

# THE NARTHEX

March-April 2018

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

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## Times and Seasons

Since the ending of the last Ice Age and the beginning of agriculture around 8,000BC, most human beings have lived their lives according to the natural seasons. We are used to the idea of the four seasons and they are part of our culture. It is perhaps hard to think of any other arrangement of the turning year. However, I did once have a conversation with a Nigerian teaching colleague who pointed out that, in his country, closer to the Equator, they really only have summer and winter: one hot; one cooler and wetter.

Measuring time has always been important to people engaged in agriculture: storing up for the bleak winter, dependant on the autumn harvest; knowing when the long nights will end, was often a matter of life or death in the past for our ancestors.

In the northern hemisphere in particular, in the temperate zone, there has always been an intimate connection between these natural seasons and mankind's religious experience. From the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Hades to the Anglo-Saxon god, Eoster, (hence the English term, *Easter*) the idea of dying and rising, of spring and rebirth, have been tied together.

We can understand, therefore, why students of religion, anthropologists and others have been tempted to see Christianity as just another of these nature religions; seeing Christ as a radical Jewish preacher of holiness whose simple message, until he was executed, was easily taken over by Gnostic cults and pagan mystery religions to produce a renewed seasonal mythology that took over the Roman Empire and has lasted up until now. This, perhaps, might well explain how Christianity managed to assimilate into the world of late antiquity but does nothing to explain how we, the Church, understand ourselves and our Faith. Merely being told by an academic that, unknown to us, we were merely engaging in yet another nature cult all along must, at best, leave us feeling underwhelmed. We shall beg his pardon and continue to seek the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness before all else.

This mixing together of faith in Christ with the natural rhythms of rural life, might have been true in the past for many country dwellers who readily joined Christianity with their **agricultural life**. There is, surely, nothing at all wrong with that. But the nostrums of those who have tried to dismiss our faith do not survive closer examination: Christianity is not a nature cult.

The fact is, Our Lord died and rose again in the spring not as a metaphor, reflecting the earth's orbit of the sun but because it is a matter of chronological history; that's when it happened. Christ birth is celebrated in December, not so that Christmas cards could depict snowy scenes and jolly robins but because that's when it happened, as St John Chrysostom knew when the feast was introduced to the eastern part of the empire from Rome in the fourth century, where events of the time, such as the census, were a matter of imperial record. Around December-time was also the season for shepherds around the hills of Bethlehem to bring their sheep down towards the little town, to the lower pasture. We celebrate Christ's birth on 25th December, not to purloin an old pagan festival (as the modern neo-pagans fondly imagine) but because that is when it took place. It replaced the old pagan celebrations because Christianity became more popular yet not as a new nature religion but because its message and gospel had obvious appeal in the face of the ultimate hopelessness of paganism.

If Christianity is tied to winter and spring in its great stories of Christmas and Pascha, what business do our Antipodean brethren have in celebrating these festivals at the opposite seasons of the year to us? Christmas marked with a summer barbeque on the beach might strike us as very different; strange even but it cannot be wrong.

The great social difference in the current age, especially in western countries has, of course, been the move from rural life to urban living. It has been estimated that now, most of the world's population live in cities. In this country, up to the 1970's, we were virtually self-sufficient in food produced here. The decline of agriculture in Britain that followed the implementation of the

Common Agricultural Policy, is evident in the reluctance of all but a few native Britons to consider a career in farming (now only 1% of our economy). However, the urbanisation of Britain has been continuous since the Industrial Revolution and the interesting question is how this might have affected people's experience of the seasons. It would be true to say that for most people, the seasons are now, largely, a matter of the weather not the harvest, of meteorology not agriculture. In other words, the population in general no longer fixes its anxieties upon the size of the harvest and its storage for the winter. In the first place, our primary concerns lie not directly on the food supply but rather on money. As Napoleon remarked in his day, the English were a nation of shopkeepers and it is clearly Commerce that has come to dominate the lives of many today.

In so far as people are aware of the seasons at all now, we might ask what rhythms and cycles structure their year. I have come, in fact, to the conclusion that a great many, (if not, the majority) now have their lives ordered around the commercial year; that, far from being discerning and educated free-agents, they have become enchanted by and enslaved to the dictates of corporate financial interests who themselves have become enticed and bewitched by the vision of more and more sales and delusion of ever-expanding economic growth.

This new spirituality of commerce even has its own liturgical calendar with its very own special days, weeks and even seasons when the 'faithful' are drawn to attend their local temple of retail and there to sacrifice their earnings that they may commune with the gods of commerce. It is also possible, of course, to 'worship' at home now through the mysteries of the internet where 'blessings' can be brought to your home through sacred ministering intermediaries, transported in white vans.

This new calendar that governs lives begins with the celebration of New Year in January, requiring the offering and imbibing of a prodigious amount of alcoholic beverages. Then comes Valentine's Day or as a pub near me has renamed it, Valentine's Week, beloved of card-manufacturers, restaurants and super markets. Hot on its heels the sacramental chocolate egg must be purchased, together with its disproportionate amount of packaging, in order to participate in Easter (even though the purpose of this celebration has been long forgotten – was it the arrival of spring or something?) Whilst the eating of confectionary is well under way (whilst you and I are keeping Great Lent) there come Mothers' day and Fathers' day: another fond invention of the makers of greetings card, emanating from the holy land of America. The next major celebration, when purses and wallets are obediently opened, does not fall till around mid-October when Christmas begins. In the middle, of course, there is Halloween where, horror of horrors, more money than fake-blood is spilt. Christmas involves decorating houses (outside and inside) and the conspicuous over-consumption of food and drink. The most auspicious day for buying these items is the feast of Black Friday. It is also the time when good-will, even to family members, is permitted. This continues up until 25th December when it all stops. And so the year goes around.

