

# THE NARTHEX

The believers were first called  
Christians at Antioch

ACTS. 9:26

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## The Journey

In his novel *The Alchemist*, the Brazilian writer, Paulo Coelho, tells the story of a young Spanish shepherd boy called Santiago. He is led by a strange encounter with character (a thinly disguised *Melchizedek* from the book of *Genesis*) to set out and seek his fortune near the Pyramids of Egypt, if only he follows the 'omens'. He sells his flock and crosses over to Tangiers. Here, a local rogue cheats him out of his money but he manages to find a job in a glass shop. He does so well that he makes enough money to go off once more. A series of adventures follow, where he joins himself to a caravan and sets off across the desert towards an oasis. Here, he falls in love with one of the Bedouin girls and meets an alchemist who tells him to leave her for a while and continue his search. Together, they go to Egypt. Once again, on the way he loses his money to thieves but he presses on, the alchemist taking his leave of him. At the pyramids he digs for treasure yet, once again, is deprived of his fortune by others. So, he returns to Spain once again and picks up his old life. In response to an omen, he digs for treasure in a ruined church, where he used to shelter his flock of sheep. Here, of course, he finds his treasure, in the very place where he started out. With his wealth the novel ends with him determinedly setting out to find the Bedouin girl to make her his wife.

A cursory glance at this

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tale might raise the question as to whether it might not have been a colossal waste a time and effort for the young man. We have all had the experienced of losing something everywhere yet finding it again right under our noses, as we say. But this is to miss the point of the tale altogether. It is the process of the search, the learning to read the 'omens' that forms the young man's education in the meaning of his life. The easy finding of his treasure' would have given him nothing but wealth and, moreover, wealth without the acquired and necessary wisdom.

For us, the *treasure* has nothing to do with worldly wealth. It is, in fact, the very thing St. Paul writes about in II Corinthians 4: '*For God...made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*'

The point is, we too have been engaged over the last few weeks in our own journey. We too have trekked across a desert of sorts - not of sand but of the Great Fast. The *treasure* for us is that relationship we have in Christ. The *omens* are the inner knowledge that we have gained about ourselves, the discovery of our own weaknesses and those hidden fault-lines in our own characters that we must carry and lay at the foot of His cross. And as for the journey itself: it will only repay what we have put into it. Truth to tell, here is no way in which we can complete the journey on our own; it is only

God's grace that can make up for the inadequacies of our spiritual efforts. But, yet again, the point is: we have to make the journey. The Lenten journey has not been an end in itself; we do not fast in order to *be* ones who fast, as if there were some merit in it, *per se*. We fasted because it is an ancient religious practice, practised indeed by Christ Himself; commended to us within the Apostolic Tradition. Yet we know - as the Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom will remind, once again at the Orthros of Pascha - all are invited to share the feast, '*those who have fasted and those who have not...*' But we do not believe in salvation through grace *alone*, nor by faith *alone*. We know that we have to work out our salvation '*in fear and trembling*' and by co-operating (a holy synergy) with the grace of God. For this is what God has laid down for us. There are indeed other 'christianties' that will try to convince you that all this is useless. That faith is a simple matter; that salvation is given to you, now, as a free (for which read: *cheap*); that you have only to know the Lord Jesus as your personal saviour and you are saved - with no knowledge of spiritual growth, no cost of discipleship and most delusional of all: no recovery of the Divine image and likeness within. This is not our faith nor is it what the Fathers passed on to us. One of those, who features in Great Lent, is of

