

Two weeks ago we opened the book called the Lenten Triodion which lays out the texts and structure of the services of the Orthodox Church as far as Easter night. The pattern is one which has become familiar to us over the years and as 'familiarity breeds contempt' according to the saying, we need to ponder deeply and afresh the messages contained in them. It starts with the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee which is designed to place us in the right attitude before God, one of humility, since we openly acknowledge before communion and the members of the Church that we are "sinners of whom I am chief". Like the Publican we are enjoined to cry to God for help in the face of our weakness and to recognise seriously that we are not better than others but rather the opposite. We recall the example of Christ who, though God, took the form of a servant to mankind on earth.

Last week we had the parable of the Prodigal Son placed before us. We were presented with the action of turning away from God and living life according to our own will; of recognising our own foolishness and changing our direction in returning to God and discovering surprisingly and with great joy that he is already there waiting for us. We discover a new depth to our relationship with him and to his love for us. For those of us who are mindful of 'the sins of our youth and our acts of ignorance' as the Psalmist puts it, this parable is most poignant.

In a sense these two Sundays concentrate on our experience of and our relationship with God, while today's Gospel is primarily about our neighbour. It makes the quite frightening equation that the way we treat God is the way we treat our neighbour and conversely the way we treat our neighbour is the way we treat God. There is no difference between the two since our neighbour is an icon of God and made in his image or likeness. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." So, we are told plainly here by Christ himself that when we come to the final judgement the criterion we shall be judged by is not "Did we hold the right beliefs? Did we attend so many services? Did we keep the fasts to the letter?" These are important of course in keeping us on the right path, in training and in self-control. But more importantly did we consider our neighbour in his or her time of need regardless of religious belief, race and colour of skin, political opinions, sexual orientation and other differences.

Next Sunday we shall be directed towards forgiving each other and we shall have an open act of mutual forgiveness here in the church at Sunday Vespers. Loving our neighbours cannot be separated from those who wrong or have wronged us in some way. The Lord's prayer, which we recite in our different languages here before communion, and other sayings of Christ in the Gospels make it an absolute condition of receiving forgiveness from God that we forgive others. And I wonder if I could touch a raw nerve in our community. It saddens me when I read the lists of names which are passed in to the sanctuary at the Liturgy and see the name of our former Bishop crossed out. It is sometimes easy to put our hands in our pockets for money when we are approached in the street or by mail but embarking on the act of forgiveness, true forgiveness, of those who have deeply wronged us requires great spiritual strength and a vision of the freedom which that act can give to us. In the week I was listening to a broadcast on the BBC World Service called 'Witness' about a young man whose father was brutally and innocently murdered by the Ulster Defence Force and who joined the IRA in order to kill Protestants and British soldiers. It was

interesting because when he attended a recruitment meeting for the IRA he was asked why he wanted to join. He gave his reasons, revenge on those who had killed his innocent father, and was turned down as he was told this was insufficient. He drifted in and out of splinter terrorist groups, planting bombs etc and then many years later he realised that what was going on inside him was ruining his life. He was not really living and he related how he put his feelings aside and began to make a real life for himself which was stable and prosperous.

Sometimes in confession I impose a penance on those who have developed enmity or hatred of a person, of praying for that person. Frequently I hear the honest response, "I can't do that yet". Then make a beginning, I say, and imagine that person standing before the judgement seat about to be condemned and Christ saying to you "Do not hold this against him. You can save him with your forgiveness". From such humble beginnings our love for our neighbour can grow. And when we pray for those who hate us, this is what we are told in Scripture that the Evil One cannot bear.

Then there is the neighbour who is closest to us. 'Families and how to survive them' co-authored by the comedy actor, John Cleese, is a best-selling book. Our husbands, wives, children, parents, in-laws (no mother-in-law jokes please) are perhaps those most difficult to love. I remember some years ago in the Sunday School asking the children what they were giving up for Lent and being both amused and shocked when one person replied with a disarming honesty, "I'm giving up my dad". Family relations, quarrels, separations and divorces require real wisdom and insight to know how to handle them in a spirit of love. But prayer especially for strength and discernment are gifts of the Holy Spirit which we are commanded by the Lord to pray for earnestly.

The imagery of judgement and hell in the parable, "the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels" are reminiscent of the prayers of exorcism in the baptismal service, and they are both vivid and frightening. But fear, while it can keep us in order like a Regimental Sgt Major in the British Army, cannot deliver love to us. Love is a vision, a magnet, a perspective on the world and creation itself, which inspires us to superhuman acts of love and sacrifice. The lives of the saints bear ample witness to this. We are granted to understand through the grace of the Holy Spirit what God has done for us in Christ; we see the beauty of the creation, the heights to which human love can ascend and we are inspired to abandon all and to follow as the disciples did in the Gospel accounts. A call and an active and immediate response.

So, the theme of today's parable is not about fear but about a love which transforms us and consequently situations around us. Let us pray fervently throughout the fast for that gift of the Holy Spirit which draws us to our neighbour and the created order in imitation of the relationship of the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

***Oxford 11<sup>th</sup> February 2018***