

22nd March 2026 Fourth Sunday of Great Lent Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell

1] If someone were to ask you to explain the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News, what would you reply? One might be tempted to fall into the common error of describing the benefits of being a regular church-goer; of explaining to any enquirer what advantages can be gathered from being religious.

2] Perhaps you might imagine that religion gives you stability in life; that it brings order and regularity to the days of your life; that children can be brought up properly and are taught right from wrong; that religion guides you to lead a moral life, makes you a better citizen, and keeps you clear of social and personal dangers; makes you *respectable*.

3] Well, that's as maybe! But all this has very little to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. If that list is all that we are engaged in; if that is the sum of the Christian life, then why not choose some other religion? Where would the difference lie? Is it just a matter of culture, or an accident of upbringing or, God help us, *taste*?

4] Those blessings to be found in life are there, of course, laid out in the pages of the Old Testament. Moses outlines them to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy: *'I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that*

both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.’ [Deut 30:19-20]

5] From the letter to the Hebrews today we learn that God Himself was witness, swearing an oath by Himself, when He made the promises to Abraham, to bless and multiply the great patriarch. But our epistle makes it clear that the old promises are the precursor, the type, the prefiguring of what is to come in due time. It is stated plainly, there in the very first words; of Hebrews: *‘God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.’* [Heb 1:1-2]

6] And we, the *New Israel*, having become the heirs of the promises, have received more abundantly the revelation of God’s unchanging intentions, as it says; God’s purposes that no one can change. And we are that *New Israel*, *not* because we are some other race that has usurped the place of Ancient Israel; some different nation on earth taking their place. We are the *New Israel*, inheriting the fulfilment of the promises of God, because our whole condition is *new*; a *new kind* of Israel, for our life is not now of this world, for we are the Orthodox-Catholic Church of Jesus Christ whose

life is the life of the kingdom of God. '*Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth,*' Paul writes to the Colossians. He does not mean just to dream of what life will be like in heaven. Setting your mind on things above means, changing your mind; resetting the way you think; it is what we mean by repentance, *metanoia*. Where are your thoughts coming from? Are they set in the kingdom, or still rooted in the way the world works? Surely, it must be the former, for as Paul continues, '*You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*' [Col 3:2-4]

7] And when did we die? When we were baptised, of course. For those who have been baptised into Christ were baptised into His death. That just as Christ was raised from the dead, so we should walk in *newness* of life. (cf Rom 6:3-4) Yes, a new life, a new Israel!

8] That is how we explain the Good News; how to present the gospel of Jesus Christ: it is a *new life*. Will all those earthly useful and good things come if we lead a religious life? Possibly, possibly... But nevertheless, still, we seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to us anyway. (Cf Matt 6:33)

9] So it is that Hebrews continues, laying before us what we have received in the gospel: a strong consolation, having fled for refuge and laying hold of the hope that is set before us; a sure and steadfast

anchor for the soul, for we have entered, as it says, into 'that which is within the veil.'

10] That veil had been there in the Old Testament, separating the holy of holies in the temple from where the sacrifices were offered up. But that was under the ancient Law, and that veil itself was, eventually, to be torn asunder, from top to bottom, when the Chosen One of God gave up the spirit on the cross (cf Mk 15:38). That veil was a figure, but in Christ we have passed beyond the figure to the reality. The old veil was made by human hands, as Moses was commanded, serving as a copy and shadow of heavenly things. But in Christ there is a more excellent ministry, for He is the Mediator of a better covenant, the *New*, established on better promises (cf Heb 8:3-6). Once again, I would advise all to read the whole letter to the Hebrews in order to gain a deeper understanding of the mystery of Christ.

11] So what is happening here, today, *again and again*, as we might say? More than anywhere else, that new life in Christ is actually manifested here, in the Divine Liturgy. Nothing else that the Church does in this world participates more clearly in the life of the kingdom of God itself, for the eucharistic sacrifice is the icon of the worship of heaven. For what is heaven, but the bliss of true worship in spirit and in truth?

12] One of Our Lord's parables presents the kingdom of God as a marriage feast (Matt 22:1ff); *Blessed are*

those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb! ' says the book of the Apocalypse [Apoc 19:9]. Yes, even if we are currently in the Great Fast, life in the Church is a feast, a great banquet of good things.

13] Eating and drinking is the very foundation of our natural life. After the breath of life, the next thing that the Creator provides for Adam, is the food of Paradise, the very foods to which we return during Lent. And just as by an act of self-will, mankind chose, too soon, the knowledge of Good and Evil, thereby losing the noetic life of communion with God, so that life is re-established in our nature by sharing in the Holy Gifts.

14] The difference, of course, is that, although we must maintain our biological existence in consuming food for ourselves alone, we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, fasting from that need, that necessity, and partaking, instead, of heavenly food in reference to God alone and in communion with him.

15] This is the new life in Christ: not just a reward for obedience to moral commands; not some gratifying feeling within our emotions; not even some mystical, ecstatic experience. Our Holy Communion in God, and with our brothers and sisters in Christ, refutes our self-existence; it is dying that we may live. For no Orthodox soul comes here to satisfy any physical hunger: this is no refreshment, nutrition, let alone gastronomy. We do this that we may refresh, remain and continue in our eternal life. Think of that transforming mystery! All over

the world, every chalice in the Orthodox Church offers to the faithful that very same food of eternal life. All hear the same words at the invitation to communion: *‘with fear of God, and faith and love, draw near!’* For the cup of blessing is the communion of the blood of Christ, and the broken bread is a participation in the body of Christ. For though we are many, we are one bread, one body; for we all partake of that one bread (cf 1 Cor 10:16-17).

16] What, then, is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News? It is that our old life, that leads to death, has been surpassed, for as the gospel says today, Christ has been delivered into the hands of men, and though they killed Him, after that He rose on the third day. And that life of His is now our life as well.