

DESCENDING THE MIND INTO THE HEART

8/04/2012

Two years ago, Palm Sunday 2010, I announced in my sermon that on the night we decorated the church with palms and after weaving hundreds of crosses for Palm Sunday a dozen of us as we were leaving, looked up into the sky and saw the clouds resembling a palm! I made the point back then that it is very rare to see something like that in the clouds. But for it to occur on the very night that we were decorating for Palm Sunday and only for the few minutes that we were going from the church hall to our cars, was something more than mere coincidence. We felt like it was a little sign, a little message. Fast forward two years. Two nights ago, forty people turned up to weave about 700 crosses with palm leaves, which all of you will be given today. We were joined that night by a dozen students from Sydney University, a couple of whom were not Orthodox. As we were closing up, several of us who were last to leave, were treated once again to a cloud formation closely resembling palms! The question will be asked again.....what were the chances?

Our rational mind was saying: "Oh, its just a coincidence." Our rational mind was suggesting: "Oh, well, if you made seven hundred palm crosses, maybe you started seeing things." And sniggering, our rational mind was saying: "Oh come on..., you people just wanted to see this." ... But our heart was saying something else. So do the photographs. Oh, and we were also making woven donkeys out of the palms. But we didn't see any of those in the sky!

This neatly brings us to the topic I promised to discuss today...

descending the mind into the heart.

We have the mind, and we have the heart; figuratively speaking... we have the seat of reason and the intellect, and the seat of feeling and emotion. Where is the soul? It is woven in the entire person, including mind and heart.

In our Tradition, it is not mind *separate* from heart

and it is never mind *versus* heart;

in our Tradition it is mind *in harmony* with the heart.

In the anthology of spiritual writings known as the Philokalia, there is a peculiar concept... this idea of harmonising the mind with the heart is described in the terms: *descending of the mind into the heart.*

St Isaac the Syrian advises us:

"Try to enter the treasure chamber...that is within you and then you will discover the treasure chamber of heaven. For they are one and

the same. If you succeed in entering one, you will see both. The ladder to this Kingdom is hidden inside you, in your soul. If you wash your soul clean of sin you will then see the rungs of the ladder with which you may climb.”

St John Chrysostom said:

“Find the door of your heart and you will find the door to the Kingdom of Heaven.”

St Theophan explains how we must pray when we descend with mind into heart:

“You must pray not only with words but with the mind, and not only with the mind but with the heart, so that the mind understands and sees clearly what is said in words, and the heart feels what the mind is thinking. All these combined together constitute real prayer, and if any of them are absent your prayer is either not perfect, or is not prayer at all.”

Bishop Ignatii teaches that descending with the mind into the heart helps us grow in discernment. He says:

“You wish to grow wise in discernment of thoughts? Descend from the head into the heart. Then you will see all thoughts clearly, as they move before the eye of your sharp-sighted mind. But until you descend into the heart, do not expect to have due discrimination of thoughts.”

O.K. So we wish to harmonise mind and heart. The first thing we need to make clear is that neither of the two should eclipse the other. If we are driven by the heart without the self-control provided by the mind, we can become slaves to passion and instinct. One of the prayers of the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy asks that *“our inner reason be set over our passions as a benevolent sovereign.”*

The same is true in the reverse. If we allow ourselves to be all mind and no heart, we can easily become rational... but dehumanised. Rational... but cold. For many rationalists, charity does not make sense, forgiveness does not make sense, love does not make sense. In today's world, even something as natural and spiritually beneficial as child-bearing and family formation has been subjected to cold rational decision. And then there is the other side of the mind-only coin... the chaos and the psychological mess modern people find themselves in. What is wrong?

What we need is balance. What we need is the harmony of mind with heart.

St Theophan explains:

*“All your inner disorder is due to the dislocation of your powers, **the mind and heart each going their own way**. You must unite the mind*

with the heart: then the tumult of your thoughts will cease, and you will acquire a rudder to guide the ship of your soul, a lever with which to put all your inner world in movement. How can this union be achieved? Make it your habit to pray these words with the mind in the heart: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." And this prayer, when you have learnt to use it properly, or rather, when it becomes grafted to the heart, will lead you to the end which you desire: it will unite your mind with your heart, it will quell the turbulence of your thoughts, and it will give you power to govern the movements of your soul."

Brothers and sisters, prayer is the vehicle, *the way* we will achieve inner harmony. But prayer is not to be understood as lots of words, that is prayers with an 's' at the end. Prayers when not understood or even if understood in the brain but not in the heart, even one minute of such prayers would be boring and unbearable. But if prayer becomes so much part of us, that it is a state we are in..., such prayer is light, such prayer is radiance, is enlightenment. And if prayer is that... then we can handle one hour, two hours, three hours of it! The Philokalia even goes further. That prayer should be like our breathing... and that means we can be in a prayerful, spiritual state 24 hours a day... yes, even in our sleep... the Bible encourages us: *"pray without ceasing"* [ἀδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθε] and the Philokalia tells us how: *"Collect your mind, lead the mind into the path of the breath along which the air enters in, constrain it to enter the heart... and keep it there listening to your natural breathing of the heart, while saying the Jesus Prayer."*

Brothers and sisters, exactly fifty years ago, Sunday the 8th of April, 1962, this church held its first liturgy. That is fifty years of prayer in this sacred space. Some of the people who were there are here today also. Today's liturgy was filmed, and the recording will be placed in our 50 year anniversary time-capsule. You were all part of it and I thank you for your presence here today... I look forward to seeing you throughout this week in the lead up to Easter, next Sunday.

Fr Gerasimos