

## **The Fullness of the Kingdom**

### **Speaker: Mother Raphaela**

This topic is a classic one for Orthodox writers and speakers. I do not intend to say anything new on this subject; only to share my own thoughts and intuitions on a subject that is as vast as all eternity and that transcends all our rational concepts.

I want to qualify the phrase, “my own thoughts and intuitions.” I believe one of the biggest road blocks for Christians today is our culture’s paradoxical stance that “scientific” truth can and must be verified; we can and must have a single correct view about things (some would say everything) based on objective investigation, whereas any truth that cannot fit into known scientific categories, especially a truth that cannot be weighed and measured, can only be a matter of opinion.

While scientific knowledge has opened up vistas our forebears could only have imagined, pushing our horizons far beyond local villages to the vast planet earth set in an even more vast solar system which turns out to be just a tiny speck in the known physical universe, it seems that our culture’s conception of God has shrunk proportionally. *The New York Times* and publications such as *The National Geographic* and *Smithsonian* magazines assure us regularly that faith and theology -- especially Christian faith and theology -- are hopelessly anachronistic in our contemporary, post-modern and scientific world. Religion and religious events are reported as data displaying only the continuing irrationality and superstition plaguing that strange animal, *Homo sapiens*. These can be quite charming when found in an on-going primitive culture in some backwater such as the Amazon basin, but to many of our contemporaries, faith and theology are hopelessly out of place in any they consider to be their intellectual peers.

I will always be grateful that some of my first reading as a teenager beginning my own search for faith in the 1950's was *Your God is Too Small*, a classic by the Anglican writer, J.B. Phillips that is still in print.<sup>i</sup> The premise of this book has helped me enormously each time I have come across yet another “astounding” discovery or philosophy that is guaranteed to make Christian faith obsolete. Any god that can be destroyed is simply an idol, no matter how elaborately it may be constructed artistically, intellectually or psychologically.

When I was in high school, a teacher who organized a group for us teens used a simple illustration which has also stuck with me through the years. In a discussion of morals and ethics, he pointed out that fish who swim in the depths of the sea have lost the use of their eyes; often have only vestigial ones; simply because they never use them. He said our conscience; our moral and spiritual senses were like that. We lose them if we don't use them.

I would submit that to approach our topic, *The Fullness of the Kingdom*, simply by thinking about it and describing it in words, will be an intellectual exercise of not much value. We can go down the list, quoting that wonderful passage in St. Paul's eighth chapter to the Romans: “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”<sup>ii</sup> Not only us humans, but all of creation: every animal, plant, rock and stone – with the angels, principalities and powers – all will be present in this Kingdom.

And unless we see the Lord as simply a deluded prophet, since the Kingdom is not bound by time and space, we can say with Him that “the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”<sup>iii</sup> All of creation is present in the Kingdom now. The proclamation of the Kingdom which began His ministry is

the proclamation of Emmanuel: God with us. Certainly there are intimations of this closeness in the Old Testament: In Deuteronomy we hear: “But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”<sup>iv</sup> And I believe St. Paul is saying the same thing in Christian terms when he says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work within you.”<sup>v</sup>

Christians travel through the landscape of this Kingdom; it is the normal atmosphere we breathe on this earth. Yet if the God of many of us who call ourselves Christians is too small, our concept of the Kingdom of Heaven is nonexistent. In many areas, we have done well in taking to heart our Lord’s words about the Last Judgment in St. Matthew’s Gospel: I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.<sup>vi</sup> Yet have we done this in such a way that those to whom we minister are left still hungering and thirsting, not learning that they can be satisfied only by the Bread of Life?<sup>vii</sup> Have we left them clothed, but in garments that will not allow them to enter the Wedding Banquet or to put on the robe of incorruption by which the mortal is swallowed up by immortality?<sup>viii</sup> Do they know that indeed, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand?

