

# THE NARTHEX

Jan-Feb 2018

'And the disciples were first called  
Christians in Antioch' (Acts 11:26)

The Orthodox Church of St Dunstan of Canterbury, Parkstone, Poole, Dorset BH14 9JG

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## Change or Stability?

I was a school teacher from 1997 to 2015. Having completed my training for a Post Graduate Certificate in Education from Exeter University, I entered the profession and taught in Somerset, Cornwall, Nottinghamshire and Hampshire. Although I always enjoyed the experience of teaching itself, the imparting of knowledge and understanding, I was always clear that teaching was not my real avocation. To be honest, the real reason I entered the profession was to earn a sufficient salary that would pay our mortgage. This enabled me to apply myself where my heart had long been set, serving as a priest. Until I was able to retire my ministry was, of course, strictly limited. Thankfully, that is no longer the case. Yet no experience in life, good or ill, need be wasted time. It always struck me that wherever I was teaching (and especially during those long drives from my then home, Cornwall, back to boarding schools in Nottingham and Somerset) it was all part of the same journey. As I looked forward longingly to the time when I would be free again to serve full-time, I would say to myself, 'This too is part of the journey.'

Nevertheless, I was thankful for the experience of teaching and especially for what I learned myself from the profession, not just about *how to teach* but also about myself and what we do with acquired knowledge.

One matter that concerned me, however, was the in-service training that came with teaching. Much of it, presented by 'experts' who would visit and address the school teaching staff, or be presented at some agreeable venue with colleagues from other schools, was indeed useful and engaging. I noticed early on, however, that much of the content of these courses were the latest educational ideas and theoretical pedagogy representing new thinking that had originated in academic institutions or more suspiciously, from Whitehall. This might typically be about preserving attention in the classroom, improving standards of attainment or increasing levels of aspiration among the students, if only we would all follow the latest idea and

technique for lesson delivery or curriculum content.

What struck me forcefully, very early on, was firstly, that the latest educational panacea of all ills was so rapidly replaced by a new one coming down the line from the academic theorists. (These were often based on studies and pilot schemes or methods developed in other countries, boasting higher educational standards but usually in a social context far removed from Britain.) This meant that teachers had to demonstrate both in the classroom and in schemes of work how they were keeping up to speed and had incorporated the new thinking in their actual practice. The problem was, of course, that you were always aware that a new bright idea would come steaming along to replace the last one, just a matter of settling down.

The second thing that I noticed was to do with human nature. No matter how entertaining the presentation of new ideas, no matter how zealously received by my colleagues, the same process was always observed: namely, that as in nature, any momentum caused by an initial explosion of enthusiasm gradually lost energy to the point where the latest fashion, idea or fad eventually fizzled out, usually after about three months in my reckoning and the natural balance and equilibrium would re-establish itself, just in time for next fresh idea to come bouncing along in order to meet its own inevitable fate in a further three months.

What might we learn from this? Well, certainly that, although the things in the world might change, even improve, people remain the same. Technology, for example might alter the way we work but it has little effect on the nature of those who use it. Indeed, it is in the nature of technology that the more free time it affords us by the removal of the heavy work, the more productive we are forced to be, filling the free time with even more work. Whether from the loom of the cottage weaver to the mechanised mass-production of the *Spinning Jenny*, the enslavement to drudgery remains constant; only the context varies.

It seems more likely that changes happen, as in natural evolution, by sudden leaps and bounds in interesting

directions, rather than by gradual and progressive development towards the inevitable goal of perfection. The idea of inevitable and gradual improvement has been and still is, the fond imagining of the political left ever since the French Revolution; the victory of idealism over realism. History, and certainly educational history, is littered with ideas of predestined perfection. The paradox is that such thinking has often been accompanied by atheism, leaving one to wonder what deity, demiurge, fate or supernatural force has predetermined these goals for humanity.

The problem with this way of thinking is that, unsurprisingly, it can take no account of the fallen nature of human beings; a dogma and understanding that is inherent in all Orthodox Christian thinking, according to the mind of Christ. In saying this, we are not gloating at, mocking or laughing at human folly – although much comedy is founded upon the notion of boundless human aspiration and the limitations of possibility. Perhaps we should no more mock human endeavours to progress than we would a toddler's first efforts to walk rather than crawl; inevitably, there are falls. Human growth and maturing itself must face eventual degradation and decline. This is recognised, of course, by the philosophy of Humanism that suggests that, although individuals have their own histories through birth, growth, decline and death, yet humanity itself progresses or can do. Touching, as this notion might be, it seems to separate the individual from the collective: what use is any form of progress for someone who lived before it happened. This starts people off journeying towards the fantasy, new age dream of a self-perfected humanity, free from social and personal conflict, decay and even death.

From our perspective such fantasies misplace the idea of development: it is not to be found primarily in scientific, social, political, medical, educational or even bodily advances

towards perfection. For us, the Orthodox, the only human development that, ultimately, is of any consequence whatsoever, is spiritual and our affective means towards that end is our Baptism.

