

THE NARTHEX

January-February 2019

'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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Scholars & Fathers

The feast of Theophany (6th January) celebrating the Baptism of Christ, falls on a Sunday this year. It is part of a wider commemoration, marking God's final revelation to the world through the incarnation of Christ. Before they became separated as discrete feasts within the Liturgical Calendar, the Annunciation, the Nativity and Theophany were observed as one general celebration of the appearing of the Saviour. In fact, it was at Rome in the mid-fourth century that Christmas became the feast we know today, fixed on the 25th December.

One of the problems with our use of religious and theological language is that we can become too used to it; over-familiar with concepts and ideas to the point where we lose sight of their radical and dynamic power and meaning. The very term 'Christ our Saviour' might slip easily off the tongue in a casual way, but if we are serious about the fact that we have been entrusted with a commission to proclaim the gospel to the world, we had better be pretty sure as to what we are talking about. If, in the words of St Paul to Titus (2:11) '*The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,*' from what is he saving us exactly?

Part of the problem in trying to explain the idea of salvation is that there are, as it were, two types of Christian language spoken in the world: I might call them *Scholastic* and *Patristic*, the first spoken in the West since the Middle Ages, the other, used in the East, since the days of the Apostles. Orthodox Christianity speaks *Patristic*, of course, the language, as the name implies, of the Fathers of the Church. The trouble is, for us who are Orthodox and live in the western part of Europe, we use our 'native' language where *Scholastic* (a language that grew from use among scholars and early universities) has been spoken for over a thousand years. The other problem is that both languages use pretty well the same words but they mean different things.

An interesting example is the word, *Salvation* and its meaning. In the western, scholastic tradition it has come to mean (if I may simplify) being saved from

all the consequences of what is called Original Sin, being finally judged as righteous and entering into heaven. Someone might protest that this, at a certain level, might seem the same for Orthodox Christians. That, however, is a superficial reading of the matter. The problem lies in the idea of *Original Sin*, that is, the basic problem at the heart of human existence and its relationship to God. It is not without reason that we Orthodox much prefer to talk of *Ancestral Sin*. In other words, if you are speaking Scholastic you cannot translate the term, *Original Sin* by the Patristic term, *Ancestral Sin*; they are not the same thing.

The Scholastic western tradition regards all humanity as having become guilty before God, inheriting the sin of Adam. This primal disobedience has now tainted every human being born into this world. The Protestant reformer, Jean Calvin, took this way of thinking to its logical conclusion, regarding us all as 'utterly depraved' and only able to be saved by a predestined election by the grace of God. To my mind there is something suspiciously akin to the ancient Gnostic heresies in this notion: a spiritual elite, preordained to 'know the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour.'

The problem with this, from the Patristic eastern viewpoint, is that it focuses on a false problem. We are not guilty of Adam's sin; Adam was guilty of Adam's sin. Our forensic guilt before God is not the issue because it cannot exist. I am no more guilty of Adam's own sin than I am of murdering Abel. There is also here the western notion that man has offended God's justice and that implies that God demands satisfaction. This, of course, presents God as some kind of feudal lord, insisting on his rights over the peasantry. (We should not be surprised at this as this particular understanding grew up in mediaeval feudal Europe.) The misconception comes from imagining that Man's understanding of Justice is the same as God's; in a fallen world it cannot be. The real problem, though, is not that of guilt but the fact of sharing Adam's nature. Cain murders Abel not from an awareness of guilt and alienation from God, but because he shares the fallen nature of his father,

Adam. No one is utterly depraved, no one, beyond redemption. Even before the incarnation of Christ, there was still repentance. In the matter at hand, though, the reason we need *salvation* (as we say when speaking Patristic) is our separation from the life of God (Sin) and its eventual consequence, self-loss (Death). In other words, Our Lord is Saviour and brings Salvation, not because he restores the balance of justice in the moral universe following Man's sin, but precisely because he defeats the consequences of Sin by defeating Death. It is Death that is our enemy, not juridical guilt. To illustrate what is being said here, one might imagine a situation where a parent tells a small child never to eat anything from the medicine cupboard. When the child is caught taking pills that look like sweets, the real problem is not the child's disobedience but the possible danger posed to the child by the pills. Naughtiness does not kill, directly but the dangerous medicines might. So the parent has to save the child by dealing medically with the immediate problem of possible poisoning. The same applies to our sins before God: it is not that God punishes us with death for our disobedience. Rather, it is that our sins flow from our fallen nature, one that has lost its likeness to God and therefore, alienated from the eternal life of God, it ends in death. Yet it is precisely that death that Christ has defeated by His resurrection.

