

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Indeed, this is what we learn from Jesus today when He teaches us about what the last judgment will be like. God is present with us through the words of Scripture, through the Holy Eucharist and also through other persons. Jesus tells us that how we treat others, particularly those who are outcasts: the stranger, the prisoner, the shut-in, the person who is hungry, thirsty, without clothes, how we treat these persons is how we treat Jesus Himself. In giving drink to the thirsty person, giving food to the person who is hungry, clothing to the person whose clothes are in tatters, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and the prisoner we show them tenderness and love and, in so doing, show the same tenderness and love to Christ Jesus.

Such good deeds are enshrined in one of the Matins gospels, the gospel we read every Bright Tuesday, the first Tuesday after Pascha. Saint Luke recounts how he and Cleopas were walking to Emmaus and were joined by someone who appeared as a stranger to them. They welcomed him as they walked, hearing from him how the Scriptures were fulfilled in all that happened to Jesus. They urged this stranger to stay with them that night and to join them for supper. And as this stranger took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them, their eyes were opened. The stranger was Christ Jesus Himself transfigured in the glory of His resurrection. And immediately He vanished from their midst.

To Luke and Cleopas this person was indeed a stranger. They didn't see Jesus in the face of the stranger who joined them. They could have told the person they were busy with their own conversation, that they didn't want him to join them or have him join but treat him like a third wheel. They did none of these things. They welcomed him and invited them into their conversation and journey, inviting him to share food with them. And lo, it was the Lord the entire time!

For our life as Christians to bear the fruit of communion with God, we must live in communion with one another. We must show tenderness to the sick, the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner (guilt matters not at all here – Jesus doesn't say "as long as you visited and innocent prisoner") As Fr. Esteban pointed out so powerfully last Sunday, Christ came to be with the sinners: the tax collectors, the prostitutes, those pushed to the margins by the religious authorities of the day. And we are sinners. Kierkegaard put it perfectly: "As in relation to God one is always in the wrong." It is not ethics, it is not human-type justice that governs it all, but God's righteousness, which is His holiness, which is His love. So salvation is not a matter of moral retribution, but being inscribed into God's love, becoming His love. That's the hidden meaning of this Gospel: clothe, feed, give water, because I (God) would clothe, feed, give water. Your salvation is to be Me - God. It is not a juridical transaction, but a transformation, a matter of being. God is the only good, all that is good, and all our goodness is His. That's why we call Him "He who accomplishes all in all" (St. Basil), "you are our sanctification" (St. John). Truly, the two insights together come to the absolute truthfulness of the fact that "we have done nothing good upon this earth." It's not an exercise in modesty, not a self-imposed abasement, but the ultimate truth.

We hear this gospel every year as we get nearer to Lent. We need this reminder that not only during Lent but during the whole of our lives we are to look with God's eyes upon the suffering. Not judging them or blaming them for their circumstances but look on them as God looks on all of us: with tenderness, compassion, with a heart that is open to welcome, to pray for, to give help.

It is our awareness of our own sins, not those of others; it is our showing mercy to those who are in need; it is these ways of being that allow us to move beyond fear of the final judgment when Christ will come to judge us because we will have judged ourselves. St. Porphyrios, a modern day saint, said "When someone progresses and enters into the love of God, what need does he have of fear? Whatever he does, he does out of love, and that is of infinitely greater value...we gradually enter into the love of God. Then the torment of hell, fear and death all disappear. We are interested only in the love of God. We do everything for this love, as the bridegroom does for the bride." Let us, then, advance in the virtue of showing mercy to the stranger, the one who hungers, thirsts, is naked, the sick and the prisoner, not because we fear Christ's judgment but because we love Christ and our love for Him we make real in the love we show for one another.