Humans have always observed things with their five senses and responded to the physical world they mediate. However for the most part, at least until fairly modern times, they have also understood that there are other forms of knowledge; that as Martin Buber points out in his classic book, *I and Thou*,<sup>ix</sup> the knowledge gained in relationship to others is entirely different from that gained simply by knowing about them. Studying a rabbit by dissecting it is an entirely different thing from getting to know it as a pet. While in our culture we would call someone insane if they tried to get to know another person by physical dissection, most of us do spend quite a bit of time

“dissecting” others, including God and His Kingdom, in words rather than by knowing them through friendship and love.

All the talk; all the theology we may spout, will leave us with nothing but the dead corpse of our own dissected ideas about God and His Kingdom if we do not step out in love, faith and prayer. Our God is a personal god; not simply a New Age Force. His Kingdom is love and truth. We can all too easily echo the words of Pilate who did not have the eyes to see or the ears to hear, when Truth stood right in front of him.<sup>x</sup>

But many of those around us will say that knowledge, mediated through friendship and love, is very unscientific. Not too long ago, I listened to two professional scientists in all seriousness scoffing at love and friendship as simply a delusion produced by chemical hormones and imbalance. The vision of blind fish swimming in the depths of the sea floated through my mind. These people were totally unaware of (or in denial about) spiritual senses that can mediate the experience of another; indeed mediate the experience of the entire universe, as surely as our physical senses mediate information about our physical environment.

In all fairness, some science is beginning to catch up with the fact that things (“subjects”) are changed simply by being observed; that there is and can be no such thing as a completely “objective” study or investigation.

A fascinating, albeit controversial study of human consciousness first published in 1976 by the late Julian Jaynes, is titled *The Origin of Human Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Jaynes makes the case that all religion and belief in deity comes from nostalgia for our pre-conscious, bicameral past when humans could not differentiate between their outer sensory and inner psychological worlds. I truly enjoyed reading his book and think he may be accurate in his assessment of the origin of human consciousness, but I am unable to make the

leap in logic that this therefore proves God does not exist, that Jesus was simply a person who attempted to reform Judaism by what “necessarily” became a “new religion for conscious men rather than bicameral men,”<sup>xi</sup> and that there is no real content mediated by prayer, experience and intuition. Jaynes would go so far as to say that any experiences humans may believe they have of God are simply the result of a form of schizophrenic delusion; that the voices and visions which seem more real to the mystic than the external world are simply a matter of chemical imbalance or the result of a non-developed bicameral mind.

Why am I belaboring this point? I believe this sort of thinking is “in the air” today, and we are all influenced by it more than we realize. I would even say, as I have said many times before, that because of the media that most people are subjected to in this contemporary world, we are so brainwashed by this kind of thinking that we do not even know it. For those of you who enjoy the language of scholarship, a book by Alexei V. Nesteruk, *Light from the East*,<sup>xii</sup> discusses with great erudition the long history of the relationship -- or the tension -- between Christian faith and science. It is not an “easy read,” but I do recommend it for those who can plow through it. Nesteruk responds well to the assumption that faith is irrelevant to science or “real life.”

Because of this “brainwashing” as I call it, I believe those of us living on the planet earth today must work harder than those who went before us if we are to find ourselves in an environment conducive to love and faith, let alone prayer.

By “an environment conducive to prayer,” however, I do not mean just seeking out some time in a Church or in an icon corner or a meditation room. The late Fr. Alexander Schmemmann makes this point very clearly in his seminal book, *For the Life of the World*.<sup>xiii</sup> Speaking of the

original sin, Father Alexander says “The sin was not that man neglected his religious duties. The sin was that he thought of God in terms of religion, i.e., opposing Him to life.”<sup>xiv</sup>

What is our personal view of life? How do we approach the world? Do we see our surroundings and other people as things to be placed and controlled by us within the boundaries of what we consider to be “our life?” Do we think of religion as a way graciously to include God in our life and allow Him the courtesy of an occasional greeting? Is the Church just another one of the activities we schedule into our life to a greater or lesser degree?

Now I want literally to shift our focus. I’m sure many of you know that what can appear to be a factor of primitive art in Orthodox iconography is actually a very sophisticated approach called “inverse perspective.” Even (or most especially) early iconographers were not “primitives.” Inverse perspective places us within the gaze of the icon. It subconsciously challenges our perception that we are the center of the universe and can best perceive and judge reality from our own perspective.

