

5. *A Sermon in Lent*

Father Shpiller gave four sermons during Lent, 1969, in his church in Moscow. We print an extract from the last of these. In the Foreword he introduces his subject and expresses his conviction that one of the most difficult phases in the Church's life has passed; many are now finding faith.

SERMONS IN LENT

(*Vestnik RSKhD*, No. 104-105, 1972, pp. 5-41)¹

by Archpriest Vsevolod Shpiller

humbly dedicated to his Holiness Kirill, Patriarch of Bulgaria.

Foreword (extracts)

(pp. 6-7) In the Orthodox Christian revelation of the spiritual depths of life, the most important thing always has been, and always will be, that which is connected with the Church's doctrine of redemption, that is, with the teaching of the Church on salvation (soteriological theology). By a tradition that has established itself with us here in Moscow, this teaching has become the focus for sermons or talks over the four Sunday evening services in Lent, the so-called "Passion Sundays". Consequently, this is an opportunity to try to explain, albeit in the most general terms, the *most essential* things in our present understanding of the spiritual reality which fills the world and transcends it, and also of that reality which we find in ourselves – closely linked with those questions which concern us today, questions of our inner spiritual state and our spiritual orientation in wholly secularised conditions. For these reasons, so as to respond to the request of my parishioners, I too have settled on the four Lenten Sunday talks . . .

(pp. 8-9) . . . In contrast to an opinion which is current in our society and is also rather widespread in some church circles abroad, to the effect that Orthodoxy here has suffered a fatal reverse, I believe that a new chapter is beginning in the history of our Church. Our Orthodox faith, by concerted efforts from various sides, had already long ago reached the "underprivileged", as they said in the last century. Today it has clearly ceased to be the property simply of the illiterate, pious granny, preserved by and relying on a "superstitious and purely external form" of the faith. The request from my parishioners testifies to this, which is the reason why it is so remarkable.

Of course this by itself is only a very small fact, which at first glance does not merit especial attention. But it is one of many which permit us to think – and I am quite convinced of this – that the present moment in the history of our Church is only the turning of one of the most difficult pages, but not by any means the last one.

The time has come . . . More and more frequently and unexpectedly you meet people of the most varied ages and situations who have gone through deep inner spiritual, mental and emotional crises, sometimes through tragic conflicts which they have found insoluble in a non-religious framework. Not infrequently now, here and there, maybe in a muted and novel way, sometimes questioningly, the poet's words can be heard: "Not long ago I was secretly told, Christ is soon returning . . ." The religious thought of great minds, faithful to Christ, is becoming a vital subject for those who are asking the Church about different things, more and more frequently, more and more deeply, more and more earnestly . . .

¹ The sermons were published without the knowledge of the author.

The Fourth Sermon (extract)

“When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost.” (John 19:30)

(pp. 38-41) On the subject of the Church's doctrine of salvation, it is fitting to consider the mystery of the Lord Jesus Christ's sacrificial suffering love, its metaphysical mystery . . . There is nothing psychological in such an approach: some of our country's studies in soteriological theology were not free from this, but they were written over 50 years ago. In this doctrine the cleansing *blood*, the saving *cross*, the life-giving *grave* are facts, possessing a mystical, sacramental meaning, which of course it is only possible to see from a metaphysical point of view. Each drop of blood, shed by the Lord Jesus Christ, contains the metaphysical power of God's unlimited love, suffering for man and extended to the whole human race.

Through it the power of grace penetrated the world. It poured into the being of man, into our nature, making our moral regeneration objectively possible, whereby self-love is overcome. By the power of God himself the gift of grace was communicated to the being of man, making it objectively possible to overcome and defeat radical evil and death. Both these objective possibilities were brought into existence by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And both of them can therefore be realized and are realized in each of us if we wish to make them our own. They are appropriated and realized, or not accepted and then not realized by the “person”.