It is, of course, true that Christ died *for us* but we need to be careful as to how we interpret the language of the New Testament here, and guard against reading it through the prism of Scholasticism and Mediaeval western Theology. Everything in Christ is *for us*, for our benefit; the whole dispensation of salvation highlights the love of God for Man. There is also a sense in which Christ in His crucifixion, offers Himself to the Father. But this is certainly not the appeasing of an angry god, demanding blood-sacrifice to restore the moral balance. This, on

Christ's behalf, is an offering of service, carrying out the will of the Father to save mankind. Christ, offering His life-blood on the cross, offers up our human nature, that, *through dying*, that same humanity might come to resurrection, the first fruits of a new creation.

Moreover, Christ's death is certainly not an offering to the Evil One, holding humanity hostage, for that would make Satan more powerful than God. There is a sense in which, for a time only, the world, is under the thumb of the devil. Many religions in the world have real sense that the Creation is, somehow, disordered, and the common practice of some form of blood-sacrifice is a natural attempt to restore an ordered cosmos. In the Old Testament itself the temple sacrifices prescribed by the Law of Moses were, indeed, direct offerings to propitiate the Lord, making reparation and atonement for sin, or, indeed, as acts of thanksgiving, giving back a portion for natural blessings. But Christ's offering has superseded all that, and the very point of His offering, its goal, is not focused on His death as a punishment but rather on the resurrection that follows.

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The whole point here is victory. Yes, Christ's died *for us* but not as a legal penalty, borne by a substitute. He was indeed prefigured in the idea of the scapegoat over which the High Priest confessed the sins of Israel once a year. On Him, indeed, the Sin of the world were laid, the Sin that brought death, but this is not as payment to the devil, nor is it to satisfy the exacting justice of a tyrannical god. It was in order to rise again and defeat the powers of darkness, the world, the flesh and the devil.

In His baptism in the Jordan that we celebrate in January, Christ, bearing our humanity, is plunged in the waters where others have confessed their sins. Here, the *Lamb of God* takes upon Himself the sins of all, so that, through the cross, He can expiate Sin, the sting of death, as St Paul calls it, and can also defeat Death once for all. By His resurrection the power and sway of the devil is ended. We who are now baptised into His death have also risen with Christ. Our free choice, our vocation, our dignity and destiny is to be found now in a new life: in that ascetic struggle to pass through this world as co-victors with Him.

In defeating the world, the flesh and the devil, Christ has made it possible for us to enter into the kingdom of heaven, that is, eternal communion within the life of God. Whilst here, of course, we are still left with the struggle against Sin, which will only end when we leave this

world. This is the point of the ascetic life as taught and practiced in the Orthodox Church. Each one of us, in as far as we are able, are called to take up our cross daily, as commanded by Our Lord, that through the struggle in prayer and fasting and charity for all, we share in Christ's victory though our own dying to the world.

Fr Chrysostom



Some Practical Tips

When the faithful come into church they should venerate the icons of Christ and the Theotokos that are at the front of the nave at the bottom of the steps. The ones on the iconostasis are only venerated by the clergy at the Kairon, before the Liturgy. They are actually painted on canvas and we would like to preserve them, especially from the effects of lipstick etc.

If you or one or one of your family is seriously ill or going into hospital, please let the clergy know. When appropriate, Fr Chrysostom can hear the confession of the sick person and anoint them for healing. The Holy Gifts can also be brought to them, again, either at home or in hospital.



Foundation Directors and Parish Committee Members Meeting

Saturday 12th January 2019 at 3.30pm
(following a Baptism at 2.30pm)



ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOMS

Join us for a one-day trip to this major exhibition on 24 January 2019.

For more information about the exhibition, see;

<https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms>

The registration form is now available at the Church and can be downloaded from the website on; <http://saint-dunstan.org/sermons/Form-for-London-trip-Jan-2019.pdf>.

A deposit is required



SERVICES

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

January

Sun 6th HOLY THEOPHANY
Divine Liturgy & Great Blessing of the Waters 10.30am



Sun 13th 33rd after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 20th 34th after Pentecost
Sunday of the Ten Lepers Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 27th 35th after Pentecost
Sunday of Zacchaeus Divine Liturgy 10.30am

February

Sat 2nd THE MEETING OF OUR LORD



Sun 3rd 36th Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday of the Talents Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 10th 37th after Pentecost
Sunday of the Canaanite Woman Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 17th Sunday of the Publican & the Pharisee Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 24th Sunday of the Prodigal Son
Divine Liturgy 10.30am