**Saturday 5 Oct. 2025. The reading is from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 14:20-25**

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature. In the law it is written, "By men of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

**The Gospel According to Luke 5:17-26**

Now it happened on a certain day, as He was teaching, that there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come out of every town of Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was present to heal them. Then behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him. And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiling into the midst before Jesus. When He saw their faith, He said to him, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.”

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, “Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins”—He said to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on, and departed to his own house, glorifying God. And they were all amazed, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, “We have seen strange things today!”

**Sermon at the Divine Liturgy on Holy Island, with the Blessing of His Grace Bishop Raphael**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ saw the faith of the friends who brought the paralysed man into the house and said to him: “Your sins are forgiven you.” Healed, the man departed to his own house, and all present were filled with fear for they had witnessed the power of God.

Faith, Forgiveness, and Christ’s Humility

But the Pharisees, as learned people, recognised, correctly, that only God can mend the mistakes of the past. Sin, as something that has happened in the past—a breaking of the relationship between a human being and God, between a human being and his or her friends—cannot be repaired since it has happened in the past. Only God, as the ruler of time, can forgive sin, argued the Pharisees, the learned Jewish teachers, and in saying so confessed, even though that was not their intention, that Christ is God.

The Pharisees, even though that was not their intention, confessed Christ to be God—seeing Him coming in might and power. This is indeed how we confess, in the Creed, that “He shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead”. Yet, His first coming was one in weakness and humility. And in today’s Gospel reading we see Him acting only because He had been invited—invited by the love of the friends who brought the paralysed man.

Love, Gifts, and the Building of the Church

Notice how they bring the man on a little bed, or a cot. They bring him on the mat that he was lying on. A paralysed man on a mat! Can you imagine what this looks like? Can you imagine what it smells like? It's not a pleasant sight!

Most of us would turn our faces and our noses away from him. But the friends brought him in right there, in the middle of the crowd, inside the house. Sin, in the way the ancient people understood it, was the cause of illness. Modern medicine has advanced and would not immediately attribute illness to sin. But in the ancient world, the connection was always easily made that for a man to be in such a horrible state—paralysed on a small, dirty mat—he must have sinned greatly. And in another passage, we hear the disciples arguing: “Who sinned—the blind man or his parents?” To their question, “Who sinned?” Christ answered, in the other Gospel: “Neither his parents nor this man. But what is happening now is a manifestation of God's power.” That even though this man is in his utter brokenness, God can be present and can act with power.

In the reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians that we just heard, St. Paul speaks of different gifts and puts the gift of tongues at a lower ranking. Speaking in tongues may look impressive, but it doesn't help the church, it doesn't help your brother, which is why it is better, concludes St Paul, if you prophesy. For him prophecy was a word from God that builds the others. It was the preaching of the word of God that comes after the readings. This was the pattern in the worship of the synagogue, and it was kept in the services of the early Church as well.

The way our Liturgy is arranged is that we wait on God to speak first, in the readings. Today this structure is not obvious, but everyone is aware that the readings come first and the “meal of thanksgiving”, or the Eucharist, follows. We know that in the ancient church the service began with simply with the entrance of the bishop, preceded by the Gospel book and followed by the clergy and the people. After the entrance, which we now re-enact with the so-called ‘Small Entrance’, the bishop would give the “Peace unto all” and then sit on his chair for the readings. So, right now, we are at the beginning of the service. After the readings, the bishop preached, as did St John Chrysostom and others, from the episcopal chair which was raised so that the people could see and hear the preacher. But before any action on our part, God had to speak first. In the ancient understanding of worship, the Word of God comes first, and then our response follows.

In the Epistle reading today, St. Paul is referring to this practice and presents the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy as clearly distinct and not of equal value. In the experience of his congregation the readings came first and were followed by a sermon, or an explanation, for which, St Paul argued, the more suitable gift was the word of prophecy and not the speaking in tongues, since prophecy helped build the congregation in the faith.

For St Paul the gift of prophecy was of a higher spiritual value than the gift of tongues only because the gift of prophecy is given by God to build the church, to help people on their journey to God. But whether speaking in tongues or uttering a word of prophecy, for St Paul the underlining gift was that of love for God and one another. A few verses before the chapter we just heard, St. Paul speaks in the most exalted way about love as the only enduring gift which binds the church.

Faith, hope and love! Love which never fails—whatever we do in church is to be inspired by it. Whatever gift God gives to each one of us, what needs to inspire us always is the apostolic love, for which we strive and which builds the church—the love which is the outpouring of the Spirit. The love of the friends who brought the paralysed man to the house where Christ was. Where there is this love, which is a response to God’s love for us, He acts and then the whole church is filled with fear, witnessing His power.

Fear, Pilgrimage, and St. Cuthbert

One more reflection on fear—they were all afraid, the Gospel says, “filled with fear”. I am reminded here of a verse in the Psalms, a prayer that says in somewhat free translation: “May those that fear you, O Lord, turn me back towards you.” What happens with us human beings, as we journey through our lives, is that we often lose our hope, we lose our strength and sometimes we even lose God completely out of the picture of our lives. It's a grevious sin, it's a powerful temptation, it's a great sin to fall into despondency—to lose hope. And the psalmist prays with these words: “When I'm in this state, when I cannot act on my own because whatever powers I may have had have now expired, I can still pray with these words: ‘May those that fear you—the friends of the paralysed man—may they help me turn back to you, O Lord’.”

First among those that fear the Lord are the saints. We have on Pilgrimage today to the island where St. Cuthbert lived. Holy Island was reached by groups of monks that travelled a very long distance, all the way from Ireland, often on foot, despite the weather which as you can see can be very difficult. These monks were inspired by their love for God, their fear of God, but also by the spirit of pilgrimage. For the sake of God's love and His fear, they would leave behind country, language, people, friends, and journey to reach Him. This is how St. Cuthbert came here. He had been at Melrose and had also travelled all the way to Ripon, where he had helped establish a monastery. Eventually, he also went to Coldingham, in Scottish Borders near Berwick, where St Ebba had established her monastery. As was the custom in those days, monasteries were sponsored by the royal house. Royal friends would often come and disturb the fragile life of prayer in the monastery. When St Cuthbert visited Coldingham, the life of the monks and nuns—for this was a mixed monastic house under St Ebba as the abbess—their life had become so laxed that he didn't know what to do to keep true to his monastic vows and discipline. In the end, he secretly went and spent the night at the sea. He went to pray in the sea. And he prayed with the water up to his neck. There were no human beings who feared the Lord where he was. And so he went to be with the elements. We all know that the sea here is not like the Mediterranean, or the Black Sea, where I am from—warm and pleasant. It's rough and cold. The sea fears the Lord. And the saint went to pray in the sea, to ask from the sea to help him turn to the Lord.

May we too, when we are paralysed and unsure what to do, be supported by the love and prayers of all those who loved and feared the Lord—those who, on the day of the great miracle brought the paralysed man in the house and saw him healed, as well as those from every time and generation, like St. Cuthbert who prayed in the sea and on whose island we are now celebrating our Liturgy.

Amen.

Presb. Nikita