

Translation of the Relics of the Venerable John, Abbot of Rila in Bulgaria; Righteous John, Wonderworker of Kronstadt

1 November 2020

Christ is in our midst! He is and ever shall be !

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen !

Epistle : Galatians 2:16-20

16 knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. 17 But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! 18 For if I build again those things which I destroyed; I make myself a transgressor. 19 For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

The Orthodox Study Bible describes the theme of this morning's verses from Paul's letter to the Galatians as the contrast between the "true gospel" and the "false gospel" and as a response to a constant debate within the Church between the relative importance of faith and works. Both are important, but Saint Paul insists that good faith must come first to provide the foundation and to ensure the validity of good works. As we shall see in today's Gospel passage, faith is the good soil from which good works grow. The Epistle and Gospel for today connect. When Paul writes of "justification by faith", he writes of a transformation of the human soul through a spiritual rebirth. Paul's words remind us of the parable in Luke's Gospel (18:9-14) of the Publican (a tax collector) and the Pharisee who go to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray. In terms of works, the Pharisee is a good man – he follows rules and regulations but his soul is dead. He follows the rules of fasting, he donates money to the Temple, and he congratulates himself on what he sees to be his own virtues. He is not, he thinks, like other people – extortioners, adulterers and in particular the tax collector! Simply stated he is puffed up with pride and blind to his own faults. The tax gatherer, who by his profession is an exploiter of the people, has a deep

sense of his own imperfection, his own failings, and in humility and repentance he prays “God have mercy on me a sinner!” Each of the two is imperfect but one has hardened his heart through vanity, blind to his own failings while the other opens his heart to God and prays for forgiveness.

This is the essence of Paul’s words in this morning’s Epistle! Faith in terms of repentance and self recognition opens our hearts, our minds, our souls, so that Christ may live in us. Human pride, human ego are defeated. To live by faith, to put faith first puts works – deeds and actions, into their proper perspective. In Christ, we, like Paul, are encouraged to echo Paul’s words that we “[...] have been crucified with Christ; that it is no longer we who live, but Christ lives in us; and the lives we now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us!”

There is a direct connection between this morning’s Epistle and our Gospel passage from Saint Luke (8:5-15), the Parable of the Sower, which is also told in Matthew 13:1-23 and Mark 4:1-20. In Luke’s version, a farmer, a metaphor for the Lord Jesus and for the Word of God, sows seed on the land. Some of it falls by the wayside where it is trampled down, and where birds eat it. Some of the seed falls on hard ground, on rock where the seed cannot take root and soon withers for lack of moisture and dies, and some of the seed falls among thorns which grow up around it and choke it. Some of the seed, however, fall on good ground, grows to maturity and yielded an abundant and bountiful crop.

The Parable of the Sower recalls a passage in Isaiah 55:10-13 comparing the word of God (for us the Gospel of the Lord Jesus) which gives seed to the sower and bread for food. If we follow the word of God and God’s commandments in faith, Isaiah says, we shall “go forth with gladness and all Nature will rejoice and the trees of the field shall applaud with their branches! “Instead of the broom tree (desert shrub) shall come up the cypress (symbolizing healing, uprightness and eternal life), and instead of the nettle (a pernicious weed) shall come up the myrtle (an evergreen plant containing a fragrant oil ; a symbol of the recovery and fulfillment of God’s promises)”.

In today’s Gospel passage, the sower in the parable is the Lord Jesus, warning us of the dangers of shallow, insincere and false faith and of the results of falling victim to temptations and distractions which cause us to fall away from true faith. The parable is also intended as a reminder that in the Lord Jesus, the words of the words of the prophets are fulfilled!

This parable may be seen as a warning but also as an encouragement, a challenge! Who are they who respond to the challenge? The Lord Jesus identifies them as follows: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Concerning the parable of the sower, Jesus implies that while knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God is given to those who follow Him in faith, others will be blind and deaf to the message of the parable of the sower and to its meaning. The seed is the word of God! Here faith and works are placed in their proper order – faith is the good earth from which good works will grow! The explanation of what happens to the seed is true wisdom, a clear analysis of the reality of human behaviour.

For those at the wayside, easily distracted by the temptations of the world as was the case of the younger son in the parable of the Prodigal Son, temptation is like a flock of birds, large in number, pecking away at the soul to devour it. When the seed falls on rock, on hard ground, it cannot take root. Some, who at first receive the word with joy eventually fall away from faith because their faith is shallow and rootless. For others, the seed of faith which falls among the thorns of our own imperfections, fears, doubts, undue concern for the self; for riches and pleasures of the material world is choked and smothered and fails to develop. The seed which takes root in good earth, however, flourishes and yields a good crop. In order to grow, the good seed needs to be planted in good ground. The Lord Jesus likens the good ground to the receptive soul of faith and “to those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience”.

Again, the good ground, the good earth in which the good seed – the Word of God - can grow to maturity may be compared with that faith to which Paul refers in this morning’s Epistle. The parable of the sower addresses the reality of the human condition! Some people may be distracted by the temptations of the world which may trample us underfoot and like the birds peck away at our hearts and souls. Some are hard hearted, judgmental, smug, arrogant, unkind to one another. Some are engulfed by worldly desires, by the distractions of a culture of narcissism, selfishness, lust and greed which choke the life out of us, leaving us spiritually empty and dead. We – all of us - are here this morning to see and to hear! In Christ we are encouraged in soul and body to be like the good ground in the parable of the sower! May those who “hearing the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience”!

CHRIST IS IN OUR MIDST! HE IS AND EVER SHALL BE! AMEN!