

The believers were first
called Christians at
Antioch
ACTS. 9:26
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER
2006

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan Parkstone, Dorset

The Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of The United Kingdom and Ireland
Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

Parish Priest: Fr. Chrysostom MacDonnell 42 Coventry Close,
Corfe Mullen, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 3UP Tel. 01202-602628

e-mail: fr.chrysostom@meowmail.com

Reader: David Wallis Tel. 01209-217499

www.orthodoxpoole.org.uk

THE HABIT OF PRAYER

Although we might follow the same religion, the quality of each one's spiritual life can vary enormously. In my experience this variety comes not from one person's upbringing or from another's knowledge of the faith; rather, the quality of spiritual life is rooted in whether one habitually prays or not.

I do not mean whether they pray occasionally, as when they come up against a particular crisis or need in their life, or that they endeavour to come to church most Sundays. In themselves, naturally, there is nothing wrong with any of these actions. We should, of course, pray in any crisis and as for the obligation of being at church on Sunday: it goes without saying. The problem for many, perhaps, even for a majority of people, is that they become becalmed there, like a sailing ship with no wind to move them further on.

What really makes for quality in spiritual experience is not just how many times we attend church services, how much we give in alms, how strict we are in fasting or how arduously we toil to free ourselves from passions and acquire virtues. All these things are needed. But what really makes the differences is the regularity of our prayer; prayer, that is, offered in a disciplined, frequent and ordered way.

In the monastic life there are the fixed hours of prayer but for the rest of us who must live in the world, there can be no reason why any Orthodox Christian, under normal circumstances, cannot find time and space to pray twice in the day.

In our liturgical tradition the day begins at sunset; as one day ends and another begins with the going down of the sun, prayer should be offered to God. This idea, rooted in the stories of the biblical patriarchs (Gen.24:63), has always been part of the Christian spiritual and religious life. The simple domestic duty in the ancient world of lighting oil lamps at sunset became a feature of worship in the early church. One of the most ancient features of Orthodox worship is the vesperal hymn, Φωσ Ἰλαρον (O gladsome Light). St. Basil the Great refers to this hymn as being considered very old in his day (4th Cent.) Here, the evening light becomes symbolic of Christ, the true Life, come into the world. In the Orthodox spiritual understanding of life, all things can be seen as symbolic, pointing beyond themselves. Here, at eventide, we see in the end of one day with the long, dark night ahead, a representation of death which permeates the whole fallen creation. Into this darkness we invite Christ. This theme of light seems to have been practically universal in ancient forms of Christian evening worship. Psalm 140(141) 'Lord, I have cried...'

was another common feature of evening worship, recalling as it does the evening sacrifice of the ancient Hebrews in the temple at Jerusalem. Needless to say, these two items, the hymn and the psalm, feature to this day in the service of Vespers in the Orthodox Church.

The other cardinal point for prayer is obviously the morning with the rising of the sun. Just as we invoke the light of Christ in the darkness of this world, so the sunrise symbolises his resurrection. It is for this reason we should pray facing east, just as when we were baptised we turned westward to renounce the devil and turned eastward to Christ. The common features in ancient services - again, still found in the Orthodox service of Orthros (Matins) - were the Psalms 50(51) and 62(63) and the Psalms of Praise: 148-150.

Having made the point that we should pray at least twice in the day, evening and morning, the practicalities will of course, vary from individual to individual. Some may be able to pray at midday and before retiring to bed as well. There will, though, be other times we should consider. Prayer is, after all, essentially a continuous conversation between the soul and God. St. Paul famously calls upon us to pray *without ceasing* [PTO]

[continued from front page...] (1 Thess.5:16-18). It is important, for example, that we pray as much as we can *with the Church*. One of the best ways of preparing for a Sunday or great feast is to attend Vespers on the eve. Those intending to receive the Holy Gifts should not neglect to read the Prayers of Preparation and say the Thanksgiving Prayers afterwards. (The latter are always recited at the end of the Liturgy.) Not least, there will be times of need and other occasions when we might recite an Akathist or wish to pray for the souls of the departed.

What follows are some ideas which Orthodox Christians have long used and found helpful, spiritually, in their life of prayer.

Set up an 'Icon Corner' in your house. This can be as ornate or as simple as you wish. This might be a wooden board with hinged side-panels fixed to an eastward facing corner or wall. Often, an icon lamp is hung in front. As well as hanging your icons here, there might be a shelf for other items. On or near the icon corner you might keep:

- The Bible and a lectionary giving details of the daily readings and the feasts/fasts that we observe.
- A bottle of holy water for blessing yourself and the household.
- A small bottle of holy oil for anointing when sick or for a blessing.
- Your book of prayers.
- Other holy items such as palm crosses or dried flowers from the Epitaphios.
- A small domestic hand-censer with charcoal and incense for use on holy days when you pray.

Of course, it is not necessary to have *all* this. It is, however, important that we have at home a space consecrated to God - just a simple area where we keep an Icon of Christ and the Theotokos together with our Bible and prayer book is sufficient. It is, though, correct to acknowledge the holy icons when we first come into the room with a bow and the sign of the cross. You might be surprised how different the spiritual atmosphere of a room can be where the icons are present. Not least, they will be noticed by visitors, opening, perhaps, opportunities for conversation and inquiries about our faith. Incidentally, why doesn't someone in the congregation with the necessary time and skills offer to make icon corners to order at a modest fee? Meanwhile, other items listed above may, of course be obtained with the help of your parish priest.

We have only just skimmed the surface here in dealing with the Orthodox prayer life. I have not mentioned, for example, the use of the Chotki or prayer rope and the recitation of the Jesus Prayer; this is a whole subject in its own right. The really essential point, though, is to pray and to pray regularly, that is, according to a definite rule. Even when you don't feel like it, even when the heart is cold or it is inconvenient, we should pray, for the discipline, even if it seem perfunctory, will carry us through the hard times. In the end, such habits are integrated as part of our daily life so that, bit by bit, grace will advance the quality of our spiritual lives.

Fr. Chrysostom

SERVICES

AUGUST

Sun 20th Tenth after Pentecost
10.30am Divine Liturgy
*Fr. Chrysostom on holiday 25th
Aug to 2nd September*
Sun 27th Eleventh after
Pentecost 10.00am Orthros and
Typika - Reader Services

SEPTEMBER

Sun 3rd Twelfth after Pentecost
9.00am Orthros 10.30am Divine
Liturgy
Wed 5th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Fri 8th Nativity of the Theotokos
Hours & Typika 9.00am
Sat 9th Vespers 6.00pm
Sun 10th Thirteenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 13th Vespers of the
Exaltation of the Cross 6.00pm
Sat 16th Vespers 6.00pm
Sun 17th Fourteenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 20th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Sat 23rd Vespers 6.00pm
Sun 24th Fifteenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 27th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Sat 30th Vespers 6.00pm

OCTOBER

Sun 1st Sixteenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 4th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Sat 7th Vespers 6.00pm
Sun 8th Seventeenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 11th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Sat 14th Vespers 6.00pm
Sun 15th Eighteenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 18th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Sat 21st Vespers 6.00pm
Sun 22nd Nineteenth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy
Wed 25th Paraklesis 6.00pm
Sat 28th No Vespers
Sun 29th twentieth after
Pentecost 9.00am Orthros
10.30am Divine Liturgy