

The One Sent to the World

Christmas message

(2015)

Readings:

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth...And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace' (John 1: 14, 16).

'And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent...O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me' (John 17: 3, 25).

Introduction:

Let us start our talk with this liturgical hymn from the prayers of the Church:

Christ is born, glorify Him.

Christ from heaven, go and meet Him.

Christ on earth, be exalted.

Sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing out with gladness, all you people.

For he is glorified!

This feast is the feast of Incarnation. Incarnation is much more than the appearance of God in the flesh; it is the appearance of the Incarnated divine love! God humbled Himself to come to our fallen world –the world that we, in our father Adam, have made to fall, as

the Scriptures say: *'For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it (Adam)'* (Romans 8: 20).

God searches for Man who has lost the way. He partakes in the suffering of the fallen humanity in order to restore man to his first rank and restore to him the fellowship for which he has been created.

There are numerous acts and blessings of Incarnation. This year we shall draw from 3 of these acts of Incarnation:

1. Incarnation and the divine mission
2. Incarnation and the continual renewal of life
3. Incarnation and the dwelling of God with man

First: Incarnation and the divine mission

In his gospel, Apostle John numerous mentions that the Son has been sent by the Father. This is actually a special feature of the gospel of John; it is repeated 18 times in his gospel. Jesus speaks about Himself as being sent by the Father. Examples of these are:

'...For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me' (John 5: 36, 37).

'As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me' (John 6: 57).

'I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true, and him you do not know. I know him, for I come from him, and he sent me' (John 7: 28, 29).

'I came not of my own accord, but he sent me' (John 8: 42).

'...whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world...' (John 10: 36).

Refer also to John 17: 3, 21, 23, and 25.

Below are the 18 reference in the gospel of John where the word 'sent me' occurred:

John 3: 17; John 5: 36, 37, 38; John 6: 29, 57; John 7: 28, 29; John 8: 42; John 10: 36; John 11: 42; John 17: 3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; John 20: 21.

This feast of Incarnation reveals to us in a special way the very important truth that *the Son of God has been sent to the world for salvation.*

At the same time, we also read in that same gospel that the Son who has been sent to the world has also sent us to the world:

'As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world' (John 17: 18)

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you' (John 20: 21).

This is a divine commission for us because Jesus Himself has sent us. His mission and sending has become part of our inheritance in Christ! We are in Christ and Christ has been sent by the Father; therefore, we also become in Him sent by the Father.

Can you now see how this sending comes to us as a divine commission by both the Father and the Son?! Isn't this great and amazing! We bear inside us the mystery of this divine mission or being sent:

- We are sent by the Father because we are in Christ who has been sent by the Father
- We are sent by the Son because He has sent us through clear and direct words

What does Jesus mean and intend by this clear commission?

The answer to this question is found in the same gospel in the following references:

'And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17: 3)

'O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me' (John 17: 25).

Can we see here the *groaning* and the *longing* in the heart of Jesus?! The groaning is towards the world to know God and receive eternal life; the longing is towards His own people to be in unity with one another and with Him so that His sending by the Father to the world for salvation may be proclaimed: *'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'* (John 3: 17).

Therefore, Jesus repeatedly says: *'that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me'* (John 17: 21). He also says: *'I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me'* (John 17: 23). Doesn't this lead us to think of others around us and come out of our self-centeredness?

Let us think of others and let us come out of the circle of the self:

Let us come out of our self-centeredness: our own preoccupations, families, and future. This self-centeredness puts to death the spiritual life in us; it imprisons it; and so the well of grace becomes constrained and the work of the Holy Spirit becomes limited in us. As a result, we wither and become dry; we move in circles around ourselves becoming like the Old Israel who was told: *'You have skirted this mountain long enough'* (Deuteronomy 2: 3).

Let us go out. It was written about Moses that *'he went out to his brethren and looked at their burdens'* (Exodus 2: 11); and so God entrusted him. He appeared to him in the burning bush and sent him for the salvation of his people!

Let us go out to think of a world dominated by the evil one and drowning in evil. It is our responsibility to proclaim Christ's love and salvation. Let it be our delight to offer this sacrifice to Him in this feast so that He may reveal himself to us. Let us be zealous with the same zeal He had: *'Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up'* (John 2: 17). If we prepare our hearts in this feast, we shall receive anew of the mystery of His incarnation; the mystery of His love to the world; and the mystery of His holy zeal for His house!

