

THE NARTHEX

*The believers were first called
Christians at Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26

July - September
2009

Activism

Unlike the churches of the western traditions, the Orthodox Church is not known for its public activism. We are not known for our vociferous campaigning or the pursuing of worthy causes in the political, environmental or even moral realms. This is not to say that there are no organised Orthodox charities or that we do not engage in good works. Bearing in mind the gospel injunction, [Matt. 61-2] these are to be done secretly and not paraded before the public gaze.

The point is, though our Orthodox Church might appear hidden in modern Britain, we are not here to change the world; that is not our mission. The created world, marred by human sin, has been shown the way of redemption in Christ. It is not our task to patch-up the broken fragments of human life, as if we could bring it to perfection by our own efforts. It is the uttermost vanity to imagine that the actions of human beings are going to build paradise on earth: such was attempted in the last century in the dual millenarian fantasies of the triumph of Socialism or the Reich that would last a thousand years.

Rather, we are here to proclaim the gospel, to worship, to repent and to seek holiness, working out the salvation of our souls and bodies in fear and trembling, whilst awaiting the coming of the kingdom. Activism, on the other hand, is the heretical belief that we can somehow bring about a world of perfect peace and brotherhood, if only we put enough effort into it. Behind this idea lies the belief that, if only we created the right systems, assuring justice and human rights for all, we might ensure everlasting happiness for all.

Activists themselves, whether political or religious, would not, necessarily, fall into such crude

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naivety; they would argue that these are things we should strive for, knowing that eternal vigilance and constant activism is needed, given the slippery nature of Man. But neither is this part our job description. Take, for example, how many are trapped in poverty, not just in relative terms in our own society but also in world terms. Christ told us that the poor are always with us [Jn.12:8]. This is not because God ordained such a state of affairs, it is just the way the world is, given our fallen human nature; there will always be rich and poor. Given, also, that we live in a world motivated, financially, if everything could possibly be evenly distributed, the net result would be not just fair shares for all but that also everyone would be equally poor. Wealth has to be created and no one creates anything without motivation. It is a harsh fact but it is the way things are in the world.

In other words, the world will not change until the Parousia, the Coming of Christ in judgement, when this age will reach its fulfilment (Greek: τέλος). Times and seasons are known only to God the Father; even Christ in his humanity did not know the hour [Mk.13:32]. God has created the world with His purposes in mind - it is the height of human folly to suppose that we can substitute a humanist alternative as if we had somehow broken free now from our divine parent; that somehow we have outgrown belief in God and have devised for ourselves human rights as a replacement for divine commandments. Like Adam and Eve, who, having disregarded the divine command, find themselves exposed and end up having to devise coverings for their nakedness. We might imagine that we have become a fully evolved, mature and God-free species, when in fact we are but a recalcitrant teenager, kicking over the traces, as we say. But the

Church, in her prophetic insight, views all Activism and Idealism and every other human -ism as just another delusion and a further enticement to build towers of Babel, founded upon demonic temptation.

Having said this, there are clearly things to protest against, injustices to be fought, immorality to confront, scandals to denounce. These things must be done because they are the right action but studiously avoiding the error of thinking that we are, thereby, bringing the Kingdom of God closer. Good actions indeed proclaim the Kingdom but they do not hasten the day of its coming, as if it were, with every action we perform. Such thoughts would be sheer hubris. What Christ does command us, however, is to watch and pray [Mk.13:37].

The most we might hope for in the affairs of men - knowing that *'the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth'* [Gen.8:21] - is that we might strive for justice. It is, after all, for this reason that the state has authority, on loan from God, to order human affairs. It is when the state imagines that its sovereignty and power comes of itself (or even from the people) and not from God that it begins to stray into oppression. (N.B. How the EU has no reference to the Divine in its formularies and constitutions. The United Kingdom still, however, just clings to this notion through its retention of a constitutional monarchy *by the grace of God*, as it says on the coins of the realm.)

There are, of course, things that change in the course of human history and in the course of time - *'cometh the moment, cometh the man'*. The abolition of slavery is a case in point; the extension of democracy and the attaining of

universal adult suffrage, yet another. But be it equality or democracy, we observe what happens when such things come by force, whether in Revolutionary France in 1789 or in Iraq in 2003.

