

HEALING OF THE INFIRM WOMAN – St Luke 13:10-17

Like many of St Luke's accounts of the miracles performed by Jesus the narrative is very straightforward and factual but a deeper reading of the text opens up some more illuminating aspects. Christ is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. A woman is present who has been suffering for eighteen years with an illness which prevents her straightening herself up. Christ sees her and immediately interrupts the service to lay hands on her and heal her. The leader of the synagogue is scandalised because the event takes place on the Sabbath and admonishes Jesus. He replies by pointing out the inconsistency of the ruler's words and his deeds since he does essential work on the Sabbath like feeding his animals but will not allow the performance of good deeds. They, the religious authorities, are put to shame and the people are ecstatic at what has happened.

It is interesting that St Luke has done his research and takes pains to mention the period that the woman has been afflicted by her illness, as he does in so many of his accounts of miracles. In this case it is eighteen years. And yet despite the period of suffering God does not forget. Christ calls directly and heals. In our own cases too there is a parallel since most of us battle away at our own afflictions and will cry to God for deliverance or will ask vainly. "Why have you fashioned me thus?". The reality of our life is some kind of crucifixion after the manner of Christ. After all what is good for the master is good for the servant as St Paul reminds us. "I have been crucified with Christ". In the depths of our pain and anguish we are to remind ourselves of the presence of God and his intimate knowledge of our condition. Even more than that 'nothing happens by chance' we are told by the well-known Russian émigré priest, Alexander Elchaninov. And Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow includes in one of his famous, "In unforeseen events let me not forget that all are sent by thee." It is profoundly unchristian to believe in chance. Secretly of course our cry disguises a desire to be comfortable, to have things ordered for a while and to forget that as Christians we are not at home here and never really can be until we reach the goal of our journey, which is heaven.

The saints, like St Seraphim, who saw the hell of this earthly life and the joy of heaven, remind us frequently that if we could see what awaits us, we would eagerly consent to endure far more for the Gospel and, as he graphically puts it, 'to be eaten by worms'. In the world we shall see remarkable examples of beauty, the image or foretaste of God, which point us like icons towards heaven and our home. But there is no real home for us here. We cannot find any ultimate satisfaction for the yearning of our souls deep within us. Fr Lev Gillet, the Monk of the Eastern Church, used to say that the person who says he is comfortable and at home in the world is really saying that the world has made itself comfortable in him. But this is not the Christian experience and how useful in God's hands is the tool of suffering if we can grapple with it courageously, and see what it has to say to us and use it by God's grace to find a certain kind of peace and patience in the eye of the storm. At this point perhaps comes the sudden deliverance of today's Gospel, because we have accepted our cross and we can move into a new phase of our relationship with God.

And closely connected with this experience is the second half of the account. There's nothing like suffering to sharpen the spiritual perception. Christ sees straight through to the heart of the law and the rules about the Sabbath, namely that it is made for man and not the other way round. Now this applies to our reading of the law or what we try to observe of the traditions of the Church as faithful servants. We are now well into the Advent fast and I remember many years ago somebody coming to me and saying that after joining the Church he had tried as hard as possible to observe the fasting rules of Lent and attend the services. However, at one stage he had begun to ask himself what it was all about. Subsequently, he had not observed the fasts. This kind of experience is not unusual in the first flush of Orthodox joy and in the desire to embrace Orthodoxy in its entirety and become 'perfect'. Those who have been born into an Orthodox culture and have been reared from earliest times in the fasting tradition are very fortunate. But, as we probably all know, to attempt to scale such great heights is often too soon and doomed to failure. As I said two weeks ago much better to be realistic about what one can do and try to keep to ever so little. The joy of fasting is a gift from God and as we have an increased taste of its benefits we try with God's help according to our circumstances to receive more. But the danger is that we actually harm our souls if we impose too much upon ourselves, just as conversely, we fail to reach the height of our own glory if we do not impose enough (like a professional athlete). In the same way the traditions and fasts of the Church are made for us and not vice versa. As we appreciate the good inherent in them so shall we long to appropriate more to ourselves. But let us not put the cart before the horse and forget that the purpose of our faith is to show practical love. Patting ourselves on the back for our fasting misses the point. Those of you who met Mother Thekla will remember how she criticised those who went out of their way to find exotic foods which met the fasting requirements.

Many of us will know the famous short story by Tolstoy entitled "God sees the truth but waits". Today's Gospel account of the healing of the woman after eighteen years of illness reminds us of the virtue of patience and trusting God to act in his own time. Nothing remains still in the spiritual life. There is always something moving deep within, which is waiting to erupt into birth like a rumbling volcano. And the eruption into birth is for us as equally startling and joyous as the woman in today's Gospel who is bent and suddenly becomes straight. How wonderful and mysterious is the process of salvation taking place within us with its various stages of inner healing. And how important it is to make use of what the Church has to offer us as aids to that healing, namely the sacraments of confession or repentance, anointing and the receiving of Christ's body and blood in Communion.

May God bless all our efforts to keep the fast as we journey towards the Feast of the Incarnation of our God on earth in Jesus Christ. To Him be glory in the Church both now and forever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

9th December 2018