

"It's Just Another Day For You and Me In Paradise"

I'll never forget what I heard one cold winter day on the radio while attending seminary over twenty years ago. . . A man was found frozen to death this morning just outside Fenway Park. Perhaps, loneliness and indifference are the greatest of sins that plague our present time. Years later, a popular song spoke of this indifference, "Think twice . . . It's just another day for you and me in Paradise." For Christians, our "Paradise" is not found in life's comforts but in spirit and truth. Paradise is the person, Jesus Christ and His living in and among us. We are living in "Paradise" through our life as members of the body of Christ - as His Church on earth.

The image of a person dying alone while being in the presence of thousands of people with no one seeing him reminds us of our Lord's teaching in Matthew 25 on judgment when He returns. In Matthew's 25, Christ identifies Himself with the "poorest of the poor," the stranger, the naked, the hungry, the imprisoned, the thirsty, the lonely, and the stranger. In Christ, God became the stranger . . . no one knew who he really was. God became the one who hungered . . . He hungered for our love and was not satisfied. God became imprisoned . . . as the un-containable God He assumed a Human body. God became naked . . . He made Himself unashamed to be with sinful humanity. The conclusion drawn from Matthew 25 is that, "...it was God who was receiving through the poor (St. John Chrysostom)." Our divine and compassionate Father identifies the afflictions of His children as being His very own. In all cases, the "who?" is God, the One Who created us after His image and likeness.

As we approach the birth of Christ, the Church invites us to prepare by fasting and prayer because we must have the eyes to see Christ not only in the manger but also in one another and especially in the "poorest of the poor." As we fill our calendars with holiday activities, the Church seeks to anchor our faith and focus by offering thirteen liturgies in the month of December. Feasting for us as Orthodox is expressed as an experience of communion in fellowship with others it is never a license to engage in self-indulgence. By remaining anchored in prayer and fasting our feasting is always Spirit filled. The experience of the Eucharist provides the model of a heavenly feast offered by Christ that makes us partakers of the one cup and unites us to one another. This experience opens our eyes of faith and allows us to see Christ in everyone.

As uncertainties and doubts about America's economic stability grow, the Church is called upon to respond in faith and love towards those most affected. The first response is always turning to God in prayer, filled with the faith that Christ has the power to help, guide and assist in times of need. The Church teaches and believes in Divine Providence - God provides for our spiritual and physical needs! As long as we seek first His Kingdom and righteousness, everything else will be provided (Matthew 6:33). Many ills, doubts and emotional turmoil are healed by turning to God in prayer and not looking for answers elsewhere.

Secondly, for the Church to respond, any barrier that might prevent love from becoming an action needs to be abolished. Some people are "barrier-makers." They prefer to live in closed circles of friends and associates; sharing the same ideology and life-style as they spend time discussing how thankful they are not like the rest of the world. Christ addressed the problem of myopic thinking with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He criticized these "barrier-makers" as not being able to experience authentic faith because they were not God-centered but self-centered. Authenticity is always an experience, an encounter between us and God that leads to the breaking down of barriers...it cannot create them. When an "us" versus "them" paradigm is created it cannot be from God. Barriers may be political, racial, religious, socio-economic, or even demographic. Anything that prevents one from seeing Christ in another human being is not part of the Gospel of Christ.

Our Lord may be characterized as the great barrier-breaker of all time. Christ came and revealed the truth that everyone belongs to God and therefore the world is the object of our mission as a Church. We are commissioned by Christ to invite them all to sit with us in "Paradise" and experience the Church as heaven on earth. Archbishop Demetrios' keynote address was on the theme, "Gather my people home." Who are "God's people?" The Archbishop answers that essentially - everyone. He cited several categories of people: the Orthodox who have left the church; others who through an inter-faith marriage no longer attend an Orthodox Church; young people who stop coming and never return; and the "un-churched," those who are not atheists but do not have a spiritual home. In America there are 60 million "un-churched" people!

Every Nativity of Christ, the Orthodox Church calls upon us to increase our desire to fill God's house with His people and to see Him outside of the manger. In Archbishop Demetrios' final note of his address he said: "God wants His home to be filled with the people because all people on earth are His people. And we are part of His desire and plan. Which simply means that we have to go literally out to the streets and lanes of the cities and to the highways and hedges and gather the people to the House of God so that His House be filled...Every time that we are in our churches, in our beautiful parishes, let us think of those other sheep, those other people who are outside, known and unknown, the ones described in the parable of the Great Banquet. Let us think of all others, the truly significant others, who wait to hear the voice of Christ. The voice of Christ invites them to gather in His home, to become His flock. But how can they hear the voice of Christ? We are the voice of Christ! My beloved people let such voice be heard outside of our Churches, calling the people of God to His home. Let us be the voice of Christ. Everywhere for everyone. At any time, at any place of the wide world of God."

Let us share our day in "Paradise" with all. Christ is born, glorify Him!
+Fr. Andrew Barakos