

THE NARTHEX

March-April 2017

'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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The Psalms and Prayer

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of," said the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. Looking back over more than twenty-one years as an Orthodox priest and especially since we began our mission in Poole in 2006, I am astounded by how much has 'been wrought' of our original vision. The idea of a centre of Orthodox faith and evangelisation in the heart of old Wessex is gradually being established and I have no doubt none of this would have been brought to realisation without prayer, without asking God's blessing on our endeavour. Ultimately, however, our prayers are offered up not to change the way of the world according to our desires; we cannot change the mind of God, as if we knew better than He. Real prayer does not change the world, it changes us; we acquire the mind of Christ.

The measure of our prayer life in Christ is not, though, the success of our mission in any material sense but on how close we have come to Christ, acquired the mind of Christ, followed His commandments and have grown in the Holy Spirit. The renovation and maintenance of our beautiful building is important and necessary for our mission but that, in itself, is not the end of or reason for our endeavour.

Prayer, though, is not the preserve of the especially pious: it is the calling of all the baptised. Indeed, it is baptism that makes our prayer in Christ spiritually possible at all. If then, any of our readers find praying regularly really difficult for all sorts of reasons, now is the season for a re-assessment; to rethink what it means to bear the name of an Orthodox Christian.

From the very early days of Christianity until today, an important element in prayer is the use of the Psalms from the Bible. This is certainly

true of monastic prayer where, among the early monks and nuns, the whole Psalter, 150 psalms, might even be memorised by heart. Psalms are, of course, an integral part of our liturgy. The Psalter is actually divided up in the Orthodox order of services into twenty sections or groups called Kathismata or 'sittings'. Each Kathisma in turn is divided up into three parts or 'sessions'. The whole Psalter can then be recited each week during the daily offices but this is really only in a monastic setting. At St Dunstan's we hear the first Kathisma (Pss. 1-8) each Saturday evening at Vespers. You will also hear psalm verses when the Prokeimena are sung before the Apostolos (epistle reading) at the Divine Liturgy.

So, for those of you who have yet to make a beginning at regular prayer, at least every morning and evening, I shall propose that you try something this Great Lent, try to keep to it and, who knows, maybe you will stick with afterwards as well. And it is going to involve the psalms which, by the way, is not just my advice: St Theophany the Recluse (1815-1894) proposed the same: *'It is good, very good, to memorize several psalms and recite them while you are working or between tasks, doing this instead of short prayers sometimes, with concentration.'*

Christ Himself and the Holy Spirit have taught the Church that the Psalms from the Old Testament, although written for particular circumstances and in particular contexts, are also prophetic: they find their fulfilment in the life of Christ. [Lk.24:44] The very humanity of the voice of the psalmist is the humanity that Christ took to Himself at the incarnation. We must bear this in mind when reciting the psalms, which must be done with attention.

There are editions of the liturgical Psalter available, set out in the twenty kathismata and often with other prayers as well. But of course, the psalms can be used in prayer straight from the scriptures. However, the numbering of the psalms used in the Orthodox Church come from the Septuagint Greek translation made in the 3rd Century BC. (Protestant Bibles follow the numbering given in the Hebrew text, finalised in the 10th Century AD. I shall give the Orthodox numbering with the Protestant ones in brackets.

Not only can the Psalms be read, it is also a salutary thing to be able to recite them from memory. We could give short verses to our children to learn. In this way, psalm-prayers can be offered in any situation in which we find ourselves.

The early Christians associated both Ps 62(63) [*O God, my God, early would I seek thee*] and Ps 50(51) [*Have mercy upon me, O God*] with the morning. Ps 50, of course is a psalm of repentance and although quite long, if used regularly, is soon committed to the memory. Ps 140(142) [*Lord, I have cried unto thee*] is the classic evening psalm and has always been used at Vespers. Associated with retiring for the night is Ps 69(70) [*O God, make speed to save me*] is used at Compline. Ps 133(134) [*Behold now, bless ye the Lord*] is also very suitable.

