

Sermon 5th week after Pentecost

CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST !

Paul speaks of his fellow Jews not walking in the covenant of righteousness and thus being unenlightened and attempting to fashion a righteousness of their own.

The word must be on both our lips and in our hearts.

Why do you suppose that Paul said this, to the Romans? There were Jews among the Romans, but for the most part the Romans were pagans. Yes he is making a case for the Gospel. He is warning us, that our faith, our participation, our communion, can become a formula that we perform instead of that which is on our lips and heart. The zeal to “be right” (as if this is what righteousness is about) is a temptation that has been in the Church from the first century.

And today this legalism can show up in a variety of ways. Legalism is a minimalist faith. And our culture contributes to this legalistic approach. Our culture doesn't ask “what are the bounties of God that He has made available to us?” but rather, “what is the least that we have to do? – what is the minimum I have to do to get by?”

This can be just as much a problem for us today as it was for the Jews in the first century. And we can become just as blind to God as they were.

Archbishop Dmitri of Dallas (of blessed memory said in his commentary on today's epistle: God forbid that any Orthodox

believer, in the name of piety and zeal, should ever persecute any one who is not in agreement with us, be they non-Christians, heretics, or simply non-believers! Unfortunately, there have been persecutions of Jews and heretics by those who thought they were doing God's service. In the life of the Church, there have been, and there still are, pious people and monks whose misguided zeal has moved them to condemn their "lax" brethren. They (in their zeal to be righter than right) condemn the clergy of the canonical Church for a variety of reasons. . . . These things have led to the formation of schismatic groups that claim to be the only "true" or "genuine" Orthodox Church.

When we replace our hunger for God with our zeal for being right, we cease desiring God.

We have been given so great a gift of the Orthodox Christian faith. We can treat it like just another thing we do; or we can let that faith transform us into the likeness of God.

And St. Paul further instructs us of the importance of humility. For God became humble for our sake – the Word became flesh, Christ humbled Himself for our sake and took on our humanity. So we must also humble ourselves and avoid looking only to our narrow interests.

The story of Jesus' encounter with two demoniacs is very similar to another story. It is a story that asks a lot of questions when we listen carefully. This comes after Jesus has calmed the sea (more about that in 4 weeks). The two demoniacs begin with a very telling cry. "What hast Thou to do with us, O Son of God? Hast Thou come to torment us before the time?" Why was there

an expectation that they would be tormented? And Gerasenes was just across the Sea from a pig dry county. Yet pigs are being herded. (There are some who suggest that Jesus may have gotten part of His parable of the prodigal son from the circumstances.) And so the demoniacs are healed and restored to their right mind.

Both SS John Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria say that the demons were afraid that Jesus was going to give them the final judgement now.

We can only imagine what torment the two suffered at the hands of the demons, for the herd of swine that Jesus bade them go to was not able to bear the demons.

Yet another way of seeing this is to admire the intelligence of the pigs. For while we humans endure their horrible ministrations and suggestions, the pigs did not, preferring death to the sort of things that we flirt with most of the time – to the temptations we consider, and, just as often as not, succumb to.

The the owners of the swine herds meet God and ask Him to leave because it is bad for business. This is a message to us. We can turn our backs on God because what God is doing is inconvenient.

And so Jesus honours their request, and does not impose the presence of the Saviour of the World upon those Garasenes. God came to them . . . and they said “no, please go.” Let us take care that we do not say the same to God when He comes to us.

This story asks us a few questions if we will but hear: What has us isolated from others? What has us imprisoned by our passions? What in our life is blocking us?

And, where in our life do we ask God to leave? Where does the holiness of God confront us – and we ask Him to leave out of shame or out of our disordered desires.