

A Life Centred on Christ or on Ourselves?

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The third Sunday of Matthew, and the Gospel reading, attempts, perhaps more than at any other time, to get us to move us to make a change, to put to right inclinations which are foreign and alien to us. In the text, the Evangelist castigates the perpetual, disordered attitude among many people- then among pagans and idolaters, now among those influenced by our Western life-style- who, rather than having Christ and the opportunity of an encounter with Him as their priority, instead have any trivial, banal thing that's given value by our sick adherence to what's become our culture.



The Gospel way of life which was presented two thousand years ago, followed as it has been by many believers, with the saints as perfect examples, is a life balanced between matter and spirit. The soul, as God's supreme gift to us, is superior to matter, though this doesn't mean that the latter should be belittled. But what the Gospel, and all the Fathers who have since commented on it, attempts to get us to understand is what the position of matter in our lives should be. The manic concern over what we're going to eat, drink or wear is a sketch of people who seem to be earthly and 'biological'. The stress, anxiety and care over the material aspects of everyday life paint a picture of a type of person who, as they go through life, have a sense of 'anxious self-sufficiency'. This is a self-sufficiency that limits life to material and earthly goods, and leaves no room for faith in anything else. In the end, it's a trap.

At this point, the Gospel-writer highlights two wonderful images from our daily lives 'the birds of the air' and the 'lilies of the field'. And this is, perhaps the most convincing answer, if we think about the 'unconcern' of the birds and flowers, which are under the aegis of God's providence. In my view, our lives should be greatly simplified, so that we can understand this miracle of nature and this providential activity of God for all of us.

The Evangelist tells us to take no care over what we shall eat, drink or wear, providing us with an outline of the sort of person who follows the Gospel and the

Orthodox view of human nature. The Orthodox way of life has Christ at its centre. Orthodox people live, breathe, think and work with Christ forever the 'extreme object of their mind', because in Him we've placed the hope of our salvation. The purpose of life isn't prosperity or 'happiness', but the experience of Paradise. This is why so many holy people have, over the years, been taken up with and have matured through the Church services, the Divine Liturgy, the sacraments, prayer, fasting, the reading of spiritual books and with the Gospel way of life in general, either at home or in monasteries. But a life based on Orthodox dogma presupposes a great desire and longing for all of this, to the extent that so many things of this world will seem really trivial to you. Elder Gavriil, from the Holy Monastery of Dionysiou writes that: 'the greatest activity in the Church is non-activity', meaning non-involvement with useless, worldly matters which separate you from God. And if we wanted to put a name to these useless things today, it would be none other than 'addiction': to our tablets, computers, cell phones and so on. This is why the Orthodox way of life is above all a frantic movement upwards and a gradual disdain for the things below, though this is not to say that the things of this world are demonic.

The life of the Church, then, is the most wonderful way of life. It's natural and linked to Christ. As we can see from history, it's a way of life handed down over the centuries which ensures first personal and then social harmony, without the need for the psychiatric medications of the modern age. Byzantium [New Rome] lasted for so many centuries because the life of its citizens was Christ-centred and ecclesiastical and this was something which the imperial authorities recognized and adopted, though not entirely*. With the passage of time, however, estrangement began to have an effect on people and strong faith in God gave way to strong faith in the earth and flesh. From a life centred on Christ, we became focused completely on humanism, which was in large measure a product of the Western world.

This materialist spirit in Europe gradually infiltrated into the East, its aim always having been to teach a different way of life, a different culture, in which matter would have the first say in all aspects. The European way of life has filled us with a whole host of requirements. These needs are superfluous and each of us can live perfectly well without them. The simple way of life has been lost and the complex life of one requirement after another is forever increasing its demands. The result of all this: increased stress and cares, and the appearance of other mental problems. Essentially, however, as the learned monk Theoklitos from the Holy Monastery of Dionysiou puts it: 'problems don't really exist. The problem that arises is that we don't exist'. Problems cease when we exist. Our 'existence' in God

makes any problems non-existent, whereas our 'non-existence' manifest them as real. And it's a fact that this 'non-existence' of God was first experienced in the West and is now being served to us.

What remains for us is to redefine our roots and repeat the process of evangelization. There are lots of problems because of our 'non-existence' and lack of trust in God. But we've forgotten the commitment of the Gospel: first seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and everything will be added to you', because our priority isn't our salvation but our material survival. Let us reconnect with the Orthodox perspective of life, with its centre and starting-point the experience of the Kingdom of God. As Saint Porfyrrios taught: 'Let us ask in our prayer only for the salvation of our soul [...] without demands and pressure for other things we might want. God doesn't need us to tell Him about our various needs. He knows them all incomparably better than we do and provides us with His love. The thing is that we have to respond to this love with prayer and the observance of His commandments'.

***Cf. Emperor Marcian, who declared, concerning a matter about to be debated at the Fourth Ecumenical Synod (Chalcedon, 451): 'Whatever the Holy Synod decides is law unto me; I follow it and I believe in it'. [WJL].**