

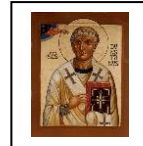
# THE NARTHEX

The believers were first called Christians at Antioch

ACTS. 9:26

March-April 2014

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan of Canterbury, Poole  
The Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of The British Isles and Ireland  
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## The Sacrifice

I still remember the first time that I heard the hymn, *Noble Joseph*, as sung on great Friday to that beautiful and haunting Bulgarian melody: the flowing tune, resting on a bass *ison* (drone note) that changes only once to descend and then ascend, is profoundly moving:

*'The noble Joseph, took they pure body down from the tree; and wrapped it in pure linen with spice of myrrh; and weeping, laid it in a new tomb.'*

Then suddenly, cutting across the hymn, a fifth above the main melody, the prophetic message is proclaimed:

*'Myrrh is fitting for the dead but Christ has proved a stranger to corruption.'*

I mention this as, once again, we begin Great Lent, leading us to Holy and Great Week and enter again into the mystery of Pascha. At the heart of this mystery there lies the sacrifice of Christ Himself and it is important that we understand it as fully as we can.

Religious sacrifice is a very ancient human instinct. It starts with the realisation of that visceral unease in the hearts of all mankind: we are not quite right; somehow the world is not as it should be; that in some way, if only we might appease *the powers* through a gift, an offering of something valued, we might restore the proper order or, at least, ritually maintain our world and its coherence. This, as I say, is a very primeval instinct and is present in many, if not most cultures, both

present and historic. From the ancient Vedic sacrifices of India to the appalling blood offerings to the sun of the Aztecs, mankind has tried to appease, cajole and placate the *forces* that are beyond his strength or even understanding. Even judicial execution, where it still exists today, has something of this quality. George Orwell's 1931 essay, *The Hanging* is a stark account of such an event that he witnessed when he was serving in the police in Burma. The lex talionis principle of an eye for an eye is there in our systems of justice and the underlying theory is that the death of the perpetrator must make up for the murder of the victim and so restore moral balance to the universe.

The problem with all this is that it happened in a fallen world where justice must be imperfect and where our very perception and understanding of what is actually wrong with man and his world is at best, 'submarine,' where the Truth is obscured from us.

It is precisely for this reasons that we need a Saviour both to enlighten us as to the Truth and to put right what has gone awry. And this He does by sacrifice. But this is not the pagan idea of sacrifice, which at best served to suggest a dim knowledge of our condition and at worst, only served and honoured the elemental demons that kept us in bondage. And this was not the temple sacrifice of the Old Testament which, although they were offered for actual sins, could not bring about our final

perfection, even though they did prefigure as a *type* the ultimate sacrifice of Christ which was to come.

It is important to grasp that Orthodox Christology (our understanding of Christ) holds that Christ is both fully Divine (being begotten of God the Father) and, at the same time, fully human (being incarnate of the Virgin). However, His humanity was not 'fallen' as ours is. His humanity is that of Adam before the Fall, as we are meant to be. He was everything that we are in essence but without Sin. Sin that leads to Death is not part of our nature created by God - it is alien to us who were made in the *image and likeness of God*. Christ had to have the same nature as us if we were to be fully saved by him - after all, what was not assimilated by Christ could not be redeemed - but if He were fallen, He would be as lost as we were in this world and could not save us. But he was, nonetheless, fully human in nature. To reverse my submarine analogy above: a fish out of water is in the wrong position but remains a fish by nature; it will eventually die as we shall, separated from the true source of our life: for the fish it is water, for us it is God.

Christ is presented in the New Testament and by the Fathers as the *New Adam*. In his incarnation He shares the same nature as Adam before the Fall, yet unlike the first Adam, He freely chooses to obey, taking our sins upon Himself, laying down His life as a perfect oblation. It must be stated here very clearly that this sacrifice was not an appeasing of a wrathful God by the offering

of an innocent life. This view prevailed in western Christianity and leads to all sorts of theological and psychological difficulties. We, as Orthodox, see Christ's sacrifice as an expiation, a taking away of our sins; the way of dissolving the wall of alienation between ourselves and the source of our own existence and thereby restoring the relationship between God and Man. And moreover, this sacrificed life (that is, an offering and an oblation from incarnation to ascension as well as the cross) reveals what it is to be truly human, created after the image and likeness of God, that is, like Christ.