According to the Christian understanding of “person”, I must point out, it is important to clearly distinguish between “person” and “individual”. The individual is attached to the material world, and is produced by the generic process. It has a purely biological origin and is determined by man's generic, biological and social inheritance. Man is an individual, but he is not just an individual. Man is a person. This is not a natural but a *spiritual* category. A person is not produced by the generic process, but comes from God. Man as person witnesses to the fact that he is the point of intersection between two worlds and that, in him, there is always a struggle between nature and spirit, necessity and freedom, the determined, dependent and the non-determined, independent. Man as person is not an animal. “Person” represents that which is free in man, the possibility of victory over the determined world. All that is personal in man is opposed to all that is automatic, psychological, social. Man as person is the incomprehensible, supra-rational, free, spontaneous being of man, which fits into no external framework, the deepest root in me, which is conscious of being some unspoken, incommunicable mystery of absolute value and the authentic reality of my “self”.

To make one's own the objective means of salvation by grace, given to the being of man, for every man separately to make them his own, we must understand that this can be done only by this free, spontaneous element in the depths of man. Only then will this blessing really be mine. Only then will it be realized. This is what is called the subjective side of our salvation, as distinct from the objective. In other words, it is man as a free person who makes the means of salvation his own . . .

How entirely right is the Christian thinker who affirmed that the whole mystery of the Lord's Cross, the mystery of Golgotha is the mystery of freedom.

The Son of God forces no-one to recognize Him. The Crucified addresses himself to the freedom of man's spirit, only to freedom. He never, on no condition, forces anyone. In order to recognize God in him, the victory of man's free spirit is needed . . .

Christianity is the religion of victory over hell, both in this world and the next. We make it *our* victory by the *free act* (*podvig*) of participating in the work of Christ the Saviour completed by his divine and human love for men, revealed in the whole of his life, in his passion, death and resurrection. It is only possible to participate in this work when we answer Him with love. In the free meeting of God's *love* for man and of man's love for God is the present religious consciousness of men established in mankind. The most important characteristic of this consciousness is the joy that overcomes and the light of loving communion and solidarity between God and the world, between the world and God. It (this consciousness) does not accept the meaningless and blasphemous idea that Christ's victory had the automatic and, as it were, magical effect of *power*. The essence of His victory is that it pours into the world, brings into it a power which regenerates it from damage, *helping* men to participate in the saving sacrifice of Christ.

Having understood as much as we can of what was *finished* when Christ on the cross bowed his Head, we now *thus* try to approach the hidden meaning of the last great mysteries of God. And *thus* we understand the basic meaning also of that way of the Cross, along which we are all called by Christ's Church – the way along which “walked and are walking all Orthodox Christians, nameless saints and righteous men and which is the supreme and adequate expression of Christianity's paradoxical truth”. Amen.

6. *A Priest in Prison*

Father Zalivako, a Russian Orthodox priest aged 33, was mentioned in the *Times* on 31 December, 1971, but since then the press has been silent. Amnesty International took up his case last year, but its letters, sent to the Soviet authorities and to Father Zalivako, have as yet received no reply. Father Zalivako is a man of exceptional qualities and clearly impressed his fellow prisoners when held in one of the Mordovian labour camps. Now he is in the Vladimir prison, where conditions are particularly severe.

The Chronicle of Current Events No. 17, 31 December, 1970
(Amnesty International Publications, London, 1971, p. 73)

Boris Borisovich Zalivako, a priest born in 1940 in Leningrad, was sentenced in early 1970 by the Uzhgorod (W. Ukraine, near the border with Czechoslovakia) Regional Court to eight years in a strict-regime corrective-labour camp and five years' exile for attempting to cross the Soviet-Czechoslovak frontier. He is in camp No. 3 (ZhKh-385/3-1).

A Letter from Political Prisoners, Mordovia, December 1971
(*Russkaya Mysl*, 20 April, 1972, p. 3. Extract)