Anyone who has grasped the importance and implications of their baptism into Christ has found the anchor of hope, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field. In other words, they have found the firm ground upon which to be built, with all those others of the same Orthodox mind, into the house of God, the New Jerusalem, that Kingdom, which is the only setting for perfected humanity in the mind of God. That is the height of human development, a spiritual development and it is the true goal of life because it is the intention of the Creator. Mankind cannot be a self-made god, wise in his own conceits: he is a God-created soul, called back to find his appointed destiny in the Creator Himself.

It is perhaps fortuitous that the start of the secular year (the Church's year, as you know, starts in September) coincides with the great feast of Our Lord's own baptism, the revelation and inauguration of a renewed humanity, raised above the Fall. It is a season of renewal, of resolution and of starting again. The knowledge that we have participated in His Baptism is the source of our stability. No matter what the changes go on around us; no matter what the movements into which we are caught up; despite the flowering and the decay, the natural cycles and the outrageous chances, folly and sins into which we fall, faith in our baptism, our death and resurrection in Christ, is our soul's stability, lifting our hearts on high.

If we examine the common life of our parish in the light of all this we might raise a number of interesting questions. In school my experience taught me that it was the senior leadership that set the tone for the functioning of the institution. It might be thought that this should be the same for a parish with eyes focused upon the clergy in terms of leadership. That is only partly true, or should be. The priests have an awesome spiritual authority and the privilege, under the bishop, 'To enter the innermost veil...and personally behold the presence of the Holy Oblation and to take delight in the divine and sacred Liturgy.' (5th Prayer of the Anointing Service) But we have no actual coercive power over the faithful. The people do not belong to the parish under the Law (as the children at school) or the need to earn a living (as the teachers must). Rather, a parish, socially speaking, is a mutual association. The goal of all our endeavour, the ultimate driver of our belonging, is the pursuit of salvation and nothing less. What I have noticed about such associations, in all joint human activity, is the way that people engage in such matters within concentric

circles of engagement and levels of commitment. In other words, one finds a dedicated core of workers at the centre, a second circle of regular people, taking part at their own levels of interest. And lastly, an outer circle of those who participate from time to time, as opportunity or inclination attracts them. This is probably so for all types of churches in general, whether Orthodox or heterodox. The latter, particularly the Protestant (rather than the Roman Catholic) have shown a marked tendency towards *new ideas*, sharing remarkably similar characteristics to those that used to be issued every three months or so by the educational authorities! These attempts to draw the outer circles into the inner core and, no doubt, are also aimed at those with no interest or involvement at all, the unconverted. In itself, this is a laudable aspiration. The problem lies not so much in the latest evangelical 'scheme' but that human tendency to drift back into the equilibrium after those three months are past. Examine what those schemes have been in recent history: the reformation of ways of worship and alteration of ancient liturgical forms; the use of commercial advertising methods to attract attention; the influence of the feminist narrative and the ordination of women; the equating of homosexual relationships with traditional marriage and the obsequious yielding to the new gender politics; the focus on world development, climate change and global politics as being the moral imperative of the gospel. One thing is certain in all this. If you find a religious body pressing these matters as fundamental, you know it is a denomination in decline.

As Orthodox, we shall continue to keep vigilant. Our focus will remain on doctrinal integrity, abiding in the dogmas of the ecumenical councils, reverence for the interpretation of the Holy Scripture received from the holy Fathers, constant in the ascetic approach to life in this world and taking delight in serving at the divine liturgy as a symbol and reflection on earth of the life of the age to come.

In the end, in a school it is the talent, integrity and experience of the teachers that make for sound education, not least in teaching students *how* to think – rather than the current fashion for directing them *what* to think. And in a parish church it is the spiritual quality of the people's lives that makes it shine as a lamp in the darkness and stand out as the city set on a hill.

*Fr Chrysostom*

*Just as it is impossible without oil and flame for a lamp to burn and thus give light to those in a house, so it is impossible without the divine fire and Spirit for a soul to speak clearly about divine matters and to illumine others. For every perfect gift bestowed on the devout soul "is from above...from the Father of lights" (James 1:17)*

Nikitas Stithatos The Philokalia, *On the Practice of Virtues*

## SERVICES

*Vespers* is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm and on Wednesdays at 6.00pm. Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards. *Orthros* is served before the Divine Liturgy on Sundays at 9.00am

### January

Fri 5th Eve of Theophany  
The Royal Hours 10.00am.  
Vespers Divine Liturgy & Great Blessing of Waters 6.00pm

Sun 7th Sunday after Theophany  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am



Sun 14th 32nd after Pentecost  
Leavetaking of Theophany  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 21st 33rd after Pentecost  
Sunday of Zacchaeus  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 28th Beginning of Triodion  
Sunday of Publican & Pharisee  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am.  
Fast-free week

### February

Fri 2nd Meeting of Our Lord  
Divine Liturgy 11.00am

Sun 4th Sunday of the Prodigal  
Son Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 11th Sunday of the Last  
Judgement (Meatfare)  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 18th Forgiveness Sunday  
(Cheesefare) Divine Liturgy  
10.30am

Mon 19th Beginning of the  
Great Fast

Sun 25th First in Great Lent  
Sunday of Orthodoxy Divine  
Liturgy & Procession of Icons  
10.30am