

A Paschal Message

to the

Pious Flock in Great Britain and Ireland

*Thou, O Christ, art gone down to the nethermost parts of the earth,
shattering the everlasting bolts which had kept the captives in...*

Orthodox Christians are enveloped by the greatest of joys at Easter, when the Church on earth and the Church in heaven are triumphant; when, together with us, all nature glorifies the Resurrection of Christ and is herself raised up – renewed.

Today all things are filled with light, heaven, earth and that which is beneath the earth...

Let us imagine the relief felt by the prophets and righteous of the Old Testament, who in hope had been awaiting the coming of the Messiah, when the light of Christ shone forth in the dark abysses of hades. What joy was felt then by the souls of despairing sinners who at that moment came to believe in the saving Light! They all became witnesses of how the Lord had *slain hell with the brightness of his Divinity* and destroyed *the everlasting bolts*. No-one else could have done this. Only He, in his most great humility and love, could raise up and lead forth the prisoners of the underworld from their everlasting captivity.

Nowadays the underworld is continually stirring and shaking. This is permitted by God in order to bring us to our senses. Humanity asks in disbelief: What will happen next? News of floods, fires, and earthquakes have become commonplace. Hundreds of thousands have perished from the ragings of the elements. Unheard of heat or cold, non-stop rains or lethal droughts, tsunamis, typhoons, and eruptions of volcanoes threaten and invade our lives despite all the achievements of science and technology. Nevertheless, many – a great many – refuse to see in all this the consequences of sin and their own remoteness from God. Such people are not interested in why the Creator Himself went down into *the nethermost parts of the earth*. This is why they are unable to rejoice at his Resurrection. Putting their hope in human reason and all-powerful ‘progress’, they still live in constant fear of both present and future natural catastrophes.

However we, dear brothers and sisters, *will not fear when the earth is troubled, nor when the mountains are removed into the heart of the sea.* (Ps 45: 3), for as Orthodox we believe that the Lord has not appointed our planet, but other places for the eternal life of the human race. *The earth*

also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 Peter 3: 10), as the holy Apostle warns the faithful. The Lord Who destroyed the gates of hell has opened the heavens to us and led us, as the Easter synaxarion proclaims, to 'the ancient inheritance which perishes not'. *By thy Resurrection, O Lord, paradise has been revealed anew* – as Holy Church sings in Bright Week. As soon as we take in this news with our whole heart and mind, with our whole being, we truly find the entrance to the *paradise of sweetness* which perishes not, open to those who have refused the satanic pride of the self-exalted human mind, having humbly accepted the Word of God, Holy Tradition and the experience of the Church.

In the Church of Christ we know and experience the saving lightness that comes to us through true repentance, this miraculous medicine granted to us by the All-Merciful Saviour. Not only in Lent but throughout the whole year, again and again we go out through the door of repentance from the dark into the wonderful light of Christ, and together with the Psalmist we thank God, Who delivers our souls *from the lowest hell* (Ps 85: 13) – from captivity to our sins and passions.

During the last century many of us suffered an earthly captivity, the inhuman violence of atheist tyranny. Great is the unforgettable joy which is felt at freedom from such oppression. But far above this is the unspeakable joy of those who have escaped from a life of sin into the hands of the Father. The Lord Himself shelters and warms such repentant fugitives with his love and mercy, He clothes them with immortality and places on their fingers a precious ring, signifying the passage from captivity and slavery to the inheritance of the children of God, partakers of his everlasting goodness.

Let us pray that the joy of the Resurrection of Christ may become for us permanent and integral, that we may accept the resurrection of our souls from a life of sin and affirm our steps on the path of salvation; that, seeing our rejoicing and freedom, those near us may be able to rejoice with us and be resurrected with us in Christ, and that those who for the moment are far from understanding the true joy that Christ is risen, may through our faith and love awaken from the slumber of sin and hasten to the embrace of the Risen Saviour.

The Passover, the Passover of the Lord, let us embrace one another in joy! Amen.

+ Archbishop Mark

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