

THE NARTHEX

The believers were first called Christians at Antioch

ACTS. 9:26

JUNE-JULY 2011

The Orthodox Church of St. Dunstan Poole-Bournemouth
The Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of The United Kingdom and Ireland
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THE ASCENSION

Whenever we meet a new person we usually begin a conversation asking three basic questions: what is your name? What do you do? And, perhaps, where are you from? The latter was a question asked about Christ by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. He, of course, was only interested in the question of whose legal jurisdiction Jesus of Nazareth came under and he discovered that Christ belonged to King Herod's domain. The incident is recorded in Luke.23:6 as a matter of legal jurisdiction but in John 19:9 with a certain sense of irony, for the reader, with the eye of faith, knows that Christ is from heaven. The writers of Orthodox liturgical hymnody love to play on such ironies where the Judge of the whole world is judged by an earthly tribunal, in order that he who suspended the earth on the waters, may be suspended on a cross.

The feast of the Ascension is ostensibly about the return of Christ to the heavens from where he came from. His state of being, divine from eternity, had never changed, so in one sense, he never left heaven, even in his incarnation. The difference is that now he is revealed as the cosmic Christ, filling all things and yet also in heaven, not only in his divine nature but also in the human nature - our nature- which he took from the Theotokos. The point of all this being that Christ has restored our humanity to its proper place, that is, to a state intended by the Creator in the creation: that of communion with God. We were made, in Blessed Augustine's phrase, for God himself and we are restless till we find our rest in Him. This is now

possible for us, for Christ, the divine image of the Father Himself, ever lives to make intercession for us, as St. Paul says in the Letter to the Hebrews. In other words, that fallen Humanity that Christ assumed from Mary and then healed through his Cross, is returned to the heart of heaven on our behalf. This is the idea of the perfect offering, the sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. So we see here that our salvation is a whole mysterious dispensation from the Annunciation to the Ascension, so that for, those who are baptised and have put on Christ, there is now access to the Father.

Access to the Divine is the very heart of the human spiritual quest. All religions are in some way attempts at mapping that epic journey but we firmly and confidently maintain and teach and insist (without arrogance or any sense of superiority, for it did not come from us) that Christ is the only way, the truth and the life.

The gospel for the Sunday following the feast is part of St. John's gospel, often called Christ's high priestly prayer. In it he specifically says that he is not praying for the world - that is, the fallen world. Rather, he is praying for those who believe in him. In other words, it is a prayer of communion and those who are in communion with God. Those who through faith and repentance have had their humanity perfect at least in potential. Those who reject Christ, who do not know his love, are clearly outside the

embrace of his salvation. Not because he has rejected them but that they have elected to remain outside. Seen in this way, we can understand how every time we fall into sin, we are denying, as it were, our true humanity, made in the image of Christ - yet our baptism still gives us access to forgiveness and restoration through constant repentance. Here, each one of us can conceive of his or her life as an ascetic struggle, striving step by step to recover the likeness of God. Such a struggle, would however, be quite fruitless, were it not for the grace of Christ that gives us true access to God. Ascetic practice is no doubt evident in many forms in the great religions of the world, but none of them have this access and therefore cannot save, for they are not *in Christ*.

This unique communion and access to God is manifested in The Divine Liturgy and in the practices that surround it. At the Proskomedia, the rites of preparation, setting out the bread and the wine on the holy vessels, the priest will commemorate the names of the faithful for whom he has been asked to pray. Members of the congregation hand in little slips of paper recording the names of the living and the dead whom they wished to be remembered. For each person a small piece of the prosphora (offering bread) is placed on the diskos. The point being, of course, that only the Orthodox faithful, whether living or departed, can be mentioned here. Just as Christ who in his high priestly prayer, prayed only for those who of his own people, so in the proskomedia, the priest the ordained icon of Christ's own ministry, can pray only for the Orthodox faithful. This has its own rationale and makes clear sense. At other services we may well pray for the world and for anyone in particular. And, of course, in our own prayers at home we must pray for all who come to