What preoccupies our life and our days? Is there still room for holy groaning over the world –as is in the heart of Jesus?! Is there still room for holy desire and longing to proclaim Him to the world –as is in the heart of Jesus?!

This is our message and our mission!

The message of salvation is a message of life from death; this is our mission in life; it is our divine commission!

Will we pray the prayer of Jesus: *'O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me'* (John 17: 25)? The same prayer was prayed by the spiritual fathers in various generations –one of whom is Saint Silouan the Athonite who lived in Mount Athos in Greece and passed away in 1938. He groaned before the Lord with overflowing tears and night vigils saying: *'I pray Thee O Merciful Lord for all the peoples of the earth that they may know Thee by the Holy Spirit'*.

May the Lord grant us this holy groaning and may we learn to pray these blessed prayers so that there would be a holy purpose for our lives and we do not remain barren but be fruitful at a time that needs those sent for salvation. The Lord would then send His Spirit anew and reveal His plan for our world and our generation. Everything around us has changed: the challenges, evil, the media and so on. Therefore, it is important to discover the counter plan of God in relation to these changes and stop repeating our routine ideas and plans; otherwise, we will bring no fruits and no one would be saved!

We need a complete change in our way of thinking and even our personalities.

Below are some practical highlights that can help us receive this divine commission and allow it to be manifested in our lives. There are 3 important highlights in this respect:

- A. The attitude and response of Virgin Mary
- B. The ministry and mission of John the Baptist
- C. The commendation of Jesus to His disciples

A. The attitude and response of Virgin Mary

God waited until humanity is able to respond to His plan of salvation. God does not work solely but in accord and harmony with human beings! Since the fall of Adam, God has been working by His Spirit to prepare humanity for this purpose: the Incarnation for salvation. In the fullness of time, He sent His angel with the annunciation to the Virgin. She was prepared and ready; otherwise, she would not have been able even to understand the words the angel spoke to her. Therefore, she responded: *'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word'* (Luke 1: 38). Here, we need to pause because this presents to us an important principle.

Searching our lives, will we find this reply inside us?! The question is posed to us: Will we bring Him to the world as the Virgin had brought Him to the world as the Incarnated Christ? Are we able to respond like the Virgin: *'Here, I am Lord; let it be to me according to Your word'*? Will we then be ready to complete this obedience to the end –as Mary had done? She walked to the Cross; she carried Him dead in the flesh; He was buried in a tomb before her very eyes; Yet, He was resurrected and salvation became proclaimed to all!

B. The ministry and mission of John the Baptist:

It was written about the Baptist: *'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light'* (John 1: 6 – 8).

He came to bear witness of the Light so that all might believe through him. Therefore, the mystery of his witness is *'the Light'*. Our witness and testimony is thus primarily a witness of a Light offered to a darkened world. We can clearly see how darkness extends and increases (Isaiah 60: 2) and that there is a dire need for light.

We should not forget the words of Jesus: *'you are the light of the world'* (Matthew 5: 14). Jesus is the true light who came to the world; He came to destroy our darkness and fill us with His light; and then send us as lights to the world!

Let us hear what the Scriptures say; let us learn to listen, understand and obey. The word of God clearly teaches us the following:

'...that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world'
(Philippians 2: 15)

'For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light'
(Ephesians 5: 8).

'You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness'
(1Thessalonians 5: 5).

Therefore, our life should be shining and full of light in a way which is totally different from the world. It should expose the darkness of the world and be capable by the grace of God to destroy this darkness, cast it out, change its effect, and break its authority on the souls. In addition to this, it should draw people's attention to the falsified truths which they do not see or discern due to mingling the truth with the wisdom of the flesh and the spirit of the world. If we do not have this kind of life which is full of light, we will not be able to influence a world that is truly in a state a '*spiritual coma*' and hence requires '*the illuminating spiritual shocks*'.

The world has made God absent; and so it lost its sensation and purpose of life. When God is absent, people lose the meaning of their existence; and hence live like dummies. Therefore, the Apostle warns us saying: *'...you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness'* (Ephesians 4: 17 – 19).

Notice that when people make God absent from their lives, they lose feelings and sensations and uncleanness spreads and increases tremendously –as the Apostle says. Don't we see this happening in the world today?!

Let us therefore keep ourselves vigilant, pure, and full of the light!