We live now, therefore, in the era of *Commercial Man*. Long-gone are the days of *Lammas Tide*, when the peasant of the Anglo-Saxon period, having harvested his crop, would present his wheaten loaf at church for use at Mass: the apotheosis of rural daily life. It is hard to imagine the same happening with modern Mammon and God, even though most of the commercial festivals that I outlined above have their real origins in the Christian religion. Those links have largely been forgotten in the modern era and it is difficult to see how they might be restored, even if that were desirable. The problem lies, I think, in that fact that, whereas agriculture is a harnessing of the natural creation, industry, technology and commerce are human aspirations and inventions of fallen Man. God's creation is called 'good' in scripture but it too falls with man, as Adam is told in Genesis, "*Cursed is the ground for thy sake... Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth for thee.*" [Gen.1:17-18] But salvation is proclaimed to every creature (see: Mk.16:15) so that all of God's fallen creation can be redeemed and transfigured in the light of Christ. But what of the creations of fallen Man himself?

The more we are removed from the natural world that harder it becomes to see the glory of God. In Orthodox Christian thinking, the existence of creation is not explained by God. Rather,

it is God Himself who is revealed by His creation - the heavens are telling the glory of God! (see: Ps.18[19]) The natural world manifests and symbolizes God's order, beauty, co-operation, glory and wonder. It is hard, though, to find this in human inventions, standing at one remove from the Creator God. The closest, perhaps, we have come to it, is in the concept of the City as the focus of community and of our relationship with God and one another. This clearly lies at the heart of the vision in the book of the Apocalypse with the revealing of the heavenly Jerusalem (see: Apoc.21:2)

Given modern conditions and, not least, the sheer size of modern populations, it would be nigh on impossible to return to an agrarian way of life, attractive as it might seem. In the brutality of commercial interest, the countryside is now an arena of leisure activities not food production; a place of second homes, not livelihoods.

How then, should we as Orthodox Christians seek to negotiate our way through this present commercial world? For when it comes to the matter of our salvation, nostalgia for a lost rural idyll is certainly one luxury we cannot afford.

The answer lies in part with our faithfulness to the Church's own liturgical calendar with its constant retelling of the mystery of faith, its feasts and fasts; in the structuring of our days according to its rhythms. For this too is part of our ascetic approach to and confrontation with a fallen world. We have a self-denying ordinance that can protect us from being sucked in to the insatiable demands of the commercial machine. In other words, we do not have to give in to the delusion of 'retail therapy', as if happiness somehow can only be found in a credit card. If that were the case, how much is enough or is it the mere process of buying and spending itself that, releasing the endorphins in the brain, furnishes the state of well-being, like the euphoric effects of an hallucinatory drug? Whatever the case, we must be sure that we are free from this addiction.

Commerce is important in the City, just as markets were in the days of the old rural life. But commercial interest is not of absolute importance; it is not the final good.

Whatever happens in the future to this nation in terms of economics, demographic change, culture and sovereignty, we know well the real source of our own identity, stability, growth, development, peace, joy and salvation. Deal with the world we must out of necessity but we need not be fooled by it. We need not be consumed ourselves as consumers, knowing to Whom we ascribe true *worth-ship* or as we say, worship!

*Fr Chrysostom*

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*"The essence of wealth is not in material things but what we have within ourselves. No matter how much you give a person, you will not satisfy him."*

St Anatoly of Optina

## 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*

### March

Fri 2nd Compline & Akathist  
6.00pm

Sun 4th 2nd of Great Lent  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Fri 9th Compline & Akathist  
6.00pm

Sun 11th 3rd of Great Lent  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Fri 16th Compline & Akathist  
6.00pm

Sun 18th 4th of Great Lent  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 25th 5th of Great Lent  
The Annunciation to Our Lady  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

### April

Sun 1st Palm Sunday  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

#### Passion Week

4th **Great and Holy Wednesday**  
Anointing Service 7.00pm

5th **Great and Holy Thursday**  
Vespers Divine Liturgy of the  
Mystical Supper 11.00am  
Orthros of the Twelve Gospels  
6.30pm

6th **Great and Holy Friday**  
Royal Hours 9.30am  
Vespers of the Shroud 4.00pm  
Orthros (Lamentations Service)  
6.30pm

7th **Great and Holy Saturday**  
Midnight Office, Rush Procession,  
Orthros  
and Divine Liturgy of Pascha  
10.00pm

Sun 8th **HOLY PASCHA**  
Vespers of Love 2.30pm

*(Fr Chrysostom on holiday 9th – 13th)*

Sun 15th 2nd of Pascha  
St Thomas Sunday  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 22nd 3rd of Pascha  
Holy Myrrhbearers  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 29th 4th of Pascha  
The paralysed Man  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am