

THE NARTHEX

The believers were first called Christians at Antioch

ACTS. 9:26

DECEMBER 2012

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan Poole-Bournemouth
The Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of The United Kingdom and Ireland
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East
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The Heart and the Head

The Author, G.K. Chesterton, a celebrated convert to Roman Catholicism, once wrote a book explaining his rediscovery of Christianity. He published it in 1908, an era of growing scepticism and, to his mind, a time when Reason as an approach to human experience was, he felt, becoming the *only* respectable approach. He observed that there were many in his own day who believed (and it was, for them, a matter of faith) that the power of the human mind was infallible and, given enough clear thought, we could solve any philosophical problem. The book in question is called 'Orthodoxy' - a title not to be confused with our exact use of the word as Eastern Orthodox Christians but, nevertheless, he uses the title, inviting his readers to rediscover a now, lost, world of faith. I recently referred to this book in one of my homilies at the liturgy and used his delightful image, drawn from the start of the book, of a man setting out in a boat from Britain to bring enlightenment and reason to primitive peoples. He comes at last to land and finds what he takes to be one of their exotic temples. However, he soon discovers that he is such a poor navigator that he has, in fact, landed in the British south coast town of Brighton and is standing before the famous Brighton Pavilion. He has 'discovered' his own homeland. The point that Chesterton makes is that *he* was that man and what he rediscovered was the Christian faith. His book, *Orthodoxy*, invites his readers, of course, to do the very same thing. There is, though, early on in the book, a clearly written

critique of the merely rational approach to life and knowledge. That approach, born from the 18th Century Enlightenment, became the rationalism of Chesterton's modern world and has become the aggressive atheism of our own post-modern world. Chesterton deals head on with those who attack the mystical imagination of, for example, the poet. The idea that such imagination leads to madness he counters by pointing out that it is chess-players and mathematicians and cashiers who go mad but creative artists and poets very seldom. He writes: *'Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea and so make it finite... The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.'*

This has great implications for us as Orthodox believers living in the times that we do. Our faith is rooted in our hearts first, not our heads. Orthodox Christianity is truly a faith of the heart. By that I use the word heart in the biblical sense: the centre of the self, not, as is frequently misunderstood, the seat of the emotions. The aim of our spiritual endeavour in Orthodox Christianity is to root our prayer, our conversation with God, in the heart. The spiritual fathers whose words are recorded in the spiritual classic, *The Philokalia*, speak of the mind being brought down into the heart. Verbal prayers can, of course, be

G.K. Chesterton 1874-1936



made by all. Liturgical services or the reciting of prayer texts, such as psalms for example when we are alone, are like this. Silent, mental prayer draws us inward, using our mental capacity to ponder upon and engage with the words we are reciting. Ideally, all verbal prayer should go beyond mere comprehension, otherwise we are danger of lapsing into wandering thought and just making sounds mindlessly, not engaging with God at all. But when the mind, through the active grace of God, descends to the heart, we meet and converse with God at the point where the soul stands in awed silence before the One in whose image we are created. Here we begin to acquire a transforming knowledge that the mind, the head, can never 'work out' no matter how clever we are at Theology. The true theologian is one who discourses on God from the heart not with the head. Even in writing this, my descriptive words must fail to do justice to my theme for these affairs can only be experienced not described, like the hymns of praise that frankly confess that words cannot express the glory of God. Chesterton was clearly right: the head must strive to reach heaven (through the heart); heaven cannot be contained within the head.

This approach to our faith is essential if we are to have

any appreciation of its transforming power. The great Russian Theologian, Vladimir Lossky wrote of the Orthodox understanding of Christianity as, at root, mystical. To the western mind this might appear obscure, a 'smoke and mirrors' trick to avoid realism. So that, whereas, in the extreme case, one pursues a rigorous logic, confining theology to the finite talent of the human mind alone, the other is founded on genuine mystical and spiritual experience, the response of the heart.

This is particularly relevant as we approach the coming feast of Our Lord's Nativity. How does the mind deal with the idea of the fulfillment of the visions of the Prophets or a virginal conception, let alone the notion of the Divine incarnation: the hypostatic union of two natures in one person - all the theological poetry that cannot possibly be conceived within the boundaries of the human mind? The answer to such mysteries can only be to stand in awed and reverential silence and to wonder. Eastern Orthodox Christianity has never lost sight of this, despite attempts in certain quarters to introduce a more westernized approach. In western Christianity itself the separation of Theology away from its ecclesiastical home into the realm of academe has often resulted in rebellion. What of those who, deprived of the religion of the heart, do not have the intellectual capacity needed for the University? The result has often been a retreat towards emotional religion, fervent enthusiasm and schism, so characteristic of much Protestantism. Such can be seen positively, a real 'protest' against the harsh logic of the Mediaeval universities and rationalism of the European Enlightenment. But the protest, having led nowhere, has left the rational west looking increasingly askance at religion itself. Need we be surprised that

whilst countries like Russia and Romania, free of Communism, rediscover Orthodoxy, in Western Europe we see the rise of a militant, rationalist atheism? The absurd outcome of all this relentless application of the head over the heart is obvious for all to see in our own times: a national established church tearing itself apart over whether they should have female bishops; a prime minister who seems intent on forcing through the oxymoronic idea of 'gay-marriage'; the endless application of equality in law as the only definition of what it is to be human.

We, however, can at least forget all that for a time during the feast. We can fix our hearts once again on that vision that St. Luke supplied, where the bodiless powers are shown singing the praises of God at the birth of the Saviour. What kind of experience is the evangelist describing here; what do the shepherds of Bethlehem see? Do they hear physical sounds, do they see creatures of light; could rational heads explain away such odd phenomena? Of course not, for St. Luke is writing from the heart. What the shepherds were privileged to experience and report is far beyond reason. One thing is clear: angelic song is not mere sound, it is not the simple vibration of airwaves; it is a spiritual music that can only register in our hearts.

So, plunge once again into the feast of the Nativity. It is rooted not in food and drink, conviviality, presents and decorations; not even in the warm comfort of nostalgia. The feast starts in our hearts and in being joined to a community of faith. We must free ourselves from what we have been though repentance and confession. We must attend as many of the liturgical services as we are able, listening intently to the words of the hymns and the message of the Holy Scriptures. For a time we can seek to enter - in spirit- into the cave where Christ was born and, with a silencing of the feverish mind, find that cave, once again, as none other than our own heart.

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. The Proskomedie is served at 9.00am and Orthros before the Liturgy at 9.30am.

Fri 30th November Parish Committee meeting 7.00pm

DECEMBER

Sun 2nd 26th after Pentecost Matins 9.30am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 9th 27th after Pentecost Matins 9.30am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 16th Sunday of the Forefathers Matins 9.30am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 23rd Sunday before the Nativity Sunday of the Genealogy Matins 9.30am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Mon 24th Eve of the Nativity Royal Hours 9.00am

Tues 25th Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Matins 8.30am Divine Liturgy 9.30am

Sun 30th Sunday after the Nativity 29th after Pentecost Matins 9.30am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