Some of the important means which fill us with light are:

- The love for Jesus
- The word of God
- Self-denial and the path of the Cross
- Keeping ourselves from the love of the world

These features were apparent in the life of the Baptist who loved God; and hence denied himself: *'He must increase, but I must decrease'* (John 3: 30). He crucified the lusts and desires of the flesh living as an ascetic: *'Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey'* (Matthew 3: 4). Therefore, God entrusted him; strengthened him with power; and sent him *'in the spirit and power of Elijah'* (Luke 1: 17), that is, a fiery spirit. He became a voice crying out in the wilderness, the wilderness of the people of God who had left His Law and so their lives became like a wilderness in its dryness. We read about this clearly in the words of the prophets:

'The earth is also defiled under its inhabitants because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, and those who dwell in it are desolate. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left' (Isaiah 24: 5, 6).

'Who is the wise man who may understand this? And who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken, that he may declare it? Why does the land perish and burn up like a wilderness, so that no one can pass through? And the Lord said, "Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice, nor walked according to it' (Jeremiah 9: 12, 13).

As a result, the people started to have no desire for hearing the words of God as Jeremiah laments saying: *'To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Indeed their ear is uncircumcised and they cannot give heed. Behold, the word of the Lord is a reproach to them; they have no delight in it'* (Jeremiah 6: 10). Don't we see this happening in our days as well?!

Both the Baptist and Virgin Mary accepted the cost of the divine commission: the path of the Cross to the point of death. Yet, it is a death which was followed by resurrection. Each of them held his life on his palm as the Psalm says: *'I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law'* (Psalm 119: 109).

C. The commendation of Jesus to His disciples

We read this commendation of Jesus in Mark 3: 13, 14: *'And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach'*.

According to the Greek origin, the phrase: *'so that they might be with him'* means 'to be separate from the world'; 'clinging to Him'; and 'set apart for ministry'. This is a condition for a mission entrusted by God, for missionaries commissioned by God!

This would allow our life to be influential, an influence whose source is God. Therefore, it is not our personalities or talents that would influence others because all these things are temporary, serve the ego and may lead to negativities.

Have we ever thought how Jesus appeared all of a sudden as the teacher who amazed everyone, attracted the multitudes and constrained the hearts of His disciples who left everything and followed him! They left the source of their bread-earning, fishing, and left their families to be with Him. They stood firm before the resistance of the Pharisees. There was something different in Jesus that made them leave all and follow Him!

In such a way we can bear witness to our world. It is our responsibility.

Notice that Apostle John repeated the word *'witness'* 30 times in his writings; while it was repeated 7 times in the whole of the New Testament!

Second: Incarnation and the continuous renewal of life

Jesus came to our world to grant us 'New life', as we know. This new life is totally different from the natural life. Therefore, the Bible uses two different words; namely, 'Bios' to refer to the 'natural life' and 'Zoe' to refer to the 'divine life' whose source is God.

In this context, Saint Shenouda, the Archimandrite (4th - 5th century) says:

'You have been granted a powerful new nature, capable through the Crucified One to subdue all the powers of darkness. Therefore, fear not of sin and do not tremble of evil because none of them has authority over you except through your submission to them, negligence or ignorance. Yet, I am not saying that you will not sin at all; but, if you fall, we have an intercessor before the Father who is an atonement and conqueror of sin!'

This divine life has its features that are different from the natural life.

The natural life draws the mind downwards; hence the soul gets filled with fear, anxiety, and confusion regarding the future. Even in spiritual matters, one does not put his trust in the work of grace; and hence grace does not bring forth its transforming power in the person. As a result, one suffers from recurring sins, frustration and humiliation.

The divine life, on the other hand, is characterised by faith, obedience, patience, love, prayer, and giving the word of God its authority and due place in the spiritual life. This results in continuous transformation of the mind, the personality and even the circumstances!

This divine life should continuously flow and extend in our being, to the mind and the personality. This is the most serious spiritual battle because we tend to form certain convictions for ourselves which are a mixture of the spiritual teaching we receive and convictions from our upbringing and surrounding circumstances. This mixture turns our mind into a real prison. We become prisoners of our deceitful thoughts –despite living the spiritual life as we were taught it!

This is indeed a serious matter which paralyses all the energies of man and causes faith to fade away. This is because the prison of the mind ultimately determines our conduct and controls the personality as a whole.

