

THE NARTHEX

November-December 2015

'The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.' (Acts 11:26)

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The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

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Earthly and Heavenly

'We are ordered to perform in this world the symbols and signs of the future things so that, through the service of the Sacrament, we may be like men who enjoy symbolically the happiness of the heavenly benefits, and thus acquire a sense of possession and a strong hope of the things for which we look.'

The quotation above is from Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350-428) taken from his writings on the Eucharist. It summarises perfectly the Orthodox Christian understanding of physical and spiritual things, the earthly and the heavenly. Moreover, Theodore defines exactly the relationship between the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven and the liturgical acts we perform on earth. Even before the days of Our Lord and his apostles on earth, the prophets of the Old Testament saw in their visions the connection between worship offered on earth and what is eternally celebrated by the heavenly powers. Moses, according to Hebrews (Heb.8:5) was commanded to model the earthly tabernacle on the heavenly one (cf. Ex.25:40). Is.6:1-8 records Isaiah's vision of heavenly worship, even foreshadowing the mystery of the Triune God, the Thrice-Holy, that is echoed in the very last book of the Bible, the Apocalypse (Rev.4:8). In the Psalms, to witness the worship in the temple at Jerusalem was also to see beyond into the glory of heaven:

'So in the holy place I appear before you, to see your power and your glory.' [Ps 62(63)]

'The Lord sits upon the Cherubim; let the earth be shaken. The Lord is great in Zion... Exalt the Lord our God and worship at the footstool

of his feet, for He is holy.' [Ps.98 (99)]

The quotation from Theodore stresses a sense of our future; that far from being a mere contrivance of man, the Orthodox Liturgy is the means of receiving (sacramentally) that for which we hope in heaven. In fact, this approach to earthly realities we might call symbolic. I mean by that, the things we see around us point beyond themselves. This is what we mean by the idea of the sacred: sacred things are those objects, times, seasons, stories, places that represent more than the fact that they exist. Contact with sacred things gives us a kind of access to realities beyond. Beyond our taking of the consecrated bread and wine there lies the reality of Christ's body and blood; beyond the wooden iconostasis and the painted icons there exists the underlying reality of the heavenly sanctuary. From the Orthodox point of view, this is also true for the whole of nature, not just liturgical things.

In understanding this we need to be clear that when we speak of reality we do not mean only the physical things that we see in this world; that would be the atheist's view that believes in physical realities alone. We hold, however, that without the spiritual, the physical would not be real at all - it could not exist. Being aware of this is one of the unique characteristics of being human. For example, we might see an object like a tree; we recognise it because we have a concept, a shared idea of what a tree is: the physical reality (that particular tree) corresponds to spiritual reality (the concept) held by our

minds. The book of Genesis depicts Adam naming the animals (Gen.2:19), linking the outward forms to an inner (spiritual) idea or name. This is instinctive in us, like the way even small children, seeing an animal with fur, four legs, a tail and canine teeth, can tell whether it be a dog or a cat.

Of course, as Hamlet says, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy; there are things that may exist of which we have no knowledge, no concept. Certainly, our knowledge of God is limited, confined to what He has revealed. We can, in the end understand divinity no more than an ant can comprehend what it means to be human. That whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent (Wittgenstein).

This might sound like a game for philosophers of language but this is, in fact, very important and for those who possess an Orthodox Christian mind, it is instinctive, part of the ethos of having an Orthodox view of reality. At a very basic level we can see it in the way we use language when, for example, we talk of the land and the sky being a metaphor of heaven 'above' and earth 'below'. Where, in the western religious mind, the idea of God is used to explain how the world came to exist, the Eastern Orthodox and, indeed, biblical approach is the other way round: God does not explain the world; the world, rather, explains God. In other words, the existence of the world is the 'proof' that God is. As the composer Haydn expressed it in his oratorio, *The Creation: 'Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes'* (the heavens are telling the glory

of God [Ps18(19):1]. In other words, we do not start by saying that the world exists because God created it but rather, that the world reflects and praises the glory of its Creator. It is like saying Haydn's Creation oratorio exists not because he wrote it but rather, the piece is testimony to his skill as a composer.