Ps 22(23) [*The Lord is my shepherd*] is used in preparation for communion and might be memorised for times of anxiety or uncertainty. Ps 33(34) [*I will bless the Lord at all times*] is good for thanksgiving. There are individual verses which can also be committed to

memory, used like the famous Jesus Prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner) to stand in reverence before Christ, to lead the mind towards the heart or just as a prayer offered up to God in any situation. These might include the following:

Ps 45(46):11 [*Be still and know that I am God*];

Ps 39(40):1 [*With hope did I wait for the Lord and He heard me and heeded my prayer*];

Ps 53(54):1 [*O God, in thy name save me and judge me by Thy power*];

Ps 85(86):6 [*Give ear, O Lord, unto my prayer and heed the voice of my supplication*];

Ps 90(91):1 [*Whoso dwelleth in the help of the Most High shall abide in the shelter of the God of heaven*];

Ps 102(103):1 [*Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me bless His holy name*];

Ps 129(130):1 [*Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord*]; Lord, hear my voice;

Ps 135(136):1 [*O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good; for His mercy endureth for ever*].

Forms of prayer for morning and evening are, of course, found in Orthodox prayer books. As ever, it is better to start simply. Short prayers said with attention are better than many words merely to fill the time. The Trisagion Prayers, used at the start of services, are well worth learning by heart. Once the habit of regular prayer is established, we might then add the daily scriptural readings from the lectionary.

Some, if able, can include the reading of a kathisma of psalms as part of their daily prayer, however divided up. In this way, the whole Psalter can be recited over a cycle of twenty days, perhaps Monday to Friday over four weeks.

Building a good habit of prayer involves self-discipline and a certain strictness with our own laziness. Some might object that praying without really feeling that you want to is just a meaningless ritual or even hypocritical. But prayer is not about motivation because of particular emotions; we stand and pray before God no matter what our feelings; indeed, it

is the discipline that will carry us through in times of spiritual dryness with patience and humility. Others might object that this is impracticable, that one's life is too busy. I am sure that I need not raise here the matter of priorities and honesty about how much of our time is actually wasted. Prayer, our conversation with God, is fundamental for our relationship with Him; the difference between God as someone we have heard a lot about on the one hand and God as the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As blessed Augustine of Hippo wrote: 'You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until they find their rest in You.'

Fr Chrysostom



SERVICES

Vespers is normally served on Saturday's at 5.00pm in the Saints of Britain chapel. Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards.

March

Fri 3rd Little Compline & Akathist (part I) 6.00pm

Sun 5th First Sunday of Great Lent
Sunday of Orthodoxy Divine Liturgy of St Basil 10.30am

Fri 10th Little Compline & Akathist (part II) 6.00pm

Sun 12th Second Sunday of Great Lent
St Gregory Palamas Divine Liturgy of St Basil 10.30am

Fri 17th Little Compline & Akathist (part III) 6.00pm

Sun 19th Third Sunday of Great Lent
Veneration of the Cross Divine Liturgy of St Basil 10.30am



Fri 24th Eve of the Annunciation to Our Lady Vespereal Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom 7.00pm

Sun 26th Fourth Sunday of Great Lent
St John Climacus Divine Liturgy of St Basil 10.30am

Fri 31st Little Compline & Akathist 6.00pm

April

Sun 2nd Fifth Sunday of Great Lent
St Mary of Egypt Divine Liturgy of St Basil 10.30am

Sun 9th Entry of Our Lord into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday)
Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom 10.30am



Passion Week

Mon 10th Great & Holy Monday

Tues 11th Great & Holy Tuesday

Wed 12th Great & Holy Wednesday
Anointing Service 7.00pm

Thurs 13th **Great & Holy Thursday**
Vespereal Liturgy of the Mystical Supper 11.00am
Service of the Twelve Gospels 7.00pm

Fri 14th **Great & Holy Friday**
The Royal Hours 9.30am
Vespers of the Shroud 4.00pm
Lamentations Service 6.30pm

Sat 15th **Great & Holy Saturday**
Midnight Office, Rush Procession, Orthros & Divine Liturgy of Pascha
NB Time to be advised, followed by the feast in the church hall.

Sun 16th **Holy Pascha**
Agape Vespers (Vespers of Love) 2.30pm