Thus praying with icons can be a powerful tool in re-orienting our approach to life. Rather than sitting down to pray and placing the thought of God in our mind and imagination, as we stand before an icon we gradually begin to realize that it is the other way around: indeed we stand before God. By His gaze, He includes us in His Kingdom, the infinite universe He has created in time and space and redeemed by the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus for all eternity. As we allow ourselves to enter into His gaze, infinitesimally limited though our glimpse of it may be, we also allow ourselves to begin to see with the eye of our heart what cannot be seen by our five senses.

The Greek theologians had a word for this “sixth” or spiritual sense: they called it *nous*, a word to describe that faculty by which we know things not mediated by the five senses. In

English we might say spiritual or intellectual understanding; intuition; the heart; prayer, experience; consciousness; awareness, even the much maligned term, “extra-sensory perception.” Whatever we may call it, it is the way we enter into the life of another; experience things through their eyes; share their thoughts; walk in their footsteps. Those who love understand this. Mothers often know when their children are in trouble – they don’t need a phone call or a cry for help. If this is a biological sense, it is one that science has yet to categorize. Sometimes people know that a person has entered a crowded room, before seeing them or being told of their presence. If we can have this communication with other people, how much more does God have it with us, who are His children in the most intimate and fundamental sense?

This is communication without words; beyond words. Michael Gallatin speaks of this very eloquently in his book *Thirsting for God in a Land of Shallow Wells*.<sup>xv</sup> This is heart speaking to heart; *nous* communication if you will. When we realize that God not only communicates with us in this way, but is the very ground of our being and the source of our life, we come to understand that any gaze we consider to be our own apart from His is sheer delusion. We cannot be on our own in God’s Kingdom. The only way to be on our own or alone is to reject God so definitively that we accept our limited and warped view of reality in place of His. He will allow us to do this, and this is the classic definition of hell: a place where the fire of His love will eternally burn us as we choose eternally to reject it rather than allowing it to purify and hallow us.

Yet we need times of solitude and silence to recognize this – we must find time and space to recollect ourselves; remind ourselves that we are in the presence of God and held by Him in eternity. Because our senses are so tuned to the clamor of this world, we must deny them at

times the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings that keep them stimulated in order to cultivate our “sixth sense.” Although He was God, in His humanity Jesus also needed time alone to pray with His Father in a world much quieter than ours. How much more do we need this as children of God, not by nature but by adoption?

God is He who has brought us into being, who allows us to stand here, and who surrounds us with His love. As much as His Kingdom is to come, it is here within us and among us. Let us long for it; let us not allow the words He taught us to be vain and empty: “Your Kingdom come; Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In whatever ways are possible for us, let us learn to pray that He may count us worthy to enter into the fullness of His Kingdom where for all eternity we shall rejoice with all of creation. Let us begin even now not only to be clothed by grace and fed with the immortal Bread of Life, but also in the bold words of St. Peter, to become partakers of the Divine Nature.<sup>xvi</sup> May all that we do and speak here in this life be with the power and to the glory of Him Who lives forever with His Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Phillips, J.B., *Your God is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike*. New York, Macmillan: 1953 (Recent paperback edition by Touchstone Press, 2004)

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 8:21-23

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 3:2

<sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 30:14

<sup>v</sup> Phillipians 2:12-13

<sup>vi</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 25:35-36

<sup>vii</sup> *The Gospel According to St. John*, 6:35

<sup>viii</sup> *Cf. Matthew*, 22:11-14 and *II Corinthians* 5:4

<sup>ix</sup> Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.

<sup>x</sup> John 18:38

<sup>xi</sup> Jaynes, Julian, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Boston, Houghton Mifflin: 1990. pp 318-319.

<sup>xii</sup> Nesteruk, Alexei V., *Light from the East: Theology, Science and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*. Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press: 2003.

<sup>xiii</sup> Revised edition. NY, Athens Printing Co.:1973 (Reprint edition available from St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 10707)

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.* page 18

<sup>xv</sup> Ben Lomond, CA, Conciliar Press: 2002

<sup>xvi</sup> II Peter 1:4