

*The believers were first
called Christians at
Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26
February - March
2007

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

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The Ascetic Struggle

*"Therefore glorify God in your
body and in your spirit, which are
God's." [I Cor.6:20]*

The Triodion is the liturgical book used in the weeks leading up to and during Great Lent and Holy Week. On the Sunday before we began to use the Triodion we heard the gospel story of Zacchaeus who climbed a sycamore tree to see Christ.

Zacchaeus himself is not only an example of repentance but also of that religious drive, that zeal, which helps pull us upwards, towards our salvation. In this way the liturgical cycle prepares us for the spiritual warfare that lies ahead of us. We do not suddenly lurch into a whole new style of life but rather, wind down slowly from the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee to the first Monday of the great fast.

Bishop Kallistos in his introduction to the Lenten Triodion says, *"We note Zacchaeus' sense of eager expectation....and we apply it to ourselves. If, as we prepare for Lent, there is a real eagerness in our hearts, if we have an intense desire for a clearer vision of Christ, then our hopes will be fulfilled during the fast. Indeed, we shall, like Zacchaeus, receive more than we expect."*

We cannot, of course, just manufacture feelings of zeal and an 'eager expectation' but we do need to examine from within ourselves, as Lent begins, what our attitude is. It comes

down to our perspective on this season: is it just another Lent we have to 'get through' as a time of negation and restriction, or a time of liberation from all that holds us back; a lightening of the load on our pilgrimage into the Kingdom? Our natural response will tell us something of our present spiritual condition and outlook.

It is well known that Great Lent developed among the early Christians from their desire to be in solidarity with the catechumens who were preparing for their baptism on the eve of Pascha. In this way the faithful could revisit and relive their own experience of death and resurrection in Christ. The Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, together with confession - often called a *second baptism* - do not so much bring us back to square one, as if, in the Pauline phrase, we become once again 'babes in Christ'. Rather, the ascetic regime, as the early Christian found, unburdens us, frees both the soul and the body from its entanglements in this life and brings in its wake God's grace by which our souls undergo spiritual growth. This is the discovery of that central Christian paradox that in dying - and dying to whatever it may be that hinders us - we are born again to eternal life.

It is because this spiritual warfare is so vital for our soul's good that it directly involves our body as well. That

might sound strange to some at first but, in every aspect of our lives, there can be no separation, in Orthodox understanding, between body and spirit. It is true that in western Theology there has been an increasing tendency, (since Descartes reduced human experience to the mere cerebral: '*I think therefore I am*') to separate spiritual things from the physical. This has led to the gradual decline of asceticism in the western tradition to the point where Lent was a time when people *used to fast* in some dark mediaeval past. Indeed, the very modern substitution of Lenten reading and discussion groups in some churches demonstrates that very decline into cerebral religion that is the antithesis of Orthodoxy. That is not to say that spiritual reading and discussion have no place among us. Of course, they have! They should be going on all the time, not just in Lent. We do, though, have to guard against the heresy that says that the body does not matter. There are two dangerous ways of thinking that we need to clear out of the lumber-room of our minds. The first comes from modern 'Scientism' that reduces everything to mere time-space-energy continuum where the spiritual is just an illusion. If the physical world is the only reality, then in the infinite continuity of time, *our time* on earth is meaningless.

The other approach is to see the spiritual as another world, separate from the physical. This cosmology is also unorthodox and does not fit with our doctrine of Creation. This reduces the body to a kind of prison, a suffering burden from which we must be liberated if our souls can escape to heaven. We, though, believe in the resurrection of the body; that we ourselves, incarnated spirits must have our bodies 'spiritualised'. In other words, there is no separation in our thinking between the physical and the spiritual; we believe that God created all things 'visible and invisible' - these are not two worlds - one seen and one not seen - but one world. Indeed, the physical, as the manifestation of the spiritual, would have no existence (or meaning) at all if the spiritual did not underlie it.

It is true that, for fallen man, our biological death separates the body and soul till the resurrection. This is even true for the saints whose souls are before the throne of God (apart from those like Enoch, Elijah and of course, Our Lady, assumed into heaven bodily). This is why their physical remains, their relics and, of course, their icons, are so precious to us.

So, for us, the body and soul alike pass through Great Lent. This might seem obvious but there are those who will try to convince us that one or other physical expression of religious practice are merely empty ritual, of no spiritual value.

Well, we have many answers to give, not least that Christ himself fasted, shared in the Liturgy of the Temple and gave alms. Truth to tell, of course, those who deny the value of ascetic discipline have either absorbed the heresies outlined above or have never been taught or experienced them first-hand. On the other hand, they might just be consumed

with self-indulgence.; formed in the materialist ethos of the present western culture they see no point in restraint, (where the soul rules the body,) rather than, as in their case, the *physical tail* must always wag the *spiritual dog*.

It is often imagined, I think that spiritual exercises are 'good for the soul' in the same way as physical exercise is good for the body's health. In one sense, of course, that is true, in that spiritual exercises of any kind may bring God's grace upon the soul. Fasting belongs, naturally, to our spirituality but we should not imagine that it is the fasting can in some way induce in us feelings of penitence and can put us in the right mood to match the liturgical season. It is, rather, the other way round - it is from a contrite and repentant soul that true fasting, as the manifestation of that soul's spiritual state, is able to express itself. Anyone can perform acts of physical self-denial but that does not necessarily entail penitence.

This is why, before we take up our Lenten discipline, our souls are called to repentance. There is no need, here, to reiterate once again, how much repentance is such a common motif running through Orthodox Christian spirituality and is a marked feature of so many liturgical texts. It only needs to be stressed once more that the word repentance (Μετανοια) means a *change of mind*, not a mere feeling of guilt; a renewal of the spirit within, not a perfunctory apology for what we have done amiss. And this renewal - with the mind of Christ - can begin with our grasp of that sacred vision of the unity of creation, all thing visible and invisible and

of our glorifying God in our souls and in our bodies.

Fr. Chrysostom

SERVICES

Usual weekday services:

Wednesday: Sixth Hour & Typika
10.00am

Friday: Sixth Hour & Typika
10.00am

N.B. Listen out for other Lenten services, as and when announced.

FEBRUARY

Fri 2nd The Meeting (Candlemas)
Orthros & Typika 10.00am

Sat 3rd Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 4th Sunday of the Prodigal
9.00am Orthros 10.30am Divine Liturgy

Sat 10th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 11th Sunday of the Judgement (Meatfare) 9.00am
Orthros 10.30am Divine Liturgy

Meat-Fast begins

Sat 17th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 18th Forgiveness Sunday

(Cheesefare) 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Mon 19th Beginning of Great Lent

Wed 21st Sixth Hour & Typika

10.00am (as usual) Compline and

Gt. Canon of St. Andrew of

Crete 3.30pm

Sat 24th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 25th First Sunday of Gt Lent

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy

10.30am

MARCH

Sat 3rd Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 4th Second Sunday of Gt

Lent Orthros 9.00am Divine

Liturgy 10.30am

Sat 10th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 11th Third Sunday of Gt Lent

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy

10.30am

Sat 17th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 18th Fourth Sunday of Gt

Lent Orthros 9.00am Divine

Liturgy 10.30am

Sat 24th Vespers 4.30pm

[British Summer Time starts]

Sun 25th Fifth of Gt Lent.

Annunciation to the Theotokos

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy

10.30am

Sat 31st Lazarus Saturday

Vespers 6.00pm