The danger in the materialist and atheist's approach is failing to see the wood for the trees, as we say; that the material objects are all that exists (Materialism). The danger in religion is similarly to become fixated on the objects, to end up worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Paganism).

Fr Alexander Elchaninov summarized these ideas when he wrote: *The world is a system of symbols, a realibus ad realiora. (from reality to a higher reality). The spiritual world is reflected in the corporeal forms of this world... The value of symbols lies in the joy springing from the knowledge that our world is like that of another world. Hence the significance of icons, candles, smoke of incense.*

There is a proper scientific fascination with the world and its wonders but there is also our ability to see the beauty of creation, our aesthetic sense. Being able to appreciate the beauty in a landscape or a spectacular sunset naturally lifts our spirits and should lead us to praise God. But even here we must not be fixed. As St. Barsanuphius of Optina wrote: *The external world with its beauty, acts favourably on a man and a soul capable of enjoying the beauty of the world becomes exalted. But a man who has achieved perfection sees in his soul such beauty before which the visible world is worthless.... It is inscrutable how the Lord Himself dwells in a little heart but where the Lord is, there is paradise and the kingdom of God.*

In other words, the ultimate symbol in this creation is mankind himself who stands, as the scriptures tell us, as the image of God in whom he was created. The real mystery being unfolded before us from all our experience is that of our very own destiny - if we attend

to the call to repent (change our minds) and turn our hearts to God.

We are soon to celebrate once again the mystery of the Nativity of Christ, our image-Creator taking that form, that nature and appearing in the flesh. Christ, the perfect God by nature, is also the perfection of our humanity, His icon (image) symbolises for us that to which we must aspire and rise to, if we are to be saved and find the fulfilment of our existence. It is not enough just to be religious, to know of that other spiritual world that is indicated by the objects of this created order; that the sheer vastness of space (though not actually infinite) points to eternity in God; that is not enough in itself.



The Feast of the Nativity invites us to respond much more dynamically, both in worshipping our Creator and Saviour and in happily casting off our sloth, shifting from our earth-bound existence that we might pursue and acquire the beauty of that inner kingdom in our own hearts. And so, in Theodore's words, 'acquire a sense of possession and a strong hope of the things for which we look.'

Fr. Chrysostom



Saturday 28 November

4.30pm: Great Vespers with Enthronement Ceremony at the Cathedral.

All are invited.

Sunday 29 November

11am: Patriarchal Divine Liturgy at the Cathedral with His Eminence

Metropolitan Silouan and other visiting Metropolitans

Free lunch provided afterwards.

All are welcome.

Among the events in the Week following the Enthronement on Tuesday 1 December there will be a reception for the Patriarch at the Lebanese Embassy, London. The Diocese will be represented by: Archimandrite Philip Hall, Archpriest Samir Gholam, Archpriest Gregory Hallam, Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell, Fr Michael Harry and Fr Alexander Tefft.

SERVICES

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

November

Sun 1st 22nd after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 8th 23rd after Pentecost
St. Michael & the Bodiless Powers
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 15th 24th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Beginning of the Nativity Fast
Sat 21st Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos

Sun 22nd 25th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sat 28th Enthronement of Met Silouan, St. George's Cathedral, London

Sun 29th 26th after Pentecost
[Divine Liturgy 10.30am - await announcements]

December

Sun 6th 27th after Pentecost St Nicholas the Wonderworker
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 13th 28th after Pentecost
Sunday of the Forefathers
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 20th 29th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Thurs 24th Eve of Nativity
Royal Hours 9.30am

Fri 25th **The Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ**
Divine Liturgy 9.30am

Sun 27th 30th after Pentecost
Third Day of the Nativity
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