Therefore, let us allow these divine seasons of salvation to be an opportunity to receive more of the grace and the stream of the divine life in our hearts and spirits. The Lord would thus shine with His light in our minds renewing our thoughts. As a result, our approach, conduct and walk would change; the whole personality would be continuously and progressively renewed!

Stumbling blocks have increased and multiplied in our days. The media became a ripe field for the enemy to work in the life of the children of God. It makes it easy for the enemy to drag the children of God into sinning; and then he consolidates sin in them and it becomes an evil bondage. Then, the enemy starts to humiliate them –as in the story of Samson. When one tries to shake off and have a breakthrough, he may find himself unable to because of the low level of grace in our lives these days. As a result, one is filled with confusion, frustration and humiliation.

Let us shake off and arise as true children of God who have all the promises of God. We need to learn to release this divine life with its rich divine promises which have been granted to us as children of God.

Let us listen to the Scriptures in this context:

'But as many as received him—to those who believe in his name—he gave to them authority to become children of God' (John 1: 12).

'Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!' (1John 3: 1)

'For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Romans 8: 15, 16).

'And because you are sons, God sent out the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba Father" so that you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, also an heir through God' (Galatians 4: 6, 7).

'...having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will' (Ephesians 1: 5)

Our problem is that we think that we understand everything regarding the bases of the spiritual life. The reason behind this is that we have transformed the spiritual mysteries into intellectual concepts which we read or hear, understand and that is all. They thus become static; they neither free nor change us and they remain imprisoned in our minds. The spiritual life; however, depends on the divine spring which we continuously take from and release in our lives through constant regular fellowship with God. This in turn casts out the death and the darkness which are inherent in us; we become filled with the divine light and presence; and thus the whole scene of life changes completely!

At this time, the Holy Spirit who vigils on our salvation continues to cleanse our conscience and inner being; He lifts up the reproach and humility of the past years by releasing in us the power of the divine promises which heal and free. In fact, reproach and humiliation constrain one's personality; cause faith to fade away; and abort the Kingdom vision: *'O you afflicted one, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, Behold, I will lay your stones with colourful gems, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of crystal, and all your walls of precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children. In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you'* (Isaiah 54: 11 – 14).

The same applies to the shaken and changeable circumstances around us which confuse and terrify us; and hence give the enemy the chance to besiege us. We need to learn to lift our eyes upwards because our place is heavenly (Ephesians 2: 6) and not earthly. It is only that earthly sphere which is under the oppression and activity of the enemy; but, the heavenly sphere is unreachable by the enemy! Let us therefore learn to view things through the Lord's eyes, trusting that everything in our lives is under a divine control for He is the *'Pantocrator'*. It is written: *'O Lord, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; you maintain my lot'* (Psalm 16: 5). Immediately after that, it is written: *'the measuring lines (which measure and determine our land and our inheritance) have fallen for me in pleasant places. Yes, my inheritance is delightful for me* (Psalm 16: 6). There is a good inheritance and manifold blessings awaiting us; yet, the Hands of the Lord which hold *'the measuring lines'* are tied because of our lack of trust and lack of submission to Him. We need to surrender to Him totally and rest in His faithfulness,

will, and goodness: *'Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass'* (Psalm 37: 5). When we do so, His Hands will move and the measuring lines will be released to determine our new pleasant places or lands so that we may enter and possess them! The reference here is to what is seen and unseen, the material and the spiritual. We can then understand the words of St Augustine (4th-5th centuries) when he said: *'I sat on top of the world when I felt that I desired nothing and feared nothing'*.

And now, can we have some sign-posts for the road? The signs highlight if Jesus is present or absent:

- When I feel frustrated; when I sense the distress of the days; when I sense the difference of places and times by saying that if I were in such a place or such circumstances things would have been different –then, Jesus is absent; my soul is moving towards other gods!
- When I seek satisfaction and fulfilment apart from Jesus, even if these seem spiritual or in ministry –then, Jesus is absent; my soul is moving away from Him.
- When I groan and despair because of my sins and weaknesses seeking to get rid of them quickly –then, Jesus is absent for why don't I trust Him and wait for Him no matter what!
- Jesus is the Redeemer and Saviour who is everywhere and who is so close to me even if I don't sense it; His delight is to save me completely (Hebrews 7: 25). Therefore, why do I delight in achievements, even if they take a spiritual form like getting rid of my sins or outward spiritual success! Jesus alone should be my delight; let me therefore shake off, arise and reach forward to things which are ahead (Philippians 3: 13).
- Jesus is present around me, with me, and before me as the Psalm says: *'I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved'* (Psalm 16: 8).
- Jesus is present and is never absent unless I make Him absent either through ignorance or by running away from Him!