our attention. But that is intercession for the world and this is part of our vocation as a 'nation of priests', the Church which is itself, the sacrament and sign of the mystery of the kingdom of God in the world. But the people remembered at the proskomedia, the faithful, are commemorated in exactly the same way that Christ prayed at the Mystical Supper in the upper room, not so much a prayer of intercession but of *communion*. It is precisely because the faithful, whether living or dead, are *in Christ* that they are remembered before God and only them. For the self-same reason we cannot, faithful to the teaching and practice of the Orthodox Church from the beginning, give the Holy Gifts to those who are not incorporated with us. Such an act would be at best a gross falsehood, purporting to declare a communion where none in essence existed. Amongst the Protestant confessions there is the practice of so called 'open communion' and adherents of the 20th century (so called) Ecumenical Movement have often urged all Christians to do the same. But the Orthodox Church (like the Roman) has always maintained the Communion can never be a *means* to an end (i.e. Church unity) but only the final goal. Besides, the unity of the Church already exists: it was there in the upper room and it is here still in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Eastern Orthodox Church of Jesus Christ and we know no other. *Where are you from?*, Pilate asked Our Lord. If I made the same inquiry of the members of our congregation I should get so many varied answers; we have a truly international community, reflecting the names of all those cited during the reading from the Acts of Apostles read at Pentecost (Acts 2:8-11) Indeed, there are no national churches in Orthodoxy (part of a heresy called Phyletism condemned in 1872) only local ones. The point being that though we,

have many origins we all, like Christ, have only one home: heaven itself (Heb.12:22-23) where he stands, bearing still the nature of our humanity with his divinity before the Father. Let our hearts lie where our treasures is. (Matt.6:21)

Fr. Chrysostom



FOR THOSE CONSIDERING BECOMING ORTHODOX

What do we say when people come looking for God in Orthodoxy? Do we hurry them into our "all singing, all dancing" catechumenates with their shiny Powerpoints and inspirational testimonies from those who swam the Bosphorus / Orontes / Moskva before them, (delete as appropriate). Or, better, do we sit them down, or rather stand them up and invite them to "come and see." There are huge transitions to negotiate in becoming Orthodox but the first and most important is to learn how to encounter the Living God in this Church and having met Him, to repent. I was wondering just now why so some people I have chrismated over the last 12 years haven't stayed the course. Most have but many haven't. I think that there is a tendency buried deep in the fascination with Orthodoxy to discover spiritually "*the lost treasure of the Incas*." This glittering prize has been dreamt of and lives spoilt in its pursuit over many generations. "The pearl of great price" ... "The best kept secret in (X)" ... "Orthodoxy - the Real Thing!" ... you know what I mean. Expectations are raised that becoming Orthodox will deliver on this great treasure. I will find my goal, my marriage will get sorted out, I will discover true peace; all this and more. Well, maybe. Actually, becoming Orthodox is much more pedestrian than being on a treasure hunt and disillusionment lies not far behind any pedestal worship. Orthodoxy is simply being a Christian and in the most personally profound and challenging way. If you are not prepared then to change on becoming Orthodox and every day for the rest of your life then you will not find what you are looking for with us. If also you are looking for a sinless Church without any blemish then look not toward us but rather to yourself and learn first from your own heart. Take time then to assess what you really want when you approach the

Orthodox Church. There will always be a welcome for you but please, don't fool yourself. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God, (Hebrews 10:31) and that's what happens when you knock on that door. You don't want to be anywhere else though believe me. The smell of sulphur is too strong. Take your medicine. Glory shines from the cross.

Archpriest Gregory, Dean of the Antiochian Deanery of the United Kingdom and Ireland

SERVICES

JUNE

Wed 1st Leavetaking of Pascha
Eve of Ascension Vespertal Divine Liturgy 7.00pm (Communion fast from midday)

Thus 2nd **The Ascension of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ**

Sun 5th Sunday afterfeast of the Ascension Orthros 9.00am

Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 12th **Holy Pentecost**

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 19th 1st after Pentecost

All Saints Orthros 9.00am

Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 26th 2nd after Pentecost All

Saints of Britain Romanian

Liturgy 11.00am (subject to

change - listen for announcements)

JULY

Sun 3rd 3rd after Pentecost

All Saints of Antioch Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 10th 4th after Pentecost

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 17th 5th after Pentecost

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 24th 6th after Pentecost

Orthros 9.00am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 31st 4th after Pentecost

Romanian Liturgy 11.00am (subject to change - listen for announcements)