**ALL SAINTS OF RUSSIA, BRITAIN, ROMANIA etc**

We are now more than half way through the fast for the Apostles, Peter and Paul**,** and today’s reading from the Gospel of St Matthew describes in minimalist terms the calling of four of the Apostles: Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee. The narrative is so stark, so factual and devoid of detail as to be for some difficult to believe. Jesus simply passes by while they are casting or mending their fishing nets on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and issues the invitation, “Follow me”. In the former case he adds the promise, “And I will make you fishers of men” (not “vicious old men” as we used to sing at Sunday School). They drop everything and follow the Lord, leaving their father in the second case to complete the work of mending the nets. The narrative seems to be intentionally short and arresting and there is no doubt an echo here of the three major Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel who each describe their calling by God in their writings. We can justifiably ask what could have gone on in their hearts and minds to make them ready and to give them the courage to down tools immediately and to follow him. We might think it demands years of inner preparation of pondering issues of the world both external and internal but on closer examination we see this sudden decision or, for some, act of unthinking madness in the world, whether it be the act of falling in love on meeting somebody for the first time or as many did in my home town in the 60s, leaving school before the prescribed time and forming a music group. We cannot calculate the incidence of success in both cases but we read and hear of enough 50th or 60th wedding anniversaries and people who make it to the top in the music business to know that it is significant. But this experience of meeting somebody which changes one’s life happens in the spiritual life too. Metropolitan Anthony wrote about how he met his spiritual father just walking up some stairs in Paris and my own accidental meeting with him in my room in Oxford as a student certainly changed my direction in my faith.

Very often the late Metropolitan used to quote the monastic saying that you cannot become a monk or nun until you have seen the face of Christ on at least one person’s face in your life. Accidental meetings can and do change our lives. A few weeks ago we celebrated the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, Photini or Svetlana. She encountered Christ at Jacob’s well and this meeting provoked a response, perhaps as powerful and immediate as in today’s gospel where everything that has gone before is abandoned in the interests of following Christ.

But in the places of the four Apostles we may substitute you or me or the Church. In his letter to the Church at Ephesus St Paul writes that “we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him‘. In many places in scripture we are reminded of our uniqueness in the sight of God and the uniqueness of our relationship with Him.

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Today we celebrate the saints of Russia, Romania, Mount Athos, America, and other countries and we wonder what made them such holy people. We know from some of them that it was an acute awareness of their own sin but there must also have been a realisation of God’s proximity to them in spiritual terms and their understanding of His immense love for them. Some years ago I spoke to one of the nuns in our deanery who was a former member of this community. She described her vocation to the monastic life as having an overwhelming sense of God’s love for her which she experienced directly and physically. This reminds me of the English mystic Julian of Norwich of the 14th and 15th centuries who, seeing a leaf in her hand, had a vision of God’s love for the world and for herself. Almost nothing is known about her except her meditations in her book The Revelations of Divine Love, the first book written by a woman in the English language.

In the final verse of today’s Gospel we are told that “Jesus went about all Galilee,

teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people”. This initial meeting of the four Apostles leads them into a journey which they could never have imagined and to see the love of God in action to a degree which will change their lives forever.

But what about us? In Christ’s Church we too are apostles or sent out as the Greek word ‘apostolos’ means, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the measure given to us by Christ Himself. Last week I mentioned the beautiful, other worldly fragrance which the body of St Seraphim exudes when his casket is opened at Diveyevo monastery in Russia. St Paul in his second letter to the Church at Corinth describes us believers as ‘the aroma or fragrance of Christ to God’. This fragrance, though perhaps not as pungent as that of the saints is real in a mystical way. It comes from knowing Christ and spreads everywhere we are.

So as we go about our daily lives doing the work of an apostle in the unique manner to which God has called us, let us remember these words of St Paul: “Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Him”. And let us rejoice with the saints throughout the world whose lives we commemorate today.

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