

THE NARTHEX

*The believers were first called
Christians at Antioch*
ACTS. 9:26

APRIL-MAY 2008

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan Poole-Bournemouth

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

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THE PROCLAMATION

We state at every Divine Liturgy that we believe in the Resurrection. This is not just a clause in the Nicene Creed but is actually integral to the whole service: we would not be there at all if we did not believe that Christ rose from the dead and that resurrection is also our destiny.

Belief is more than mere intellectual assent to an idea. Indeed, normal human reason is dumfounded by the idea of rising from the dead; it just does not happen. Our belief in the resurrection is more than an article of faith that we wear as a kind of 'badge' to show we are Christian. It is true that, at baptism, the candidate is asked a series of questions regarding his faith and must give assent in order for the rite to proceed. But this is not just a probing of his intellect; it is a demonstration of the candidate's incorporation into the Church's life of faith.

During the early days of the Soviet Union, Communist leaders would tour villages in Russia to instruct the peasants in atheism. The story is told that a leading communist once arrived at such a village and harangued a group of villagers for a long time, explaining through Communist materialist rationalism that God couldn't exist. At the end, to show that he was a reasonable and fair-minded man, he invited anyone in the crowd to come up and reply for the opposition. There was an awkward silence: who would want to be known to

the authorities as a believer? Suddenly from the crowd there came a young man who mounted the speaking rostrum, stared at the people and shouted '*Christos voskrese!*' There is no need for me to record what the crowd shouted back. Needless to say, the leading communist left the area with his tail firmly between his legs.

The resurrection is the very heart and soul of Orthodox Christianity. However, I should also like to add that our belief is far from irrational and would be so bold as to assert that belief in the resurrection is grounded in the first place in history; that this is likewise, fundamental to our understanding even of the Incarnation: God was manifested and entered physically into human history, into the very *story* of what we are as human beings.

If we were to ask believers today why they acknowledge a faith in Christ's resurrection, speaking generally, most, I suspect, would say either it's in the Bible or its part of the Creed of the Church. Yet, if we go back to the time of the Apostles and their immediate successors, we are in a very different situation. In the middle of the first century AD the canon of the scriptures had not been settled - not even fully written; the Creed had not been formulated to counter the claims of heresies. What they did have was the apostolic tradition in the form of a *proclamation*, in Greek: *Kerygma*, that is, the message based on personal experience. A man like St. Irenaeus (2nd Cent.)

for example, in his younger days, knew the martyr, St. Polycarp who died at the age of eighty-six. St. Polycarp was prepared to die for Christ because he, in turn, had been a disciple of the Apostle John. The Beloved Apostle did not believe that Christ had risen, he *knew* he had. The gospel is based on what the Apostles proclaimed and they proclaimed what they has actually experienced. It was this that they passed on to their successors who, in turn, established the faith in their preaching. Irenaeus believed because he trusted the witnesses themselves. It is this same *Holy Tradition* which is entrusted to the bishops of the Orthodox Church and we believe because of their testimony. Alongside all the other witnesses to Holy Tradition: the creed, the scriptures, the Divine Liturgy, whatever we name, it is the same proclamation, that Christ's resurrection is founded upon history, nothing less.

For the unbelieving world there is a variety of available options if they want to disparage our belief.

They might claim that the Apostles and moreover, the five hundred that St. Paul mentions in the first letter to the Corinthians, (most of whom were still alive at the time, he says,) were merely deluded or indulging in wishful thinking, even hallucinating. But how do you delude so many and at different times. As President

Lincoln said, 'you can't fool all of the people all of the time.'

Others claim that Christ did not really die, that a substitute died for him - the Muslim view, invented over six hundred years later - or that he merely lost consciousness and 'recovered' in the cool of the tomb. Once we've recovered ourselves from our derisive laughter, we might gently point out that someone having undergone the torture of Roman crucifixion would end up crippled, no doubt eventually to die from gangrene.

A more sophisticated approach proposes that the Apostles were myth-makers, starting a rumour that grew in the telling and fulfilled the emotional and spiritual needs of their eager hearers. But the Apostles were not subtle and crafty manipulators or literary craftsmen, dealing in far-fetched stories. They were candid and straightforward first century Jews, fishermen and other ordinary men who had witnessed something extraordinary. The mythic theory is the way that the resurrection is dealt with in the modernist version of Christianity; a vain attempt to change the faith in order to suit a world that has lost belief in the spiritual realities.

All these attempts to explain away the Apostles' proclamation lack credibility because they are not based on the evidence. They become in the end more bizarre than the idea that they try to deny. And here we have not yet brought on the evidence of the scriptures themselves. Beginning to be written even in the lifetime of the Apostles, the gospels and epistles announce the same message. The fact that they give different accounts, in no way harmonised by a common approach as to the details, gives the lie to the idea that this is a conspiracy; that the Bible was edited by the ecclesiastical leaders to establish

their prestige and authority.

The four gospels were first century accounts, written within living memory of the events. There were other 'gospels', produced using the names of the original Apostles, in the second century, mostly presenting Gnostic ideas that had latched onto Christianity at the time. St. Irenaeus was the champion here, teachings and writing against these aberrations, especially as Gnosticism [the belief in salvation through secret 'knowledge' revealed to an elect minority of souls,] denied the physical resurrection - why would pure, spiritual souls want to be incarnated again in the 'fallen flesh'?

The point is, the Apostles received the Lord back from death. They, in turn, taught the tradition to their successors whose writings and testimony we also have. Our faith is built on historical fact, easily able to meet the challenges of pure rationalists and cranks alike. If the unbelievers pressed the point they must find that, thinking honestly, that like the communist atheist leader mentioned above, they too must depart with their tails between their legs. There is only one conclusion to the historic evidence: Christ really did rise, body and soul from the grave.

On the night of the 26th April we have the most important appointment that our diaries hold this year. We have to gather together once again in the dark and proclaim publicly the light of the very same message that the Apostles delivered: that Christ is risen and we can no longer see, let alone live our life as if we were like those entombed in unbelief.

Fr. Chrysostom

SERVICES

April

6th 4th Sunday of Gt. Lent
(St. John Climacus Divine Liturgy 10.45am)

13th 5th Sunday of Gt. Lent
(St. Mary of Egypt) Divine Liturgy 10.45am

19th Lazarus Saturday

20th Entry of Our Lord (Palm Sunday) Divine Liturgy 10.45am

PASSION WEEK

24th Gt. & Holy Thursday
Vespertal Divine Liturgy of the Mystical Supper 3.00pm

25th Gt. & Holy Friday [strict fast]
Vespers of the Shroud 5.00pm
Lamentations Service 7.00pm

26th Gt. & Holy Saturday (Eve of Pascha) Baptism of Mark Nash 9.00pm
(Fr. Chrysostom should be available to hear confessions from about 10.00pm)
Midnight Office, Rush Procession, Orthros and Divine Liturgy of Pascha 11.00pm, followed by the feast

27th HOLY PASCHA
(No fasting, except the communion fast, for 40 days)

May

4th 2nd of Pascha (Thomas Sunday) Divine Liturgy 10.45am

11th 3rd Sunday of Pascha
(Holy Mearbearers) Divine Liturgy 10.45am

18th 4th Sunday of Pascha
(The Paralysed Man) Divine Liturgy 10.45am

19th Monday St. Dunstan of Canterbury - Patronal Feast

25th 5th Sunday of Pascha
(The Samaritan Woman) Divine Liturgy 10.45am