which, at one time, spread gradually through, and then permeated, what was once called Christendom. But that hegemony of Christ over the once-Christian nations, is coming to an end. Even if that prominence of Christianity only ruled over the different cultures, and not over everyone’s lives, it was still respected and honoured. But even in my lifetime I, like many of you, have witnessed that being Christian culture unravelled.

The challenge for us and for our salvation is, no doubt, the same as it ever was. As St James, writing in his epistle about what it means to be religious says, ‘Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.’ [Jm.1:27] Think of what that must mean for us today: to remain unspotted by this world. How can we do that, especially those who have been brought up, formed, imbued and constantly bombarded by a culture that has, to all intents and purposes, let go of Christ, and in places, even given back to the devil? In St Luke’s account of the wilderness temptations of Christ, Satan offers our Lord all the kingdoms of the world: “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.” [Lk.4:6-7] Well, no doubt he is gradually taking back those parts that he once possessed. You may well fear for your children and our young people. Just think how much Christianity formed and informed, for example, Education, especially in this country; how much real scholarship, science and learning came from the patronage of the Church. But think again about how much of it now, even in so-called church schools, has been drained of the ethos of the Faith, to be replaced by notions and mores and values tinged with the stench of the demonic. Yes, I fear for our children!

As to where this is all leading us, I have only speculations, no prophecy at this time. Yet like those first Christian who now, by their holy prayers, urge us on in the great contest, we await the new heaven and the new earth, albeit, as our Lord tells us in St Mark, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is.” [Mk.13:32-33]

This is our hope in Christ, that knowledge based on faith, that as God was in the beginning, so shall He be at the end. It is certainly possible, like all the rest, to put our hope on things in this world; in politicians and leaders, in parties and movements, in commerce and finance, in technology and power, and even in vaccines! But that will all be for a time, only. But what does Paul tell the Corinthians this morning: ‘Therefore, come out from them, and be separate from them,’ says the Lord, “and touch nothing unclean.’

How can we do this: live in two worlds, two kingdoms at the same time? On the one hand, we must work and toil, deal with others, manage our families, maintain our peace and our well-being, deal with many difficulties, problems and unforeseen events; and on the other, which of us is ready to tread the courts of light, who has been so perfected by grace at this time as to be prepared to keep the company of the saints in light? As Christ says in Matthew’s gospel, in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ [Matt.22:12] In our Rite of Baptism, during the fourth prayer of exorcism, the priest prays for the candidate saying, ‘that having lived in accordance with thy commandments, and preserved inviolate the Seal, and kept his garment undefiled, he may receive the blessedness of the Saints in Thy Kingdom.’ But who among can say that we have done that? And we need entertain no romantic ideas of those early Christians, for if they had been perfected, would the apostle Paul have needed to dictate all those epistles? Meanwhile, between these days and the coming of the kingdom, we have need of repentance, we have need of confession, we have need of grace.

We have not had that call to the monastic life. In the monastic life one might depart the busy tumult of life and

strive unhindered by this world, at least, if not quite from the flesh and the devil as well. St Sepaphim of Sarov taught his spiritual children that they should strive to acquire the Holy Spirit more and more. But how often have we broken the seal, who were sealed in Chrismation, and failed to keep that garment undefiled, who had put on Christ in Baptism?

If not in the shelter of a monastery, at least let us be here, in the House of God, because we here can live as the temple of the living God. As the Paul says today, “I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” This is our refuge, our hospital, our school, our defence, our treasury, our hearts’ rest. As the prayer towards the end of the office of Compline says, ‘The Father is my hope; the Son is my refuge; the Holy Spirit is my protection.’

We have with us today five neophytes; five newborn in Christ; five catechumens who have now taken on the light yoke of Christ. You will see them be the first to receive the Holy Gifts this morning. You must support them for they have now joined you on the Way. Our common endeavour is to recover the likeness of God that we lost in the old Adam. What is that recovery like? Think of that one described by Our Lord in today’s gospel: loving enemies, doing good, lending, expecting nothing in return; greatly rewarded, being a son or daughter of the Most High; one who is merciful, even as the Father is merciful.

But to be like that requires that we receive the one who has received us. It requires that we fast and pray and repent: resealing the senses, washing the garment, as in the gospel parable: like good servants, vigilant and watchful for the Master’s return. For in sharing in the Holy Communion the faithful receive into their very bodies, as well as their souls,

the deified humanity of Christ, the mystery of our own perfected humanity. For in the offered and consecrated Holy Gifts, we participate in the divine energies of God, that though we can never become God or know the divine essence, yet by grace we can recover the likeness of God, fulfilling what our human nature was intended to be; participating in the divine nature as St Peter tells us, escaping the corruption in the world [see 2 Pet.1:4].

Step by step, Sunday by Sunday, even if it be two steps forward and one step back, or even if we should fall backwards, again and again, let us move on, always keeping our vision fixed beyond the noise and busyness that surrounds us in this world. To quote St Paul once more this morning: 'let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.'