

SUNDAY SERMON – 12TH MATTHEW – IRENAEUS OF LYON

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

There are two major Christian heresies today, both of which deny the full divinity of Jesus Christ. They make Jesus out to be “a god” meaning a deity (with a lower case “d”) rather than God meaning THE Deity (with a capital “D”). Some time ago, I received this \$100 bill. When I got it, it seemed to me that something about it seemed off. Initially I just thought that maybe it got run through the washing machine or something. The color and feel of the paper is off, the watermark looks cartoonish, and the line that is invisible unless you hold it up to the light is visible on the surface. Then I received a \$100 bill like this one. All of sudden I fully realized that the first was a counterfeit bill, it was not the real thing. Really seeing and getting to know the real thing better enabled me to recognize the fake, the counterfeit.

The two modern Christian heresies I referred to earlier are Mormonism and the Jehovah Witnesses. Both use the premise that sometime after Christ, the Church as we know it fell away and that they now represent the true Church. I love when they come knocking on my door and I have time to “entertain them”, especially if I am in my civilian clothes, meaning not dressed as a priest, and they don’t know what they are getting into. You see I know that the Apostle John the Evangelist appointed St. Polycarp as bishop of Smyrna in his place. Smyrna is modern day Izmir on the west coast of Turkey. I also know that St. Irenaeus of Lugdunum in Gaul, whom we commemorate today, was raised in Smyrna and was a disciple of St. Polycarp before leaving there to become the second bishop of modern day Lyon in France in the second century. So once they hit me with the story of the church falling away, I ask them, “When did that happen, during the time of John the Evangelist, Polycarp or Irenaeus?” Of course they don’t know about any of those things because they have not studied Church History. They get nervous and can only say they don’t know.

St. Irenaeus was one of the early Fathers of the Church. He wrote a five volume book called Against Heresies. The heresy he was writing against was Gnosticism. It is now clear that John in his Gospel also wrote against an early form of Gnosticism. Until the Nag Hammadi library was found in an Egyptian cave in 1945, many scholars believed that Irenaeus was exaggerating about just how bad the Gnostic teaching was. Since that time, we have discovered the patently false gospels of Thomas, Philip, Judas and

other texts falsely ascribed to the Twelve Apostles. Once the canon of scripture, the Bible as we know it, came into being in the fourth century, these false books had been almost completely destroyed. Up until 1945, many scholars even questioned their existence. Since that time, unfortunately, some have again embraced their teaching, the false teaching of the gnostic “gospels” and other books. When the Treasury Department comes across counterfeit bills, it destroys them and prosecutes those who make them. The early church did the same with these counterfeit texts so that they would not confuse the people of their time. Unfortunately, many are being confused by them again in our time now that they have been rediscovered.

Do YOU know enough about the true Gospel of Jesus Christ to recognize a false version of it? St. Irenaeus of Lyon was the first to use the term **Apostolic Succession**. It is the idea that the teaching and grace of Jesus Christ and the Apostles was successfully passed on from one generation to the next without change. The Orthodox Church has the greatest and clearest claim to Apostolic Succession of any Christian Church, with a continuous history and tradition going from Jesus Christ and His Apostles until today.

St. Irenaeus, writing at the end of the second century, taught that there are only four true Gospels, those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He quotes from at least 21 and as many as 25 of the 27 books of what would become the New Testament canon in his writings, as well as from the Patristic texts of Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas.

St. Irenaeus was the first to refer to Christ as the New Adam and the Virgin Mary as the New Eve. He is an important early Father of the Orthodox Christian faith. He enabled Christians of his time to discern the true Gospel of Jesus Christ from the false gospels floating around in his own time and, unfortunately, floating around again today. It is of critical importance that we make the effort to read and know the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is revealed in the Bible and in the Orthodox Christian Church so that we can know and live the truth of the Gospel and continue to pass on this truth with the full integrity of Apostolic Succession. We need to learn, live and share the truth of the New Adam, Jesus Christ, and the New Eve, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary.

It is the same gospel that St. Paul teaches us in today’s Epistle reading and that Jesus Christ reveals to the rich young man through the Ten Commandments in today’s Gospel reading. Brothers and sisters, I can’t emphasize how important it is for you to

read your Bible, and especially the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Come to know the true Jesus and stop being fooled by false versions. Seek to learn the fullness of the Orthodox Christian tradition, to fully know and embrace our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Generations before us have died to pass it on to us today. Let us make sure to do our part to make sure that it gets passed on to our children, grandchildren and for many generations yet to come.

To God be the glory, now and forever, and to the ages of ages, Amen.