Finally, let us learn to exploit the difficult and opposing circumstances so that they themselves become a new power which pushes us forward instead of being the cause of paralysis and siege. Virgin Mary was told: *'a sword will pierce through your own soul'* (Luke 2: 35); yet, she endured and continued to understand the mystery of God until she completed her wondrous mission!

This is the holy sorrow which pushes us towards Him more and more!

This is the redeeming suffering which de-skins us from the prison of our old nature with its thoughts and manners.

It is learning to transfer opposing circumstances, whether suffering, sorrow or siege, into a new power forward for release and freedom.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit who waits for us to go and take His grace for this divine season!

Let us recall here the words of the liturgical hymn of Incarnation:

Christ is born, glorify Him.

Christ from heaven, go and meet Him.

Thirdly: Incarnation and the dwelling of God with man

At the beginning of the talk we read *'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'* (John 1: 14). According to the original language, the phrase *'dwelt among us'*¹ means *'built His tent among us'*. God was so delighted by this; He awaited *'the fullness of time'* in order to be incarnated. He awaited it much more than man awaited it because man was ignorant of his need for salvation; while God, in His dynamic love directed to the salvation of man and restoring him to His fellowship, did not rest.

¹ In other versions of the English translations; this phrase reads *'tented among us'* (ABP: Apostolic Bible Polyglot version); *'tabernacled among us'* (LITV: Literal translation version); *'did tabernacle among us'* (YLT: Young literal translation)

God also now requests a place to build up His tent, but this time it is different from the first one. The first tent is the tent of His body which He took from humanity through the Virgin Mary to carry out the mission of the Father and to complete redemption. But now, it became available for everyone who believes in Him to be implanted in this body (1Corinthians 12: 13) and become as Paul says: *'members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones'* (Ephesians 5: 30). If the members of His body realise this and become united together, the *'new tent'* would be manifested: the tent of His spiritual body. This refers to His people who are united with Him, His Church in any of its units whether small or big, provided that it has the features of the Church of the apostolic age when the Church was first established on the day of Pentecost –the features of having one mind and one heart.

This spiritual tent is best called 'Zion', according to the Scriptures. Let us hear the prophetic words of the Holy Scriptures which have important significance especially these days:

'For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His dwelling place: 'this is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it' (Psalm 132: 13, 14).

'But you, O Lord, are enthroned forever; You are remembered throughout all generations. You will arise and have pity on Zion; it is the time to favour her; the appointed time has come...For the Lord builds up Zion; he appears in his glory' (Psalm 102: 12 – 16).

These verses were mentioned at a time when the historical Zion, which David had established (2Samuel 5) and which kept its status in the days of Solomon, became ruins. Yet, the Psalmists realised by the Holy Spirit that God has a special purpose of this place: *'He has desired it...forever'*; and so they sang awaiting God's visitation.

Jeremiah, the prophet, mentions the same thing regarding Zion saying:

Return, O faithless children, declares the Lord; for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. 'And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding' (Jeremiah 3: 14, 15).

Then, in the verses which follow, Jeremiah clarifies future matters: *'shall not be remembered/ Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord'*:

And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the Lord, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the Lord." It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart' (Jeremiah 3: 16, 17).

Though these verses have prophetic dimensions related to Israel, the people of God and the children of the promise –according to the words of Paul in Romans 9 & 11, there is also a spiritual application to these verses according to the understanding of the early Church and as highlighted in her writings. Jerusalem or Zion refers to the human soul, on the individual level, or the Church, on the corporate level. God's mind is the same; it does not change. Therefore, He awaits a new spiritual Zion from us, the gentiles, similar to that related to Israel –where His scattered people may gather, in different units in various places; and in it His glory shall be seen as the Psalmist says.

Isaiah also mentions a similar thing regarding Zion where he says:

'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising' (Isaiah 60: 1 – 3).

The reference to Zion is clear in Isaiah 59: 20, the passage which occurs immediately before these verses.

There is also a prophetic reference to Zion in the New Testament in the book of Acts where James, Jerusalem's first bishop says:

'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the

Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old' (Acts 15: 16 – 18).

