

THE NARTHEX

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

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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 View from the Top

There is often great virtue in being 'down to earth' and practical. Being able to do what is needed and at the right time, is always very welcome. Yet when it comes to making sense of life itself as an experience, then the earthly view has its limitations. Walking through the countryside is indeed pleasant but the view over a landscape from a high vantage point is spectacular, often breathtaking. Life itself may be lived in the valley but seen from the mountaintop, a much wider picture emerges.

In the biblical tradition, significant encounters with God often have their setting on mountains. Listing just a few, we might mention Abraham offering up Isaac, Moses receiving the Commandments, Elijah defeating the false prophets of Baal, the preaching of the Beatitudes, the Transfiguration of Christ and his Ascension into heaven. In part this reflects the culture of the times in that the high places were associated with the offering of sacrifice. The story of Babel is set upon this idea of mankind's hubris and his vain attempts, by his own efforts, to attain heaven. But having fallen out of paradise, nothing by the power of human thought or action can help us return, no more than we can return to the innocence of childhood. In this life our experience is bound by time and nothing, as such, can be turned back.

Those baptised, for example, do not regain paradise

and the primal state of the 'first Adam'. If that were the case, then we would have to be baptized every time we sin. The very point of our baptism was to take our leave of the old Adam and to be reformed after the pattern of the new one, Christ himself.

The problem is that, so often, our perception, our very view of what we are is so time-bound, so very much the view from the valley floor, not the mountaintop. Unless we truly understand what we have become by being baptized, we will never really make sense of what it is to be a follower of Christ; to understand what the mystery of Baptism means for us is truly to take the view from the top. To take the earthly view of our religious experience; to judge, as I have mentioned before, the 'usefulness' of religion (secular religion) is like a man peering up the wrong end of a telescope. We know that the world often evaluates religion of all sorts. Historically, statesmen and politicians have, always assessed the usefulness of religion and, of course, used it for their own purposes. But we don't baptize people in order to make them more docile citizens; it is not our function to admit candidates to the holy mysteries in order to create a more coherent society.

It is, of course, perfectly correct generously to give alms in order to help the poor, or to support a charity that helps the poorest peoples of our world to help themselves. But in doing this we are responding to the love of

God towards us in the first place. What we are not doing is engaging in a political campaign to develop failing countries from economic motives. Our religion is of no earthly 'use' in that sense but it is not meant to be, for the kingdom is not of this world.

Our veneration of the holy Icons is another case in point. One can view them as items of religious art, classify them according to their schools, write learned books upon their history, analyse their role, have them valued and even sold at auction. All this may or may not be legitimate but it will tell you nothing of their essential reality - reality, that is, from the point of view of Theology. This is because the Holy Icons can only really be comprehended from within the inner experience of the Orthodox believer. For a start, our understanding begins with the idea that it is not so much *we* who look at icons but rather, it is the icons that look at *us*. With the icons, manifesting physically through the painted image the person of Christ, his Mother or the other saints, it is for us to stand humbly before them, as if the windows of heaven were opened upon us.

To appreciate this requires a very different perspective on the world. This in New Testament terms is acquiring *the mind of Christ*. St. Paul, of course, is the great exponent of this. Again and again, he makes the point that

those who have been baptized have died spiritually, already and have been raised up with Christ. And this first, spiritual death does not mean *unreal*, for to the religious mind the spiritual is precisely what is real in the first place; without the spiritual reality there is no physical manifestation. The body of flesh (the physical reality) has still to go through biological death, of course, but our soul has already past through. St. Paul speaks of our being buried with Christ [Col. 2:12]; of our being baptized into his death [Rom.6:3-4]; of our life being hidden with Christ in God [Col.3:3]. He speaks of us having, even now, the blessings of the heavenly places [Eph.1:3].

The study of these passages begs the question: how then, are we to live the rest of this earthly life? No wonder St. Basil the Great could refer to monks as 'men living on earth like angels.' For St. Paul, the implications of this spiritual mind are total: our relationships, our work, our possessions, our social life, our body, everything is to be seen in a new light. The closest analogy of which I can think is of the migrant worker in a foreign land: physically, he is working abroad but his heart is set on his homeland still, the place for which he yearns. For us, that place is the kingdom of heaven.

For the same reason St. Paul saw the commandments of the Torah as having now served their purpose: those *in Christ*, those joined to the new Adam were not made righteous by keeping within the rules but by co-operating with grace. St. Peter calls this partaking of the divine nature [2 Pet.1:3-4]. When in fact the apostles outline the evil things to avoid morally and the good works that Christians should do, these are not so much, in the Old Testament sense, commandments but rather, the evidence that we are living in the Spirit, that we are acquiring the

likeness of God, having had the image restored at baptism. This changed view of our experience and of how we see the world [2Cor.5:16-17] is brought to our attention once again by the current season of Ascensiontide, the days leading up to Pentecost. For us who have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit Himself through Chrismation, the question is remarkably simple: is what we are engaged in at the moment, is what we do, say and think proceeding from our renewed spiritual nature or are we revising the corpse of the old Adam? [Gal.5:16-15] St. Paul knew that the essence of living the Christian life was found in carrying around the death of Christ (to the old Adam) in order to manifest the new. [2Cor.4:7-11]. In other words, every time we overcome temptation; every time we practise virtue we are affirming and proving our faith in the central paschal mystery of the Christian faith. Not only do we believe that Christ has died, is risen and has ascended into glory. The point is, we have too!

This godly view, this divine perspective is what St. Paul calls having *the mind of Christ* [1 Cor2:16]. This is also, collectively, the mind of the Church, so that the truly Orthodox believer is the one who is able constantly to live the spiritual life, choosing, like Mary of Bethany, the better part [Luke 10:42].

Historically, there were times when this *mind* prevailed, at least in part, over many aspects of European culture. That has largely disappeared now, so that, for the most part the world regards the spiritual man of little use. If we are seen as 'dead to the world' and so heavenly minded to be of no

earthly use, then so be it. To look for approbation and honours from the world is but once again to rouse the old Adam.

Fr. Chrysostom

SERVICES

JUNE

8th 7th Sunday of Pascha
(Sunday after Ascension)
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

15th Pentecost Sunday
Divine Liturgy 10.45am
followed by Holy Baptism

22nd 1st After Pentecost
All Saints Divine Liturgy
10.45am followed by Holy
Baptism

23rd Beginning of the
Apostles' Fast

24th Nativity of St. John
the Baptist (fish, wine, oil)

29th 2nd After Pentecost
SS. Peter & Paul
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

JULY

6th 3rd Sunday after
Pentecost All Saints of
Britain (transferred)
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

13th 4th Sunday after
Pentecost Fathers of
4th Ecumenical Council
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

20th 5th Sunday after
Pentecost Prophet Elijah
Divine Liturgy 10.45am

27th 6th Sunday after
Pentecost St. Panteleimon
Divine Liturgy 10.45am