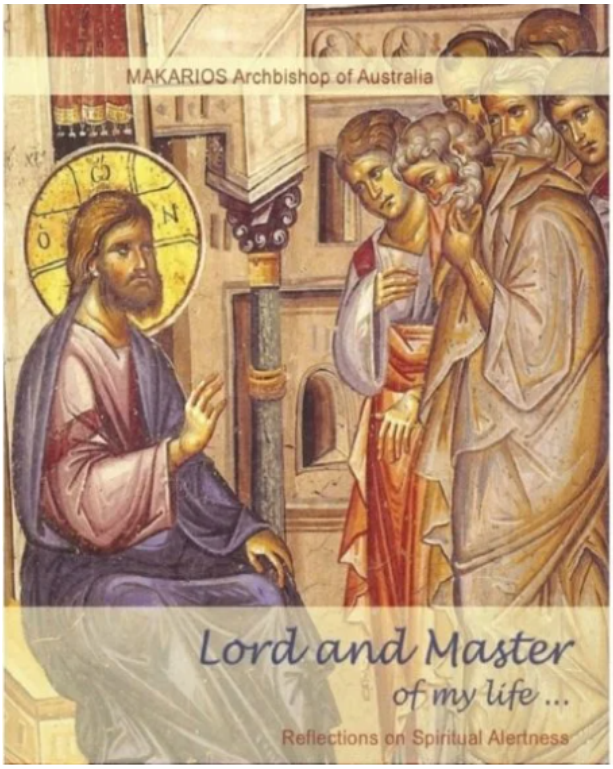
25/05/2020

Lord and Master of My Life’, a new book by Archbishop Makarios of Australia



Lord and Master of my Life..” is how the Lenten prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian, commences. It is not perhaps not entirely coincidental that Archbishop Makarios has chosen to publish a book of meditations focused around this prayer and adopting its first phrase as his title, during the global Coronavirus pandemic, for Saint Ephraim is said to have perished while attending to the needs of plague victims.

Saint Ephraim, an ethnic Assyrian monk, is fittingly referred to in Syriac as “Kenara d’ Rukha”, the Harp of the Spirit and every syllable of his mellifluous writings, is a hymn of joy, a paean of praise, a lyric laudation of God. Take for example his Epiphany Hymn: “Glory to Thee from Thy flock on the day of Thy manifestation./He has renewed the heavens, because the foolish ones had adored all the stars / He has renewed the earth which had lost its vigour through Adam / A new creation was made by His spittle / And He Who is all-powerful made straight both bodies and mind.”

A most prolific writer, the church historian Sozomen maintains that Saint Ephraim, throughout his life, wrote over three million lines. As he wrote in Syriac, a form of Aramaic, he was able to meld the traditions of Rabbinic Judaism with Greek science

and philosophy, combining these with his native Mesopotamian tradition of mystery symbolism. The complex and diverse forms of his poetry, of which over four hundred examples survive, constitute a foundation of the musical and hymnographic traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox and the Assyrian Church of the East. His homilies, known as ‘memre,’ are written in seven-syllable verse, often divided into two parts of three and four syllables.

Through the medium of such poetry, the Saint celebrates Church feasts, expounds a Scriptural narrative or takes up a spiritual or edifying theme. More remarkable, are his teaching hymns, known as ‘madrase,’ meaning instructions and, in modern Syriac, ‘schools,’ which employ over fifty different metrical schemes and which consist of a traditional tune identified by its opening line and antiphons, which it is believed, were originally sung in response by women, to the tune of the lyre. Some of the hymns are acrostic, where each strophe begins with a different letter of the alphabet, drawing from the tradition of metrical verses in the Bible and on other occasions, the first letters of a number of verses form a given word. This enabled Saint Ephraim to ‘sign’ his hymns, and this is a form that has profoundly influenced Greek poets from the time of Ephraim right up until Greek Nobel laureate, Odysseas Elytis in his masterpiece, “Axion Esti.”

Thus, with regards to his poetic genius, fervour of feeling, breadth of inspiration and linguistic dexterity, the Saint is arguably a master of the form and a teacher to all those who followed, such as the great melodist Saint Romanos.

Arresting imagery, sharp metaphors and similes, bold comparisons, antitheses, coining of successful maxims, and vivid dramatisation characterise his style and further his aim of providing his listeners, steeped in a culture of poetry, with a solid theological grounding that would inoculate them against contemporary prevalent errors in doctrine, or as the Saint himself put it in his ‘Hymns against Heresies, so that his flock would not be: “tossed to and fro and carried around with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness and deceitful wiles.”
Saint Ephraim’s Lenten prayer, considered to be the most succinct summation of the spirit of Great Lent, was without a doubt, composed by the Saint, with the above in mind. At weekday services during Great Lent, the prayer is prescribed for each of the canonical hours and at the Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Surviving only in Greek translation, it loses none of its devotional Syriac heritage, but is engagingly as simple as it is deep in meaning:

“O Lord and Master of my life, grant me not a spirit of sloth, curiosity, love of power, and idle talk.
But give to me, your servant, a spirit of sober-mindedness, humility, patience, and

love.
Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother, since you are blessed to the ages of ages. Amen."