This is a quote taken from Amos 9: 11. The tent of David is Zion which he had established and brought to it the Ark of the Covenant so that it would be the centre and headquarter of his kingdom and the place of God's presence amid His people.

Brothers and sisters, may the eyes of our hearts be opened to see and understand the following:

- The world has forcefully sent Jesus out of its midst. They rejected Him; mocked Him and considered Him a yoke that they should get rid of! Even the countries that have a Christian heritage and history now desire to be estranged from Him; they reject Him as though knowing Him is disgraceful or shameful; they consider that spiritual matters are against personal freedom and hence should not be mentioned publically but remain only in one's chamber!
- In response to this, would we be zealous with holy zeal for Christ to be restored to His world which was created for Him and by Him: *'For by him all things were created'* (Colossians 1: 16)? This is the desire in the heart of Jesus and His groaning in His intercessory prayer before the Crucifixion as is repeatedly mentioned in John 17. *'The world has not known you...so that the world may know that you sent me'* (John 17: 21, 22, 25).

How great is the groaning in the heart of Jesus if only we can sense it!

It is as though He desires to come incarnated anew...shall we bring Him to the world?!

We are the members of His body...will we build His new tent, the new Zion?!

- We can never bring Jesus forcefully as the world has sent Him out forcefully because He is gentle and not resistant; He is drawn and attracted by love! Love alone can attract Him and bring Him in our midst!

It is true that we may sense our weakness and inability; yet, He accepted to come in a manger amid the animals of earth. Will we build and prepare *'small mangers'* for Him?

This is the Spiritual New Zion which He awaits. We need to prepare it for Him so that He may come with a true presence among us, build His tent anew, gather His scattered people and reveal His glory so that the world would know Him. At this point, the final scene of His second coming would be ready and completed!

Some practical steps towards this purpose:

1. Coming out of our hibernation in our comfort zone

Each one has made for himself an illusionary comfort zone and hibernated in it: his life, family, work, together with prayer and attending church. He is thus comfortable, secure and reassured –a false assurance –not knowing that this leads to spiritual ageing, barrenness and self-centeredness which increases the activity of the self and increases the spiritual darkness. It leads to spiritual satisfaction, selfishness, withering and struggling with others.

2. A life centred around Jesus and the word of God

It is a life which is renewed every day; watchful so that worship may not turn into an empty routine and practice and that is through igniting the spirit of love, repentance, vigilance and purity of heart.

It is a daily dialogue with the Beloved; a mind that continuously turns to Jesus in the daily situations; a soul that has no delight apart from Jesus!

Its words and conduct are full of life; even its silence is full of life.

It is a life that has a special favour in prayer and intercession.

It is a life that loves the word of God so much and lives according to it; and hence mysteries and great depth in the word of God open up for her.

It renews its infilling by the Holy Spirit without being at all preoccupied by the gifts, miracles or anointing; but is rather preoccupied by proclaiming the sweetness of Jesus, His faithfulness and the authority of His word for salvation: *'Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good'* (Psalm 34: 8).

3. Accepting suffering on the bases of sound understanding and awareness

Sometimes God allows suffering for a purpose. The purpose is to empty the inside exactly like when we scoop out the flesh of certain vegetables to fill them and stuff them with something else to turn them into a delicious meal. Similarly, the purpose of these sufferings which God allows is to empty the inside in order to fill it with the sweetness of Jesus so that we also may become a spiritual food for a world which is perishing because of the spiritual famine in it.

Let us listen to the words of the Scriptures in this context:

Amos, the prophet, clarifies to us this spiritual famine of the world in the following verses.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it” (Amos 8: 11, 12).

Such scene took place at different times. It happened in the days of Samuel, the prophet, several generations before Amos: *‘And the word of the Lord was rare in those days’* (1Samuel 3: 1). It was then repeated again many generations after Amos, before the coming of the Baptist, at the time between the two Testaments. For about 400 years there was no prophecy until the Baptist came to prepare the way for the Messiah. In his prophecy about his son John the Baptist when he was just born, Zachariah, the prophet, said: *‘...for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins’* (Luke 1: 76, 77).

Today, we live in a generation where the talk about the Lord is abundant; yet, not all talk about the Lord is *‘the word of the Lord’!*

What does God do in such situations? He does not leave Himself without witness (Acts 14: 17). He always has *‘witnesses of love’* whose life and words are the mystical spiritual food offered to this world which is perishing with hunger!

