

THE NARTHEX

The believers were first called Christians at Antioch

ACTS. 9:26

March-April 2015

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan of Canterbury, Poole
The Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of The British Isles and Ireland
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East
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Whom do we love?

It must seem to many that the world has never been in such a terrible state. However, anyone with a good knowledge of history would soon restore a sense of proportion. One might wonder what effect, for example, the availability of 24 hour news from all around the world has on our general sense of security. We should not, of course, be surprised by any of at this, remembering Our Lord's words: *'And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be alarmed, for it is necessary that these things happen first but the end if not immediately...Nation shall be raised against nation and kingdom against kingdom and there will be earthquakes and in various places pestilences and famines and there will be terrors and great signs in heaven.'* [Luke 21:9-11]

About forty years after Our Lord's time, the Jewish historian, Josephus, who wrote about the Jewish revolt against the Romans around 70AD, records that a comet appeared above Jerusalem in the form of a sword. St Luke, in his gospel, is clearly reminding his readers of what Our Lord said, in other words that, despite such 'signs', the world will go on as it ever has until God's purposes are fulfilled. Our task, however, is to watch and pray.

There are forms of Christianity that imagine that through our own activity we can substantially improve the world. Well, yes, there are many things we can improve and we should do those things but we cannot imagine that human efforts will finally bring peace, equality and brotherhood to all humanity; all such vain projects

are bound to end in failure, knowing, as we do that Man is a fallen creature. There might be some who would criticise us at this time of the Great Fast; with so much wrong with the world, what are we doing withdrawing into ourselves as far as we are able and fixing our attention on our inner, spiritual lives? As the old saying has it: being so heavenly-minded as to be of no earthly use! There are several answers we can make against this charge, not least that there is no separation between our inner and outer lives, our contemplation and our action. We are also aware of what the Old Testament prophets taught: *'I did not choose such a fast, says the Lord: rather, loose every bond of wrongdoing; untie the knots of violent dealings; cancel the debts of the oppressed; and tear apart every unjust contract. Break your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house...'* [Isaiah 58:6ff]

We were reminded of something similar on the Sunday of the Last Judgement from the gospel of Matthew (25:31-46). It is for this reason we add almsgiving to our Lenten discipline alongside prayer and fasting. So, having begun this holy season, we can quite properly fix our attention, as far as we can, inwardly. We who live in the world rather than in monasteries, will still attend to our daily work, our routines and duties, family lives and other concerns. But, as we can, we must make space in our lives for

what our Lord told Martha was *the better part* [Lk.10:42].

Among the early desert fathers it was the practice for the monks to be apart during the Great Fast, coming together again on Palm Sunday. This is reflected in the first of the stichera verses used at Vespers on that Sunday: *'Today the grace of the Holy Spirit has gathered us together...'* We, to a large extent lead our lives during the week mostly scattered but we do need to gather together Sunday by Sunday; we undertake the Great Fast together as a community. We have a duty to help and support each other and to encourage each other on the way. Next year, God willing, I shall have more time for services during the weekdays of Lent and, in attending, we can all be strengthened in our endeavour to grow closer to Christ.

Let us therefore be very clear about what we are doing at this time. We are striving to recover the likeness of God we lost when we fell in Adam. Or rather, we are striving to allow God to transfigure us by His grace. Yes, it is a matter of wills, God's and ours. The question, then, is very simple: whom do we love the more, God or ourselves? We do indeed have free will, but our choices are not necessarily enlightened in this fallen world. On the other hand, the light of faith will reveal to us that our real freedom is found in that humanity measured by the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph.4:13) - the paradox that obedience to God is actually our perfect freedom. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that Christ, as Son, learned

obedience through suffering (Heb.5:7-8) and we can recall his struggle in the garden of Gethsemane, asking that the cup pass from him, if possible but nevertheless, he let his Father's will be done (Lk.22:42). As St Nikolai Velimirovic writes:

'No-one can be a good superior who has not gone through the school of obedience. Adam lost his power and primacy over the animals and the natural elements in the hour when he showed himself disobedient to God...If a man listens to God then God listens to him,' said Abba Moses. However, it is obvious that God listens to man more than man does to God...The fact that the immortal God listens to us corruptible beings more than we do to Him should fill with shame anyone with any conscience remaining.' [Prologue 3 March]

We need to remember this when we pray in Lent - why should God do our will if we will not do His? Before all else, our prayer in Lent has as its aim the nurturing of that relationship and conversation we have with God as our priority, to seek first the kingdom of God and everything else that we need will be added unto us.

