

THE NARTHEX

The believers were first called Christians at Antioch

ACTS. 9:26

December 2011 -January 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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BE WHAT YOU REALLY ARE

'Just be yourself...' It's probably a bit of advice that you've been given many times. Indeed, *finding yourself* is one of those pursuits beloved of the self-indulgent, the poor souls who find themselves psychologically and socially confused or those who think life is a great hunt for the ultimate self-help book. The problem is that, when we talk of our true self, are we talking about a *someone* or a *something*? From the Christian perspective, as far as our Self is concerned - who we are as an individual person - the only real question is whether we are known to God. Some Protestant denominations focus on whether their members 'know the Lord Jesus as their personal Saviour'. This, though, is to reverse the real Orthodox understanding of the matter. Salvation is not about personal evaluations and estimations of who or who is not the most effective saviour, based on human criteria. The matter is, rather, are we known - as the person we are - by the Living God? Our Orthodox understanding of the Gospel teaches us that the Faith is not our private opinion in respect of a religious proposition (i.e. do you believe that Christ is your Saviour?) but rather our response to our experience of the love of God. God has shown His love for Mankind; He has loved us first, making us capable of loving Him. Read again, I John 4:9-10. Indeed, we believe in Christ but this is not our personal view of Him but our incorporation into the Faith of his Bride, the Church. Of course, who we are - our *someone* within, cannot be separated from the *thing* we are. I mean here our human nature, the *something* that we are,

cannot exist except as the particular person we happen to be; you cannot have human nature walking about without people. The problem here is that our human nature is somehow not what it's meant to be. We have an instinctive feeling that we are not quite right. The same is true of the rest of nature: we might have all sorts of romantic ideas about its beauty and order but underneath we know it struggles and groans in futility, red in tooth and claw. [Rom.8:18-20] We see in this idea the Fall of Man and with our fallen nature, our relationship with the rest of creation has become tainted - not utterly depraved, as certain Western Christians teach but somehow imperfect. No wonder that lost souls search in all sorts of blind alleys for their true self, unaware of their real condition. We are about to celebrate, once again, the feast of the Nativity and it is very important that we know just what we are doing. There will be a very real temptation, even in a religious festival, to be distracted and to miss the point completely. (Don't forget that the Devil can be religious, he can quote scripture; he even believes in God in a way...) Quite plainly, Christmas celebrates, yes, the incarnation of God but for a purpose: in order to restore our real humanity. And in restoring the *something* that we truly were meant to be, we can be perfectly at ease with the *someone* that we are. Those ill at ease with who they are have often missed the point. The problem does not lie in *who* they are but in *what* we are:

our fallen human nature. God loves *who* we are despite *what* we are. The trouble is, those searching for their true self are often perfectly happy with *what* we are, they can't see the problem with our human nature, whereas in fact, it's the very root of the problem. We have a tendency to criticise individuals for their personal faults but this is a shallow judgement. Any faults we have are rooted not in our self but in our fallen nature, our humanity. Better, rather, to blame our own intolerance and impatience with the faults we so readily see in others on our humanity in the first place. Coming as we are to the celebration of our Lord's birth, it is time once again to think a little deeper, to push past the often repeated phrases and see, once again their real and surprising significance. '*Christ is born: Glorify Him!*' We say. Why? because in the first place, he came to share that very nature that we have corrupted. We hear again the message of the angels to the shepherds: peace on earth and goodwill towards men - this is more than the mere ending of warfare and a general feeling of conviviality. It means the reconciliation of our sinful selves with the source of our life, God Himself. It means that through an act of grace, God has revealed his good intentions towards us by becoming one of us. Some will look with wonder on the idea of the birth of child in a manger. But is that all there is to it: some vague notion of human hope because of a birth. That's happened to all seven billion of us on this planet anyway! No - it's about God in whose image we are created joining us here as

one of us. That's why we hold so firmly to all that theological language and dogma about Christ having two natures (divine and human) united in one person). If the child in the manger at Bethlehem was not both fully human and fully divine, then our humanity cannot be fully incorporated into the whole of the divine. Furthermore, all our witness and asceticism and charity would ultimately be a waste of time and effort for we would not be fully saved. But thanks be to God! This, the mystery of faith, has been revealed in the Church, the ark of our salvation.

So think of those people whom you find annoying. It's a very human thing to be impatient with others. The problem is that we assign their faults (which can be very real) to the person (the *someone*) they are and not (as we should if we are being truly theological) to what they are (the *something*). The origin of our faults lies ultimately in our fallen human nature, not in our personalities. Here we should take stock and think for a moment. If all human failings stem from our Fall, then, if we find fault with others, the same must be true of ourselves, for we share a common nature. As Our Lord taught, how can we remove the speck from our brother's eye when we have a beam in our own? Therefore, the truly spiritual soul's proper response to finding faults in others is always repentance. The faults of others become mirrors, reflecting what we ourselves are! Seeing their faults, we must say immediately, *I too have my faults for we are both human; Lord, forgive!* In this way we can see past the faults into the image of God contained in our common humanity. It was, after all, for the sake of that image that Christ became Man and was manifested among us. So that, whoever can judge and condemn others, must likewise be pointing the accusation at his own self.

Try to remember this idea as you hear again this Christmas the scripture readings appointed for the feast. Everything you hear read is leading you to consider once again this idea of the love of God, revealed in Christ, inviting us to be healed, not just in *who* are but in *what* we are.

The whole problem of Man is rooted in what he has fallen into, not in who we are as individuals. By his nativity, his life, his death and resurrection, Christ has restored what it is to be human, so that, for those who are *in Him*, they are on their way to being saved. And salvation for us means not only uncovering the image of God, as we were made in Adam, but proceeding further - Theosis- growing closer and closer towards the divine likeness, from glory to glory, eternally united in communion with God and one another.

The beauty of this is that, the more we strive through our Orthodox Christian life, working out our own salvation through our ascetic practice, through prayer, through charity, the more we shall develop our true self and we shall be transfigured both in our human nature and in our person, in our body and soul. And if this seems too much, we do not labour alone, for it is the grace of God that perfects all our efforts to become what we really are

Fr. Chrysostom

Presbytera Olympias (Mo) thanks all who have recently sent gifts, cards and good wishes and have prayed for her. The condition was, thankfully, caught early and, of course, her treatment will continue. God has given many blessings so do please persevere with your prayers to Our Lord who is wonderful his saints.

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 *Proskomedia* and *Orthros* are served before the Liturgy at 9.30am

DECEMBER

4th Sun 25th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy at 10.30am
11th Sunday of the Ancestors
Divine Liturgy at 10.30am
followed by Baptism
18th Sunday of the Genealogy
Romanian Liturgy at 11.00am

23rd Fri Royal Hours 9.00am
24th Sat Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom 10.30am for Christmas Eve. Great Vespers 5.00pm
25th Sun

Nativity of Our Lord
Matins 8.00am. Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great at 9.00am

JANUARY

1st Sun Circumcision of Our Lord. St. Basil the Great. Divine Liturgy at 10.30am
8th Sunday after Theophany
Divine Liturgy & Great Blessing of Waters at 10.30am
15th Sun 31st After Pentecost
Romanian Liturgy 11.00am
22nd Sun 32nd After Pentecost
Divine Liturgy at 10.30am
29th Sun 33rd After Pentecost
Divine Liturgy at 10.30am
NB Some of these times and arrangements might be subject to change. These will be announced.

