

*The believers were first
called Christians at
Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26
DECEMBER 2006-
JANUARY 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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REVELATION

Of the two feasts we celebrate at this season, Theophany (6 January) is the older. It originated in the 3rd century; Nativity is first mentioned in the 4th. Theophany, celebrating the Baptism of Christ, proclaims the knowledge of the Holy Trinity to the world. As such, it is a festival of light, enlightening all with the knowledge of God, in so far as the human heart and mind can comprehend the Infinite. *'When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan,'* runs the Troparion of the feast. *'The worship of the Holy Trinity was made manifest.....O Christ our God who hast appeared an enlightened the world, glory to Thee.'*

In Orthodox thinking, God in his divine nature, is ultimately unknowable; no one can comprehend God. Even though we strive with God's grace to come to Theosis - the making divine of our humanity - we shall never ultimately have God all wrapped up, for such an object of our endeavour could never be the God who is our creator and redeemer. God can, however, be known in his *energies*, such as his love, his power and wisdom.

Orthodox Theology is often described as largely *apophatic*, that is, negative: we can say what God is not; all we can say of what he is, however, (*cataphatic theology*) must have been revealed by him, according to his will. You might recall, for example, how Moses in the Book

of Exodus cannot see the face of God, but only, as it were, looks upon the back of God, as if looking upon the dark side of the moon.

These two great feasts, though, give us much that we *can* say, so that it is worth being reminded of what Holy Tradition actually teaches us, especially in the face of heterodox or even heretical ideas. It is well worth reviewing this once again, not least, so that we are aware of just what we are celebrating and, at the same time, being enabled to refute the errors that are just as evident today as they were when the Church composed her creed.

God has revealed himself as a Trinity of three persons in one Godhead (Divine Being), the Father being the source of the divine essence (nature), of whom the Son is perfect image, eternally begotten so that there was never a time when the Son was not. The Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father. Human nature is created in the image of God (Gen.1:26) and that image is Christ. It is being created in the divine image that sets our humanity above all other creatures and gives a value to human life beyond that of other animals [which, incidentally, is why Orthodox Christianity values human life from conception to grave and opposes abortion, euthanasia and embryological experimentation]. At the incarnation we believe that the second person of the

Trinity took human nature so that in the one person there were two distinct and complete natures: human and divine, at the same time. If Christ had not taken all our humanity into his person we could not have been totally redeemed; if he were not fully God we cannot be fully saved. It is these ideas that lie at the heart of the dogmas thrashed out at the first great Ecumenical Councils of the Church in the 4th and 5th centuries. It is *this* what we are celebrating, proclaiming and commemorating at Christmas.

Now, compare that with what is held by our detractors who do not have the revelation or knowledge of the living God.

Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, follow a heresy invented in the late 19th Century by an American charlatan called Charles Taze Russell. Their theology is Arian, seeing Christ as a creature, not as God. They say that he was created at the beginning in the form of the Archangel Michael. Make of that what you will! Next time they call at your door simply ask them why God left everyone in the dark for nearly nineteen hundred years before *revealing* all this to Russell - then close the door politely but firmly.

Mormonism, another American heresy, is based on the fantasies - or possibly stolen ideas - of a profiteer called Joseph Smith. Mormons

do not believe in the Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Rejecting monotheism, they are actually polytheists. Smith taught that the god of this world is an exalted man with a physical body. This god, called Elohim has not yet reached perfection (!) Some see this father God as Adam who had sons, the first being Christ and another being Lucifer. In all this mythological nonsense there are heavy hints of the kind of connections woven in the Gnostic heresies of the ancient world.

Judaism, of course, rejects the idea that Jesus of Nazareth could have been their Messiah and remain stuck with the shadow of the Law (Torah) and have not grasped the reality to which it pointed - Christ the Lord (YHWH) of the Old Testament come among them (Lk.19:37-42; Is.7:14).

Islam, similarly, can offer nothing, being but a reversion to the Old Testament and regarding Christ as just a human prophet. As such, Islam is inimical to Christianity, as is evident to anyone who has read the Qur'an. Here, clearly, the latter, violent pronouncements of Muhammad came from the time when his preaching was stirring up opposition

We are more among friends when we explore the varieties of western Christianity but even here we can be surprised. Since the thirteenth century the West has steadily over-stressed the humanity of Christ, often reducing its faith to what Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century called, '*morality tinged with emotion*'. Once devoid of theological content, Christmas is imbued with mere sentimentality and is reduced to the season of goodwill. As religion declines in the post-modern world we cannot be surprised if this season becomes just an excuse for hyper-commercialism, conviviality and overindulgence. Of course there is nothing wrong with the homely and

heartening elements of Christmas and every Christian land has its own cultural traditions woven into its observance of the feast. This, though, cannot be all there is to it; Christmas reduced to mere culture, mere heritage, mere cuisine, mere commerce or even mere church-going will soon lose its power to transform the meaning of human existence. We have a duty as Orthodox believers to point out what we are doing at this time and our practice has clear *theological* foundations: God is born among us as one of us. He has assimilated what we are totally, joining it to his divinity, totally. God is with us and has restored our human nature to what it was in its primal creation, for the incarnation reveals afresh the image and likeness of God in our humanity, declaring our dignity as the people of God. Anything else is not salvation; anything else will not do.

Fr. Chrysostom

'Make ready, O Bethlehem: let the manger be prepared, let the cave show its welcome. The truth has come, the shadow has passed away; born of a virgin, God has appeared to men, formed as we are and making godlike the garment He has put on. Therefore Adam is renewed like Eve and they call out: Thy good pleasure has appeared on earth to save our kind.'

[Stichera from the First of the Royal Hours of Christmas by St. Sophronios, Patriarch of Jerusalem]

Dates and topics of the Study Group Sessions

DECEMBER

12 Theology - the Orthodox understanding of God.

19 The Holy Mysteries - the transforming character of the sacramental life.

JANUARY

9 Orthodox Spirituality - prayer and the ascetic endeavour.

SERVICES

Usual weekday services:

Wednesday: Hours & Typika 10.00am

Friday: Hours & Typika 10.00am

DECEMBER

Sat 9th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 10th Twenty-sixth after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Sat 16th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 17th Twenty-seventh after

Pentecost 9.00am Orthros

10.30am Divine Liturgy

Fri 22nd Royal Hours 9.00am

Sun 24th [Fr. Chrysostom

Serving Divine Liturgy in

Cornwall] Great Vespers 6.00pm

Mon 25th

The Nativity of Our Lord

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy

of St. Basil 10.30am

Tues 26th Akhathist 11.00am

Sat 30th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 31st Sunday after the

Nativity Orthros 9.00am

Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Fri 5th **Eve of Theophany**

Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil &

Great Blessing of Waters

7.00pm

Sat 6th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 7th Orthros 9.00am Divine

Liturgy 10.30am

Wed 10th Clergy meeting in

London - no service at 10.00am

Sat 13th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 14th Orthros 9.00am

Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 21st Orthros and Typika

10.00am (Fr. Chrysostom on

holiday)

Sat 27th Vespers 4.30pm

Sun 28th Orthros 9.00am

Divine Liturgy 10.30am