This is why we are baptised 'into Christ', to recover once more not just the pre-fall nature of Adam but even to share in the divine nature (theosis).

This idea of sacrifice pervades our whole view of the creation itself which is, likewise, alienated and

*'the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now.'* [Romans 8:22]

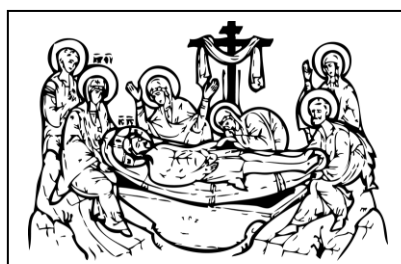
In the Orthodox understanding of creation, everything is to be offered back to God the Creator. When we think of all the physical objects we use in worship: bread, wine, oil, water; all the things we bless in God's name: flowers, fruits, candles, wedding rings whatever they be, we receive them make transfigured, sanctified, that is, restored to their real, spiritual purpose. Water, for example, is not just H<sub>2</sub>O, the medium for chemical processes in botanic and zoological organisms but the manifestation of Life itself.

Think then of this Great Fast that we are about to enter, of all that we are to give up and sacrifice just for a season: time in prayer, various types of foods and alms in charity. These things we offer to God we will receive back but they will be changed, utterly

transfigured, utterly more worthwhile. For alms, we shall have treasure in heaven; for fasting, we shall have the heavenly banquet of the Lamb; for time, we shall have eternity itself. The world, of course, prefers to have its current riches, opportunities and pleasures as they are available now and in as much abundance as possible. These, however, can only endure for a time and largely depend upon the fickle nature of chance and fortune. We, on the other hand, seeing through all this with the eyes of faith, 'look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come'

Offering His life on the cross, Christ receives it back in His resurrection. And we, having died with Him in Baptism, receive back Life not to be used and lived centred on ourselves but as offered to God, a living sacrifice that through the mystery of the Liturgy, through the conversation of prayer, through generosity to others, through patience and endurance, through our sufferings and losses and everything else that we can offer up, we can experience, even now, the Life of the world to come. We need no other proof of our faith - *the substance of things hoped for.*

No one can say that this is easy; this is the spiritual struggle that lies not only at the heart of Lent but also within the soul of Man.  
*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.

## MARCH

Sun 2<sup>nd</sup> Cheesefare Sunday  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am  
Mon 3<sup>rd</sup> Start of the Great Fast  
Sun 9<sup>th</sup> First Sunday of Gt. Lent  
Sunday of Orthodoxy Divine  
Liturgy & Procession of Icons.  
10.30am  
Sun 16<sup>th</sup> Second Sunday of Gt.  
Lent St. Gregory Palamas Divine  
Liturgy 10.30am  
Sun 23<sup>rd</sup> Third Sunday of Gt.  
Lent Veneration of the Cross  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am  
Sun 30<sup>th</sup> Fourth Sunday of Gt.  
Lent St. John Climachus Divine  
Liturgy 10.30am

## APRIL

Sun 6<sup>th</sup> Fifth Sunday of Gt. Lent  
St. Mary of Egypt Divine Liturgy  
10.30am  
Sun 13<sup>th</sup> Entry of our Lord (Palm  
Sunday

## Passion Week

Great & Holy Wed 16<sup>th</sup> Anointing  
Service 7.00pm  
Great & Holy Thursday 17<sup>th</sup>  
Vespereal Divine Liturgy of the  
Mystical Supper 11.00  
Service of the Twelve Gospels  
7.00pm  
Great & Holy Friday 18<sup>th</sup>  
Vespers of the Shroud 4.30pm  
Lamentations service 6.30pm  
Great & Holy Saturday 19<sup>th</sup>  
Midnight Office, Rush  
Procession, Orthos and Divine  
Liturgy for Pascha 11.00pm  
Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> Holy Pascha  
Vespers of Love 2.30pm  
Sun 27<sup>th</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Pascha  
Thomas Sunday Divine Liturgy  
10.30am

