

# THE NARTHEX

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

December-January  
2008/9

## THE COMING

As a major feast, the third ranking after Pascha and Theophany, The Nativity of our Lord is observed with careful preparation. The celebration of Our Lord's birth was originally part of a composite feast, linked with the Annunciation and Theophany. This pattern can still be seen in the Armenian Church. As a feast in its own right, Christmas appears in The Roman Church during the Fourth Century. The date of the 25<sup>th</sup> December (now, 7<sup>th</sup> January in the old Julian calendar) was probably chosen to discourage Christians, in a still largely non-Christian empire, from taking part in the more riotous pagan celebrations of the winter solstice.

The linking of Christmas, however, with a dark time of the year, if not planned that way, was still fortuitous: setting a dark, sunless season against the enlightening brightness of Christ's first coming. [Much the same can be seen in the celebration of the Resurrection at Pascha, linked in with the natural new life of Spring.] This linkage is not essential, of course, otherwise our co-religionist in the southern hemisphere would have problems! Interestingly, there is another link also, in that pre-Christian peoples would often see the season as a time for tightening one's belt, storing up food for the coming winter, in order to survive. Somewhere in this gloomy time, there would be, of course, a great feast to cheer

## 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 spirits - all perfectly understandable.

Something of this, no doubt, is to be found in our Nativity fast but that is as far as it goes. Though the practice of our faith might ride upon this natural, time-bound rhythm, observed in and sanctified by the passing of millennia, our real motivation is quite different. We are not just surviving the winter - though any brightness in the bleakness of mid-winter be greatly welcome - we are engaged in a spiritual activity, our hearts set on our heavenly, not our earthly home.

For this reason we are keeping a six week fast before the feast - not a survival technique in a lean time nor necessarily, for the good of our physical health - salutary and beneficial though such a fast may be for many! For us, the fast is always, primarily ascetic, a form of self-denial.

The Western (Roman) tradition observes the season they call Advent at this time. Now a four-week period, marked by changes in their liturgy, it was originally a six-week period with a fast like ours, brought into the Roman Rite from the Gallican and Mozarabic Rites. [Up to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, these Liturgies were served in France and Spain and, it seems, were influenced by our Eastern rites]. We don't really have an Advent season, marked so much in the Liturgy but we do prepare for the feast of Nativity in our habitual, ascetic manner.

However, in the Western Rite, Advent was really fixed

not primarily on Christmas but rather on the *four last things*: death, judgement, heaven and hell. How much this holds true now, I cannot really tell but it makes the point - or it used to - that Christ will come again and we must prepare. In our own Liturgical tradition, the focus upon the Second Coming of Christ latches upon the so-called *Bridegroom Services*, the Orthros (Matins) of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Great and Holy Week. Indeed, something of this is seen earlier, in the pre-Lenten period, with its emphasis on repentance in the gospel readings: Zachias, Prodigal Son, the Pharisee and the Publican and the Last Judgement.

Our celebration of the Nativity is, clearly, more an engagement with a past event: the first coming of Christ. For God's old people, The Jews, this was the consummation of their history and the fulfilment of the promises made to the Patriarch Abraham. In preparing, as we do, we are bringing the mystery of *God among us* into our present time; receiving the Holy Gifts at the Christmas Liturgy, Christ is born again within us; our heart becomes the manger; our celebrations a rejoicing in the birth of the Saviour.

This marking of the Nativity, though, is a looking back - it was the first coming of Christ. There is still the second to come and it is a point of doctrine for us, a clear belief of the catholic faith, as

understood in the Orthodox manner. We proclaim this in the Nicene Creed: *'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.'* In fact, the words *he will come* are better translated from the Greek original as *he is coming* [Greek: ερχομενον]. This gives the far more dynamic idea that *He* is on his way. Indeed, as it says in the Gospel of Luke, the kingdom of God is within you. In effect, this means that in his first coming, Christ opened the way to the kingdom of God for all who would seek it by his dying and rising; it may be found even now by those who strive with God's grace; [compare the Hesychast monks' idea of bringing the mind (nous) down into the heart through the practice of the *Jesus Prayer*] and Christ will bring in the kingdom in the new heaven and earth when his purpose is consummated and history ends. For those who reject God's love this is Armageddon, the judgement that brings doom for having gained the whole world yet having lost their souls. But for those who are Christ's, it is 'Ο Τελος (Gr:telos), *the end*, not in the sense of destruction but as the culmination, the goal of the journey. It is the Apocalypse, the revelation of the glory of God in his saints. Just as Christ, the second person of the Trinity, became man, coming from the spiritual realm of heaven, outside time, space and matter, so in the end at his second coming, this material world will be spiritualised, just as our bodies will be resurrected in glory, so will all created matter achieve its purpose (telos) in God.

At Nativity we shall greet each other with the words, *Christ is Born - Glorify him!* When priests greet each other, they say, *Christ is among us - He is and ever shall be!* In being reminded of Christ's first coming at Nativity, we are also looking forward to his second. It is as if we lived in three times at once: the 'nostalgia' which is always

a features of Christmas; the longing, as we await the future coming of the kingdom, the end (telos), the very goal of our faith and finally, the presence of Christ in the present, the Christ who is always among us. If we ever doubt this, we need to be reminded that it is a fundamental feature of our prayer *that God is present even if we are unaware.* Why else pray, if God is not there. We must remind ourselves of this when we pray: whom we are approaching; who is listening; before whom we stand. When we pray *Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven...* we can be assured that the earth to which *He is coming* is the poor earth of our own mortal bodies in the first instance. The coming of the kingdom starts here and now within ourselves.

*Fr. Chrysostom*

Metropolitan John has recently approved the choice of **St. Theodore of Tarsus** as the patron saint of our Antiochian Deanery in Britain. This was announced at the recent clergy meeting in London. St. Theodore (c.602-690) was an Asiatic Greek monk, originally from the Antiochian Patriarchate who was chosen to be Abp. of Canterbury in 668, sent by Pope Vitalian. He reorganised the renewed the Church here and is a very worthy patron. Incidentally, the patron saint of the Archdiocese of Western and Central Europe is St. John Chrysostom. Together with our beloved St. Dunstan, we now have three great saints praying for us in heaven!

If anyone has a prosthora seal and would like to bake the bread for the liturgy at any time, do let Fr. Chrysostom know. They can be baked and frozen for future use.

## SERVICES

### DECEMBER

7<sup>TH</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Divine Liturgy 10.45am

14<sup>TH</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Sunday of the Forefathers Divine Liturgy 10.45am

21<sup>ST</sup> 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - Sunday before Nativity Divine Liturgy 10.45am

24<sup>TH</sup> **Eve of Nativity  
Divine Liturgy for the  
feast 9.00pm (in the  
church)**

28<sup>TH</sup> No service  
(Fr. Chrysostom on holiday)

### JANUARY

4<sup>TH</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Divine Liturgy 10.45am

6<sup>TH</sup> Feast of Theophany

11<sup>TH</sup> 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (after Theophany) Divine Liturgy and Great Blessing of the Waters 10.45am

18<sup>TH</sup> 31<sup>ST</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Divine Liturgy 10.45am

25<sup>TH</sup> 32<sup>ND</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Divine Liturgy 10.45am