The abolition of Slavery was, no doubt, *the* most noble action of the British Empire's history. It took a civil war in the United States (1861-65) to achieve the same, where the slave-free Northern states were, financially and industrially, leaps ahead of the slave-owning South. The fact is, slave-owning societies are economically backward, prone to vigorous conservatism and, as one southern commentator remarked, keeping slaves was like holding a tiger by the ears: you dare not let go! Many good people worked tirelessly to get rid of slavery but it still exists in many forms in our world today; there will always be those who exploit others. Oppression, like the poor, is always with us: only its form changes.

All this calls for discernment on the part of the saints. We know there can be no fairy tale ending to human history - that we would all live happily ever after. For even our, apparently, achievements seem a double-edged sword. Consider, for example, how basic human health has improved in the UK since 1945 - We are left wondering whether we can go on providing for an ever-increasing elderly population that is economically unproductive. And yet our scientists continue to research for ways to prevent the ageing process and even fantasise about abolishing biological death! So, what results from such perfecting of the human species is the very abolition of what it means to be human - or will such dubious blessings be reserved for the rich and powerful elites alone?

In short, it is not the work and mission of the Church to strive officiously to improve the world. Was there anywhere on earth, at any time that we would call perfection? Which revolution, which movement, which dream of the great and just society ever came into being? Even Byzantium, the epitome of the Christian city, if ever there was one, lasted but a thousand years but even she past away into history. Nothing in this world abides and all things are passing, so that, following the teaching of the Apostles, witnessed in the Holy

Scriptures, we await the new heaven and the new earth, living as in the world but not of it, awaiting our redemption with prayer and repentance, loving those around us and suffering what we must in patience.

Yet we do lead change; there is a form of activism in which we do engage. We hold meetings and take part in the most subversive of all activities; one designed to overthrow the powers and dark forces that rule this world; an action in time yet beyond it, prefiguring the age to come; a mysterious revolution that overturns all that the world values and even anticipates our destiny as made in the image and likeness of God. It is called the *Liturgy* and as long as there are ears of wheat and grapes on the vine, the offering will be made that transfigures the world.

Fr. Chrysostom

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 "With prayer I cleanse the vision of my faith, lest it lose sight of you in the mist, O my Most Radiant Star. "What use will your prayer be to God?" ask the swarthy workers of the earth. You speak rightly, sons of earth. What use is the mariner's telescope to the North Star, when it sees the mariner even without a telescope? But do not ask me, since you already know, what use a telescope is to a mariner. Prayer is necessary for me, lest I lose sight of the salvation-bearing Star, but the Star does not need it to keep from losing me. What would become of my inner vision, if I were to stop training it with prayer? Are the soldiers of the earth not trained, extensively and strenuously, to see targets in the distance?... How could I not train the vision of my faith to see my sole treasure as clearly as possible? Trapped in a web of illusions, I have barely caught sight of a way out, so do you really expect me to lose sight of it? Get it into your heads, my fellow wayfarers, that seeing God is not a cheap affair. You who sacrifice fortunes to see the luxuriance of the tropics or the polar lights of the arctic, must pay more dearly to see the One for whom the luxuriance of the tropics is poverty and the polar lights are a tallow candle. When you give even your entire life in order to see Him, you have barely paid a penny. Nevertheless He is magnanimous and good-hearted, and expects nothing more from you than this...Sever your bond with God for just three hours and you will find it painful to look at His light again. You ask me: how long does my prayer last? Can you understand me when I tell you that it lasts longer than my days ...Oh my fellow wayfarers, how majestic is the vision of faith! I swear to you, if you only knew how majestic it is, your prayer would never pause or end."

From *Prayers by the Lake* (XL)  
 by St. Nikolai Velimirovich

## SERVICES

### JULY

26<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
 NO Liturgy - Fr. Chrysostom on holiday

### AUGUST

1<sup>st</sup> Monday Beginning of the Dormition Fast  
 2<sup>nd</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am  
 6<sup>th</sup> Thursday The Holy Transfiguration [service to be announced]



9<sup>th</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am  
 15<sup>th</sup> Saturday The Dormition of the Theotokos (Service transferred to Sunday)  
 16<sup>th</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost - Afterfeast of the Dormition  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am  
 23<sup>rd</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost NO Liturgy - Fr. Chrysostom in Cornwall  
 30<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am

### SEPTEMBER

1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday New Church Liturgical Year begins  
 6<sup>th</sup> 13<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am  
 8<sup>th</sup> Nativity of the Theotokos  
 13<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost - Sunday before Exaltation of the Holy Cross  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am  
 14<sup>th</sup> Monday Exaltation of the Holy Cross



21<sup>st</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost - Sunday after Exaltation of the Holy Cross  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am  
 27<sup>th</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 11.30am