So, faced with the inclination to recoil from anything that contradicts our natural desires and passions, we find ourselves engaged in spiritual warfare. We must, though, be careful in using the term *natural desires* here, for in Orthodox Christian thinking, we are referring to our fallen nature which, in fact, is not natural to us at all. This is the sinful human nature, fixed on the ego, our selfish absorption with our own comfort. Our real nature is that revealed in Christ. This is why the Lenten struggle is so difficult, because we are so unaccustomed to contradicting our own will; of denying our own desires; of refusing our own comfort. So, like Adam, we are faced with a choice: our own will

or the will of Christ? And the choice, here, really comes down to whom we love the more. Like the two sons in the parable, the one, who, though reluctant at first, did his father's will, was the one commended by Christ [Matt.21:28ff].

Christianity is first and foremost not a religion that concerns itself with rules or commandments; not with rituals or observances but rather, with the relationship between God and us. If we dare to supplicate God and bring before him our needs and prayers, if we would have Him do our will, ought we not, likewise, to do His will in almsgiving, in prayer and in fasting? If we love Him, we will.

Fr. Chrysostom

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Some people find it difficult to comply with my insistence on quiet and silence in the church, not only during the services, which should be obvious, but before and after. And I think we must realise something which we forget so often: that our being present before the face of God does not begin at the moment when the priest pronounces the first holy words of the service; this is the place of God, this is His dwelling place; these, in terms of the Old Testament, are the Gates of Heaven. And when we come to the church, the first thing which we must realise, is that we are in the presence, and that this presence can be perceived and lived with only in the deep silence of our souls - not only the silence of words, but the silence of all powers of our being in awe and adoration before God. It is only if we enter into the service from within this silence that the words of prayer will reach us and blossom out into a new depth of contemplative silence, of serenity, and will have power to transform and transfigure us. So, it is not (only) a matter of church discipline or of protecting other people's prayer against our own dissipation; it is a matter of entering ourselves into the mystery of this presence, so that through the liturgy we may gradually be transformed and brought into that depth where one meets God.

Metroplitan Anthony Bloom
from www.pravmir.com

SERVICES

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

MARCH

Sun 1st First Sunday of Great Lent
Sunday of Orthodoxy
Divine Liturgy & Procession of the Holy Icons 10.30am

Sun 18th Second Sunday of Great Lent
St. Gregory Palamas.
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 15th Third Sunday of Great Lent
Veneration of the Cross
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 22nd Fourth Sunday of Great Lent
St. John Climachus
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Wed 25th The Annunciation of the Theotokos

Sun 29th Fifth Sunday of Great Lent
St. Mary of Egypt
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

APRIL

Sun 5th Entry of Our Lord
Palm Sunday
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Passion Week

Wed 8th Great & Holy
Wednesday Anointing Service
7.00pm

Thurs 9th Great & Holy Thursday
Vespertal Liturgy of the Mystical Supper 11.00am

Service of the 12 Gospels 7.00pm

Fri 10th Great & Holy Friday
Vespers of the Shroud 4.00pm
Lamentations Service 6.30pm

Sat 11th Great & Holy Saturday
Midnight Office, Rush Procession, Orthros & Divine Liturgy of Pascha 11.00pm
Followed by a Feast in the Church Hall

Sun 12th Holy Pascha
Vespers of Love 2.30pm

Sun 19th 2nd Sunday of Pascha
Thomas Sunday
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 26th 3rd Sunday of Pascha
The Holy Myrrhbearers
Divine Liturgy 10.30am