AFTERFEAST OF THE ASCENSION St John 17:1-13

Last Thursday we celebrated the Feast of the Ascension. We ceased to greet each other with the Paschal salutation and we removed the winding sheet of Christ’s body from the altar. We shall resume the prayer to the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy next Sunday at Pentecost but until then we are in a kind of low period between the two feasts of the Resurrection and the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and members of the early Church. In the daily readings which are appointed for all of us to read, not just the clergy, we are well into the second book of St Luke known as the Acts of the Apostles. In these we have seen the conversion of the enemy of the Church, Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus where he was going to arrest and execute its members. We have witnessed his amazing u-turn and his becoming Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. Arguing with the Jews of what is present day Turkey and Greece and the philosophers of Athens he tries to prove through considerable persecution and opposition but with great success that Jesus is the Messiah (the expected one) and that his resurrection from the dead shows that he is the one sent by the creator of the world to bring salvation (the victory over death) to mankind throughout the world.

In today’s reading from St John’s gospel we have heard the long prayer of Jesus for the Church, familiar to us from Thursday of Holy Week. It emphasises the unity of the wills of Christ and the Father despite the unspeakable agony which he goes through in his earthly life leading to his crucifixion. He has been faithful unto death and he has guarded his followers or kept them ‘in your name’ as was his duty. He now prays that the Church may be one, as the Father and the Son are one. Christ’s prayer is a kind of scale against which we as members of his Body can usefully measure ourselves to keep ourselves humble.

The Church that He founded has been divided since the 11th century and it is with considerable sadness that we look at the recent developments and rifts between two patriarchates of the Eastern Church. Conversely, the meetings between Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in Rome and Istanbul have yielded positive signs of a deep desire for rapprochement. Disagreement in the Church is familiar to us from the earliest times. We have recently read of the dispute between St Paul and St Barnabas about whether to take John Mark with them on their second missionary journey to the Gentiles as he had left them during their first expedition and returned home. They could not agree and this difference led indirectly to the conversion of Cyprus by Barnabas and of large parts of Greece by Paul. Disagreement is part of life and of the Church but only in the light of love and respect for our neighbour. In his letters Paul speaks about our oneness in Christ. He writes, “As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ”. Here again is a concept of oneness which is a mark of the Church even in our disagreements and we can honestly admit in the light of our continuing nationalism that we have failed in this in many different ways in the Orthodox Church.

Another image that he presents to us is that of the body and he says that we, as the Body of Christ are many members which are joined inseparably to each other. Some of these members appear weaker than each other and inferior but it is not so. All are equally important and we should accept what we are in the Body whether higher or lower and try to support the other members. He writes that there should be “no dissension within the body but the members should have the same care for each other. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it”. This again finds many echoes in scripture that when we sin, we sin against each other and damage the Body of Christ.

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After this discourse in his letter to the Church in Corinth in which he likens the Church to a body and its members to parts of the body, which are dependent upon each other St Paul concludes by saying there is a more excellent way. This leads him into one of the most famous passages in the history of world literature namely a long discussion on the nature of love, which is familiar to most of us. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”…He tells us…”Faith, hope and love abide, these three but the greatest of these is love”. As Christ loved the Church and gave his life for it, so in this high priestly prayer he prays that we should emulate the acts of the Father and the Son whose will is one. “All mine are yours and yours are mine.” Love is not an option in the Church. It is part of the rules that we have subscribed to in our baptism. And particularly today when we see our fellow Christians suffering so grievously in the Middle East.

And then there is another duty of the Church which Christ imposed on us at his Ascension, namely to take this message of the love of God in Christ into the world. Elsewhere in the Gospel Christ says there are other sheep which must come into the fold i.e. future members of the Church. God’s love does not rest until all of mankind has embraced this experience. “Dare we hope for the salvation of all” is the title of an article written some years ago by Metropolitan Kallistos. As Christ prays in today’s gospel so fervently and deeply for us, members of His Church, who have experienced something of this love, we must reply, “Unreservedly, we pray and work for the salvation of the world”. Lord Jesus Christ come!

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