Archbishop Makarios, in his "Lord and Master of my life," analyses and deconstructs each phrase of Saint Ephraim's prayer, in a collection of homilies which as he states, constitute "Reflections on Spiritual Alertness." The publication of such a work is timely. Our current state of isolation, or lockdown, invites the introspection that Saint Ephraim deems so necessary. To acquire the perspicacity to identify the flaws in oneself, to analyse these and seek to address them requires not only humility, but a good deal of spiritual quietude. Despite the fact the Church calendar still celebrates the Easter period, the unique sense of time in the Orthodox tradition is not linear. Rather it conflates past, present and future so that every time is the time of the Resurrection and conversely, every time is also Lenten. As such, in these times, Archbishop Makarios indirectly identifies Saint Ephraim's Lenten prayer as particularly pertinent. As he states in his book, maintaining the joyousness of spirit of Saint Ephraim: "Great Lent is… a period of joy… because actually we return to life. During this time, each of us aims to be spiritually reborn by renouncing whatever is… decayed in order to truly live and experience the boundlessness of spiritual life, in all is depth and intensity…"

In Archbishop Makarios' view, this is likely because in parallel with the government-imposed state of isolation and lockdown, mankind has also self-isolated and locked itself down, away from its creator. For him, Saint Ephraim's prayer is an ideal way to address the cacophony of narcissism which pervades and afflicts the modern world. It offers, for those who would take it, a pathway of emancipation from a state of utter subjugation, a lifting of distancing restrictions imposed upon the movement of the soul: "…being distant from God and being personally isolated not only does not bring joy and fulfillment, but life becomes desperately confined and burdened. That is why the autonomous and egotistical person, the one who makes himself godlike and worships himself, ends up living without freedom."
Significantly, Archbishop Makarios devotes a chapter of his book in examination of Saint Ephraim's prayer to be granted a spirit free from περιέργεια, as is stated in the original form of the prayer, literally translating the term as "curiosity," whereas other translators have traditionally employed the term "meddling," in English. His choice of term is significant, for in adopting a word derived from the Latin curiosus, signifying a quality related to inquisitive thinking such as exploration, investigation, and learning, evident by observation, he achieves equivalency with the original Greek term which signifies an "inquiry around matters." What follows is a timely and nuanced critique of the "Information Age," where all are inundated by a deluge

of information, images, fake news and stimuli cascading from various media and are often rendered powerless to objectively assess their veracity or relevance. It is the suspension of one's critical faculties in the face of such an onslaught that is of paramount concern. As Archbishop Makarios explains, Saint Ephraim does not condemn a spirit of inquiry or a love of learning. Instead: "When the information which accumulates in the person's mind is not in order and is not checked then more information one has, the more confusion it brings… Contemporary man becomes…side-racked and disoriented."

The result in the Archbishop's view: an inability to feel empathy, an incapacity to love.

Archbishop Makarios perceptively links a spirit of sloth and curiosity with a love of power, an insidious form of egotism and narcissism that undermines the very fabric of society and erodes its underlying moral principles, in his next homily. According to him, this is a pathology of loss of sense of self and self-control: "Our ego becomes the absolute centre of our life and it controls our judgement in all matters… This…may be seen through our indifference, neglect, lack of interest, care and respect towards our neighbour."

Returning to his subtle, understated parallel with our current situation, the Archbishop views isolation not as a physical state, but rather as a spiritual one, with its own consequences: "Isolation is not so much about the place as it is about the heart, the expression of an inner state of being…No one is as empty as the one who is full of his own self."

Considering Saint Ephraim's injunction against idle talk, Archbishop Makarios is careful to point out the power of the word in the Orthodox tradition. After all, as the Gospel of John tells us, "In the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Acquiring the discernment to know when to speak and when to remain silent, in the Archbishop's view, is a key step in a person's transformation: "through…love." Mastery over the spoken word is important because at the end of Saint Ephraim's prayer, the supplicant will be called upon to proclaim that God is "blessed to the ages of ages. Amen."

Unlike sundry social commentators, Archbishop Makarios not only exposes some of the major flaws and fractures in modern society, but through Saint Ephraim's prayer, also suggests solutions that can be implemented at an individual level. According to him, the quest and attainment of a spirit of sober-mindedness, humility, patience, and love, an ability to see one's own faults and not to judge one's brother, elements that he closely examines in turn, are intrinsic to the fulfilment of one's personhood, and facilitate a "struggle, not for ourselves but in

order to be united with everyone."

The culmination of Saint Ephraim's prayer, in Archbishop's Makarios view, is the offering of thanksgiving, an experience of the Resurrection and Pentecost. In his exposition, he expertly draws once more upon the central motif of current events, to confound and completely invert conventional understanding of isolation and distancing, revealing the paradox within: "Whoever journeys towards God wants to be separated from everyone and to remain alone with God, but although he is separated, he remains united with everything, with the whole of creation."

Written in an easily comprehensible, crisp and engaging style and eschewing rhetorical flourishes and superfluous adornments, Archbishop Makarios' recently published moving and incisive meditation on Saint Ephraim's prayer is ably translated into English by Anna Dimitriou and Angeliki Georgiou. Expressing a critique of the world in all times and articulating the Orthodox Church's unique world view forms part of the Church's salvific mission, as it understands it, and in the age of self-help manuals and mindfulness, the Archbishop reaches back to the early days of the Church in order to offer, not to impose, an ancient means to rec-connect with ourselves and others, gently and assumedly reminding us, as Saint Ephraim did our ancestors through countless generations, that even in our purported state of isolation, we are never alone:

The prayer of Saint Ephraim summarises, in a unique and wonderful way, whatever is spiritually needed for us to reach spiritual fulfillment and so it recommends a rule whereby we can assess our struggle during this period and for our entire time that we are in this world."

'Lord and Master of my life' by Archbishop Makarios is available at the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Bookshop at Axion Esti Monastery, Northcote.

neoskosmos.com