**THE GOOD SAMARITAN St Luke 10: 25-37**

We have come to the Sunday before the Advent Fast, which begins on Friday, and we are asked to abstain from animal products until after the Divine Liturgy on the Feast of the Nativity when we celebrate God’s entry into this world in the form of a man, as a baby, Jesus of Nazareth. He has no earthly father, although Righteous Joseph the Betrothed takes on that role in practice, and his mother, who is a virgin, is made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. There are many who scoff at the miracle of a virgin birth but it exists in nature and I would not be surprised if scientists prove it possible in the not too distant future.

However, I should like to say a few words about the epistle which was read to us a few minutes ago. It comes from the second chapter of St Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia and it is a pity that the preceding verses were not read to us as it sets the following verses about justification by faith and not by the law i.e. of Moses in context. In the first chapter of the letter St Paul talks autobiographically about his calling by Christ to be an apostle and how he slowly made contact with the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem, Peter and James, the brother of the Lord. Then fourteen years later he went back again and noticed that false brothers or believers who insisted on circumcision had penetrated the Church. Later when Peter came to meet him at Antioch St Paul opposed him to the face and accused him of hypocrisy because he had been eating with Gentiles but withdrew after certain members of the circumcision party arrived from fear of them. It seems that other Jews joined Peter even Barnabas, the first Archbishop of Cyprus. But Paul was adamant and accused them of not acting consistently with the truth and freedom of the gospel. And this leads him into a discussion of what justifies people who believe. It is most definitely not by performing works of the law, since this does not lead to salvation but it is simple faith in Christ which saves us. “If the law had been sufficient, then Christ died for nothing” he says.

Paul is probably so acutely aware of this because he had been so strictly brought up in the Jewish legal and Pharisaic tradition which he had pursued zealously only to reject this when he had met Christ on the road to Damascus and discovered that Christians are the true descendants of Abraham because like him they believe in the promises of God that is Christ and are justified by their faith. As he says in the next chapter God says to Abraham, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you. ‘For this reason those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed’.”

What does all this have to say to us? Much indeed about how we approach fasting and view our relationship with God. All of us no doubt would freely admit that we would like to achieve an exalted spiritual state under our own efforts and particularly by ticking all the boxes at every stage on climbing the ladder of perfection. Fortunately for us God has other ideas and brings us down to reality and humility with a bump to make us see that it is the work of the Spirit in us which drives us forward. It is our hearts that the Lord wants, where our treasure lies, and he tests our willingness to serve him faithfully as far as we can out of love for him. The coming fast is designed to prepare that inner place into which he can enter more fully, not just to put us through an ascetic assault course.

The second theme that arises from the readings today is of course our love for our neighbour. In the gospel the Lord deliberately makes the outcast, the Samaritan, the hero of the parable and the religious establishment the villains. The priest and the Levite observe the law to the letter perhaps but something gets badly lost in the reasoning. Christ says that you should honour your father and your mother according to the Law of Moses but this is twisted by the Pharisees into ‘if I make an offering to God (corban) of what I would have given my parents it is more blessed than if I had helped them’. The Samaritan, however, simply sees the need and gives generously what he can.

The key question that the lawyer asks is “Who is my neighbour?” The parable shows that the person who is near us who is in need is our neighbour whether we like him or not and loving our neighbour may involve helping one who has actually done us harm. In the life of St John the Merciful, whose feast falls on Tuesday, he took the words of Christ seriously and continued to help those who were cheating him and to show mercy to those who were clearly abusing him. This is no easy task to overcome our righteous indignation and to do good to our enemies. We all naturally have those we like and those we are not attracted too and I often dwell on the phrase “the disciple who Jesus loved’. But Christ lays upon us the commandment to pray for those who hate us and do us harm. It is not enough to love those who love us as everybody naturally does. Membership of the Kingdom requires us to go much further and bring a new law of love to those around us. To inspire us we have the image of Christ before us: arrested unjustly, mocked, humiliated, brutally beaten, and sentenced to a criminal’s death despite having done nothing to deserve it. And finally praying in his last words for those who have done all this to him.

As a community we shall collect for a worthy cause on three Sundays in Advent, that is for those who have been victims of sex trafficking or sexually abused. But let us use the period of the fast to dwell on the lengths to which human love can extend, as we see in the life of Christ, and pray that our hearts may be opened to see those in need around us and to give courageously to meet that need as the Spirit of Christ within directs us.

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