SUNDAY OF ALL SAINTS St Matt. 10: 32-33, 37-38; 19: 27-30

Since the Feast of the Ascension our attention has been concentrated on the embryonic Church of Jesus Christ which he founded here on earth in Jerusalem. Two weeks ago we looked at Christ’s prayer for the Church, asking that it may be one i.e. united in love just as the Father and the Son are one and share one will. And we considered the image of the members of the Church created by St Paul of a body with many parts and limbs, some more important, others weaker, but all inextricably bound together and dependent on each other in order to function properly. I think I have mentioned before there is also another strikingly interesting image or rather two images of the Church in the very early work called the Shepherd of Hermas. The author is granted a vision of the Church in the form of an aged woman, weak and helpless from the sins of the faithful, who tells him to do penance and to correct the sins of his children. Subsequently, he sees her made younger through penance, yet wrinkled and with white hair; then again, as quite young but still with white hair; and lastly, she shows herself as glorious as a Bride. The second image is that of a tower which is continually being built as the Church, and the stones of which it is built are the faithful. Some fit into the tower perfectly, others not so easily. The latter have to be discarded or reshaped.

Last Sunday we celebrated the empowering of the Church through the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and disciples of Christ in the form of fiery tongues sitting on each of them. It gave them the courage to preach the resurrection of the Lord boldly and without fear, so that thousands were led to believe in Jesus as the coming Messiah and the Saviour of the New Israel. This antagonized the scribes and Pharisees among the Jews who reacted ruthlessly with persecution, imprisonment and executions, most notably in the stoning of the first martyr the deacon Stephen. Later the Lord’s brother James, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, was martyred too.

Today’s Gospel reading lays on us in stark and arresting terms the cost and the duties of those who choose to follow Christ: We are first warned about the dangers of apostasy or betraying Christ by an act of denial. If we deny him before men, he will deny us before the Father and if we acknowledge him before men he too will acknowledge us before the Father. Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Middle East are painfully aware of the consequences, namely death, of acknowledging him before terrorists and fanatics. Here in the west we often experience opposition and ridicule for being believers but nothing like those Christians in the east. And yet despite the harsh warning in the Gospel we know that Peter was forgiven for betraying his master and made head of the Church. Elsewhere we read that “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself”. There is always a way back to God through confessing our sins and repentance.

And then we read about our priorities as followers of Christ. We must love Christ more than those dear to us. He does not say that we should not love our families and our friends but there is an order of things here. The first commandment given to Moses talks about loving God with all our heart, strength, soul and mind and this includes necessarily our fellow man but what Christ is speaking about here is making God our priority just as seeking the Kingdom of Heaven first will inevitably bring us the riches of the world as well but not vice versa. “You cannot serve God and mammon (or riches)” is what the Lord states elsewhere. It is a question of priority, which we constantly need to assess to remain spiritually healthy and to make sure we maintain detachment from earthly things as the Fathers of the Church urge us to do.

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But included with this prioritization of the spiritual over the material comes the injunction to each and every one of us to take up the cross which is unavoidable in following Christ.

This personal cross can take many different forms in life: physical, mental, psychological, emotional, in our relations both intimate and social with families, partners, colleagues. But no matter in which way they are measured out to us we are promised them and it is to be expected. “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you’” writes St Peter. In the Church we are all called to be martyrs in some form or other and especially in the prayers at a marriage (symbolized by the crown) and at the ordination of a priest indicated in the hymn to the martyrs. We are told to bear our cross manfully and not to forget that this is the way appointed by the Master for our salvation. In this we are told to find joy because God is refining our faith in Him. How hard this is!

It is not surprising in the Gospel that Peter complains given the warnings and obligations which are laid on the disciples and those who would follow Christ. Is it all one way traffic, he objects, or “what shall we have since we have left everything and followed you?” The answer comes that the disciples at the coming of Christ will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel. It is not immediately clear what this signifies but it is made abundantly clear that if we share Christ’s sufferings, we shall also share his glory. This is our source of joy.

Today we honour all the saints of the Church. We too are saints chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world according to the words of scripture. This is a statement we can usefully dwell on. The Christian view seems to be that we never stop existing before, during and after life and that we retain our uniqueness of identity in Christ. Today, as we celebrate those saints especially who went much further than us along the path of theosis or becoming Christlike we are to find joy in our membership of the Church for which Christ gave his blood. And in thankfulness to God for all his benefits we are to pray that he will pour out the Holy Spirit on each of us so that we too may become like them and “let our lights shine before men”, as the Lord bids us.

 *Oxford 27th June 2021*