Let us listen to the words of Song of Songs:

'I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk. Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love' (Song of Solomon 5: 1)

Jesus first enters the garden of His bride, the inner life, and if He finds that it bore fruits and He tastes love in it: spice, honeycomb, honey, wine and milk; He would then invite those who search for food at times of famine to come and take of this food for free, the food which His grace has prepared in His beloved ones!

Isaiah highlights the same thing in his prophecy saying:

'Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come; buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy (this is a picture of a kind of food which does not satisfy despite being costly, costing hard labour and silver; yet, giving no satisfaction –as is the case in our days)? Listen diligently to me (this is the Beloved calling out from the garden of His Bride, from New Zion!), and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food' (Isaiah 55: 1, 2).

4. Taking heed of the deceitful economy of the evil one:

As mentioned earlier, the enemy is on the lookout for the children of God. The more they are keen on living a holy spiritual life, the more the temptations increase and vary in a deceitful way.

Let us take heed because the enemy has incredible ways to weaken or break the spiritual immunity against sin. As a result, the human soul, even the children of God, became filled with evil attractions and the uncleanness of the world. By this, the enemy managed to have dominion over them, even over their bodies with various illnesses. Isn't there an increase in immunity diseases in our generation much more than we have ever heard in the past, together with other fatal and rare illnesses and also strange and deceitful temptations?

Now is the time not for crying out for healing and rescue without any discernment; but, our cry should *first* be to examine our ways and ourselves, recalling the words of the prophet Jeremiah in the Lamentations:

'Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins? Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord! Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven' (Lamentations 3: 39 – 41).

Notice here that this man is one of God's children because the prophet calls him *'a living man'*. The purpose of the punishment referred to here is purification in order to receive blessings.

5. The visions of faith for our generation

Every person who has a true living fellowship with the Holy Spirit has the ability and responsibility of discovering the visions of God for him (Ephesians 2: 10), visions of faith to serve this generation.

Yet, this cannot be on the individual level only, like the many examples we see in our generation, lest this leads to glorifying the self and being constrained in narrow circles. But, let us bear in mind the Church of Christ and her need.

A special vision:

- Since we have been brought up in this family of the body of Christ, the Orthodox family (especially the Orthodox family of our country), what could the need be or how can we pray for this family?
- I don't claim that what I am sharing here is the only thing or the correct thing, but it is one picture among many other pictures that God uses to build His Church, restore her to His divine purpose and prepare her to be His bride.
- The need is for true infilling by the Holy Spirit which we should ask for in a specific and discerning manner and receive anew. Yes, a renewed infilling, as the bible says.

- There is also a need to be in harmony with the prevailing movement of the Holy Spirit in the whole body of Christ, provided that this renewed infilling would reflect the Orthodox identity. This is not some kind of fanaticism or reclusiveness; on the contrary, it is to preserve a rich inheritance of the early fathers which needs to be proclaimed to the whole body of Christ. There may be some approaches which focus on one aspect and not the other; namely, the infilling of the Spirit and the Orthodox spiritual inheritance.
- In fact, our need is for an Orthodox Charismatic movement which includes both clergy and congregation. We have witnessed this in the Catholic Church several years ago. When this movement appeared in the Catholic Church it was accepted and acknowledged by the highest levels of leadership of the Church and was considered an answer to a prophetic prayer offered by the Pope prior to the movement.
- We do not imitate anyone and we should not lose our identity in order to preserve the Apostolic Patristic handing down –as mentioned earlier –but we need to live it as it originally was: in fellowship with the Holy Spirit.
- Let us practice the visions of faith which are in harmony with God’s purposes for our generation and which glorify His Name so that the glory of His salvation may be proclaimed to all the earth!

In conclusion, we say:

Yes, we wait upon You Lord

Yes, we seek You Lord

Yes, we receive You Lord

In our lives anew,

In our midst so that Your glory may be revealed,

In New Zion:

'For the Lord builds up Zion; He appears in his glory' (Psalm 102: 16).

And of Zion it will be said, "This one and that one were born in her; and the Most High Himself shall establish her. "The Lord will record, when He registers the peoples: "This one was born there." Both the singers and the players on instruments say, "All my springs are in you."(Psalm 87: 5 – 7)

Christ is born, glorify Him!

Christ from heaven, go and meet Him!

Christ on earth, be exalted!

Sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing out with gladness, all you people.

For he is glorified!

Amen