

## Epiphany III

From Psalm 18

“The Law of the Lord is Perfect, it revives the soul. The rule of the Lord is to be  
Trusted, it gives wisdom to the simple,  
The precepts of the Lord are right, they gladden the heart. The command of the  
Lord is clear, it gives light to the eyes,  
The Fear of the Lord is holy, abiding for ever. The decrees of the Lord are truth  
and all of them just,  
May the spoken words of my mouth, they thoughts of my heart, win favour in  
your sight, O Lord, my rescuer, my rock!”

Are you for walls or are you for bridges? Walls or Bridges? There is a tendency in our culture and in the Christian Church to be simplistic and one-sided about walls and bridges: Walls are bad because they keep people out, they separate and divide, but bridges are great as they establish connection and inclusion. So the encouragement is to be a bridgebuilder and not a wall restorer - To construct bridges and knock down walls.

However, to be faithful to the Law of the Lord which is perfect, to be an honest Christian true to the Word of God, the Tradition of the Church, we need both walls and bridges – identity and relevance, both the Word and the Work of going out is needed to be a Faithful Christian.

Here, the Walls stand for the Command of the Lord which gives light to the eyes. We could argue that throughout the Old Testament God himself has been building Walls, if you like, God called his people out of the nations to be his own

people, set apart from all other nations, to know and obey his Word, his decrees and his commands. So that they would be different from the nations. He gave them the Torah, the Law with all what they can do and could not do, so that they will be on the path to Holiness, Good and righteous in the sight of God.

We do find numerous biblical references against syncretism; which is the practice of combining beliefs and practices from different religions, philosophies, or cultures, because God knows it will compromise their faith and righteousness, and damage their covenant relationship with him.

### **Jeremiah 10:2**

<sup>2</sup> Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them.

<sup>3</sup> For the customs of the people are vain...

The law was entrusted to the Jewish people not that they were better than other peoples of the world, but because of God's choice of them, he could have chosen any other race for that matter, and most of them would have responded so inadequately like the Jews, because at the end of the day, the fallen nature of humanity is the same across all cultures and races.

In God's graciousness he chose them through, those who obeyed his Word and Command and entrusted them his Word, his Laws and Decrees – that gives wisdom to the simple. These laws, decrees, rituals, moral laws and practises made them different from all the nations surrounding them. They had a whole different way of life, that separated them from the other nations, who did not know the One True God.

This way of life, defined them and confirmed their identity as the people of God, and they were constantly called by the Prophets to be true to that identity.

**In other words there were ‘Walls’ in shaping their identity as the people of God, This identity as the People of God is the Wall we are talking about.**

This is the context of our First reading, Nehemiah and Ezra were given the mission of rebuilding the physical Wall of Jerusalem and the Spiritual Wall of the identity in Torah as the exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylonia, when they had lost their identity in a foreign land. Nehemiah Focused on the Physical Wall of Jerusalem that is needed to protect the city from enemies, while Ezra the priest read from the Book of the Law to men, women and Children old enough to understand, because “The Fear of the Lord is holy, abiding for ever. The decrees of the Lord are truth and all of them just”

However, it’s not all about building walls. The purpose of the walls is to build great bridges, so that all can come and see the light of the Lord in his Word and in his People. Israel was given the law not to hold it for themselves, but to be a light to the nations.

**"I the LORD have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto the nations" Isaiah 42:6”**

This is what our Lord Jesus fulfills in today’s Gospel. After spending almost 30 years of his life, building walls, in the silence – Learning the Torah and practising his faith, realising his identity as the Son of God, Jesus was finally ready to start building bridges – to reach out, to evangelise, because he has the good news for all the nations of the World!

We know that Jesus left home to go and see John the Baptist, and we know that his whole life changed after his time with John. However, Jesus didn't stay in the wilderness to live a hermit's life with John; he received a prophetic anointing at his baptism to announce the new age of the Kingdom of God. So he became a travelling preacher, a bridge builder.

By the time Jesus returns to his home town his reputation has arrived before him: when he goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath as he usually did, this time he is invited to preach. He chooses a passage from Isaiah which give a beautiful summary of the programme of his new mission – to build bridges all over the world as it were, as he reads –

**“The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.”**

Jesus was able to reach out to the outcasts of the society, the sinners, the rejected, the rich, the poor, men, women, the sick and the lame, foreigners... basically all human beings who were in any kind of need. He was able to heal them and give them new sight because he had something to offer – the Good News which brings them to the right relationship with God and with each other. **Jesus was not merely going everywhere preaching that everything everyone does under the sun is compatible with God and his law!** While he reached out in mercy he also challenged sin; for an example to the woman caught in adultery, Jesus indeed showed mercy but warned her not to sin again.

“Neither do I condemn you but do not sin again” – John 8:11.

This is why Jesus says in Matthew, “I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it” – Jesus was able to interpret and practise the Law mingled with Mercy – **He was not just about the rule of the Law**, there are Christians who are very legalistic in their interpretation of the Law and the commandments of the Lord, either due to their own immaturity in the Christian life or the lack of human compassion, empathy, and the attribute of Mercy. They are all about the walls; cold and harsh in judgements. They need to grow in the attitude of Christ and learn from him.

Then on the other hand, there are Christians who are all about the bridges, all about including everybody into the church and the kingdom of God, without emphasizing the need to repent and believe in the Word of God. If a Christian or a preacher has not invested his or her life in the Orthodox Christian Faith which has the capacity to save, they have nothing to offer the World. If our theology is heavily influenced by our surrounding culture, we have no Goodnews to offer our neighbour. Preachers and Teachers should spend more time in prayer and study of the Word – in other words – building walls – before they begin to build bridges. Learn from our Lord, who for thirty years in his life in Nazareth practised his faith and realized what he needed to preach and how he needed to reach out.

Also, we need to remember Jesus himself was not accepted later in his own homeland, as the home crowd later tried to throw him off a cliff. Surely, Jesus didn't preach what they wanted to hear! He would have challenged them on certain matters.

This is the challenge of every True Christian and every Preacher in our World. The church needs to rediscover her true identity and mission, and then bring the Good News of God's Truth, Love and Mercy to all. To do this in an authentic way, we need both Walls and Bridges. Let's build strong walls so that

we can build long bridges! We need to deepen in our Christian identity, and live the liberating Good news of the Lord, and ask for the Anointing of the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom to go out to a world gone blind to the Truth, and to bring them into the light of Christ.

Let us pray with the psalmist,  
May the spoken words of my mouth, and the thoughts of my heart, win favour in your sight, O Lord, my rescuer, my rock!”