

26th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 17: 12-19

December 22, 2013

Beloved in the Lord. As we prepare ourselves for the celebration of Our Lord's Nativity, His Birth as a Man, I think that it will be helpful to refresh and clarify our understanding of what this Birth signifies; why and how it is important. So, today we will review the basic Orthodox teaching on this subject. St. John of Damascus said that Christ's Incarnation is, "the only new thing under the sun". This means that since the creation of the world and man, nothing new happened until the Coming of the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

To grasp the meaning of this we must back up a bit and reconsider what is called the Fall of mankind. We read an account of this fall in Genesis. In describing the cause of this Fall, the Orthodox, as a rule, do not use the term 'original sin' nor are people thought to be, somehow, guilty of Adam and Eve's error. Rather we teach the Fall as the ancestral sin, the error of the first people. We are not, personally, responsible for any sins but our own. What we inherited from our ancestors was not the responsibility for their sins but the consequences of those mistakes. This same kind of thing happens to people all the time. I make a decision to move to Syracuse, NY. That's my responsibility. My kids are not responsible for that but they will have to live with the consequences, one of which will be that they will grow up in Syracuse, not Hawaii or Paris, France. We all live with the consequences of other people's choices. Some we are able to change. When they grow up my kids can move to Hawaii if they want to. Other things, like their genetic makeup, are a bit more permanent.

When it comes to the ancestral sin, according to Orthodox teaching, no one is born free of the consequences. Ancestral sin meant depravation of the Glory of God, alienation from God and loss of communion with God. It, also, has physical consequence, namely, corruption, decay and death. Metropolitan Hierotheos points out that "the decay and death that man inherits is the favorable climate for the nature of the passions. In this way, man's nous (his consciousness) is darkened."

This is the Orthodox explanation of how the universal human condition of alienation, inclination to evil and death came about. For untold centuries thoughtful people have recognized this condition in themselves, recognized it in their fellow beings and struggled with the persistent conviction that, somehow, this is not the way things should be.

Christians believe that by Christ's assuming a mortal and passible body, by His Incarnation, he helped to correct the consequences of ancestral sin. Through Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection, human nature has become deified (reunited with God, existentially) and, thus, the possibility of being deified has been granted to every man. Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection, quite literally, creates a new thing; a new human nature. Thus, the Church calls Christ the New Adam.

Now here's the thing that we must be clear about. Jesus Christ, the God-Man is the new human nature. It does not exist apart from Him. You and I cannot acquire it of ourselves or for ourselves in some individualized way. Our experience as fallen beings is the experience of separation - "I am a rock, I am an island". All we can really say of the New Life offered us by Christ is that it's not like that.

Christ, by His Incarnation, has made a Miracle as great as the miracle of the first creation of the world and of man. All other miracles, signs and wonders are dwarfed by the Miracle of the creating of the God-Man. This miracle begins (if we can really speak that way about it) with the Annunciation of Christ's Conception to the Theotokos. It culminates in the Ascension of the Risen Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. All of the great feasts of Christ are feasts of His Incarnation and are unified. We only separate them for the purpose of contemplation of the Mystery. In every Divine Liturgy we live through all the events of this great Miracle. Thus, the Fathers teach that it is always Christmas, always Pascha, always Pentecost, etc.

So, let's see how this miracle affects us. The Fathers teach that by Holy Baptism we become members of the Deified and Risen Body of Christ. They say that man is released from the ancestral sin by Holy Baptism. In other words, we are 'saved' from the condition of fallen human nature but accepting the invitation to become 'one' with Him. By uniting ourselves to Christ, we unite ourselves to the new deified human nature and this new man begins to be formed in us.

Only Jesus is the God-Man. This is why the Fathers teach, unequivocally, that there is no salvation except in Jesus Christ. “I am the Way, I am the Truth, I am the Life”, says Christ. ‘Unless you drink My Blood and eat My Flesh, you will not have the new human nature in you’.

This union with Christ is what makes a person a true Christian. What many people do not seem to understand, however, is that this miracle happening in us, also, takes place over a period of time; a time that does not end with the death of this life. The new nature does not suddenly annihilate the old man. Rather, a conflict begins in the person who must choose freely and repeatedly to support the new life and to suppress the old man. This defines our struggle.

It is like marriage. The ceremony is just the beginning of a lifelong struggle for unity with another person. If a person does not experience this struggle or engage in this struggle in a conscious and determined way, this does not mean that everything is okay. What it usually means is that the old man is ‘running the table’.

The new life in Christ is the nature and development of the new nature; not just an improvement, more or less, of the old fallen nature. Bringing this new nature into its full stature and maturity is our most important work as Christians. It would seem, however, that the great majority of people do not really want this new life that Christ holds out to them. Or, at least, they don’t want it badly enough to do the work that acquiring it would entail. As one of our theologians once put it, “People often disappoint”. Much like the 9 ungrateful lepers in today’s Gospel. And much like the many marriages that fail.

Admittedly, there are many wonderful ideas and teachings in Christianity that even the old man can be improved by. Jesus does heal all ten lepers. There is no indication that he reverses the healing of the ungrateful nine. The sun continues to shine on both the just and the unjust. But to be Orthodox is to go beyond that. To be Orthodox is to recognize the great gift that has been offered to humanity. To be Orthodox is to hold out a trembling hand to receive this great gift and to dedicate the rest of our lives to the struggle that is required of us. Thus, we show genuine gratitude for God’s Gift.

I have attempted this morning to put before our mind's eye a few simple rudiments of our Orthodox theology. I have tried to express this theology in words that modern people like ourselves can understand. The words and examples may be mine but the teaching is that of the Fathers. Met. Hierotheos, again, tells us "The Divine Incarnation is not offered (by the Church at Christmas) for pious thoughts and sentimental or psychological analyses." Such analyses can offer something to a suitable physical and spiritual age level but, in the end, the Mystery of the Incarnation must be analyzed within the atmosphere of Orthodox theology.

We will continue this study next week which the Church designates as the Sunday of the Holy Forefathers. God Bless you all.