

# THE NARTHEX

'And the disciples were first called  
Christians in Antioch' (Acts 11:26)  
MAY – JUNE 2022

The Orthodox Church of St Dunstan of Canterbury, Parkstone, Poole, Dorset BH14 9JG

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## Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of Mankind. It is concerned with human behaviour, ethnology, social interaction, culture, rituals, language, and many other aspects of human life, whether past or present. In the popular mind it is often associated with academics living among primitive tribes and analysing their ways of life. As a serious study it is, of course, classed as a social science. As with any human pursuit of learning it is found upon observation, analysis and the understanding of its implications. As such, the anthropologist has to stand aside, as it were, and observe human beings yet, at the same time, try to avoid being influenced by his own social prejudices and attitudes.

As with any science, Anthropology may have useful things to impart, generally. But it cannot go beyond its objective, scientific boundaries, just as scientific medicine may well save our physical bodies from biological death but only for a time. Anthropology may indeed inform us about our own social interaction; indeed, governments have certainly used social anthropologists to help inform political policy. But there it must stop: Anthropology cannot save us. It might comment on the human belief in spirituality but it cannot pronounced authoritatively on the reality of spiritual beliefs. An anthropologist might describe how one tribe of hunter-gatherers believes that trees are haunted by the spirits of their ancestors, and of how their behaviour is affected accordingly: he cannot, however, declare whether such ghosts actually exist, indeed, he is, inwardly, more likely to dismiss the question altogether. This is perfectly correct within the bounds of any such scientific study.

Bearing this in mind, we might wonder what any anthropologist would make of an Orthodox Christian community that was chosen for study. It would certainly be interesting but, ultimately, it would be largely of no consequence, for our understanding of ourselves is, in the final analysis, not the subject of science but of our Theology. And Theology is the distillation not so much of observation but of what has been received by revelation

from God. Scientific Anthropology can know nothing of revelation itself; it is beyond observation, though it might comment on the importance of the concept for the community.

Orthodox Theology, of course, has its own, unique anthropology, that is, a theological (rather than scientific) understanding of Mankind. It is an understanding that applies to the whole of humanity, *whether male or female, Greek or barbarian, slave or free.* Moreover, it is a perception of Man that is concerned with the spiritual realities beyond the purview of any science, and ultimately focused on eternal salvation. In short, Orthodox Christian Anthropology seeks to explore the significance of what it means to have been created in the image and likeness of God.

We receive our understanding of Man, in the first place, through the Old Testament that records the relationship between God Almighty and the ancient Hebrews personified, firstly, in Abraham, the Father of faith.

The first followers of 'The Way,' as it is called in the Acts of the Apostles, were, of course Jews, and it was to Jewish Synagogue congregations that the Apostles originally preached the gospel after the resurrection and Ascension of Christ. When Christianity began to spread out into the gentile world the Church was receiving converts who had none of the religious and cultural background of Judaism. Therefore, it was necessary that catechumens who would, doubtless, have been steeped in the pagan mythologies and values of the ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations, would firstly have to be taught the principal stories of the Old Testament, in order that they might have a fuller understanding of the New Covenant in Christ.

During the first centuries of Christianity people who were to be baptised might spend up to three years in preparation, hearing the most important parts of the Bible read to them, and learning how the Old Testament prefigured through 'types' what was fulfilled in the New.

To a large extent this time of learning was important as it established in the mind a thoroughly Christian

Anthropology, that is, the Church's own understanding of Man and his place, both before God and in this world. This was and, indeed, is important because it established the reason as to why we need salvation at all. Furthermore, it prepared the ground for a proper appreciation of what exactly it is that Christ (through the Paschal mystery of His death and resurrection) has done for us.

We can see the echoes of this catechetical system in the two earliest great festivals of the Orthodox Church, Pascha and Theophany. Both feasts have vigils where the Vespers Divine Liturgies of Holy Saturday and 5<sup>th</sup> January have a series of Old Testament readings: precisely the kinds of biblical text that would have been taught to those catechumens in the early Church.

We find, for example, such stories as the Creation, the offering of Isaac, the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. Throughout Great Lent, as well, we have the reading of the book of Genesis, including the story of the Fall of Adam (commemorated on Cheesefare Sunday) and the other familiar stories of the Patriarchs. Lent, of course, was originally the period when the Catechumens who were ready, were preparing for their baptism by prayer and fasting and, no doubt, hearing these texts read in church.

The essential truth imparted through all this was a perspective on Man himself as the regent of God in Creation. Man, once in a primal state of bliss, was a spiritual being enjoying communion with God in paradise, but he had fallen into this carnal world through Sin, taking all of Creation down with him, so that, *'Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.'* [Gen.3:17]

The receiving, acceptance and appreciation of this view of what it is to be human is of primary importance to anyone who wishes to make sense of the gospel message. It requires of catechumens a certain repentance in the fullest sense of the word; that is, a change of mind regarding one's place in the world. The salutary point,

however, is to ask, how many contemporary Orthodox Christians can appreciate this? It is one thing when we are dealing with people who are seeking to enter the Orthodox Church and who must go under instruction in the Faith; it is quite another when it comes to people who are born into Orthodox families and are brought up in the culture of Orthodox Christianity. We might like to imagine that such people would naturally receive and absorb Orthodox Anthropology as part of as part of the world around them. The question, however, is how much of this is something understood within the mind, something that affects how they live their Christian lives? As so often, much religion can be a thin veneer covering an underlying paganism or secularism, especially for those who are merely culturally religious, without regular practice or real engagement.

The problem arises because we presume that from childhood we absorb the ethos around us. Liturgical prayers and texts heard again and again have a remarkable, even powerful effect in forming the religious mind. However, without proper teaching and instruction it is also possible to misconstrue and misunderstand the concepts and paradigms that underly Orthodox religious thought and language.

At St Dunstan's we have the *Followers* course that endeavours to teach an understanding of the Faith to the younger members of our congregation. But leaving childhood, each Orthodox soul has a duty to be informed about their faith and to study it according to their own academic ability. We are, after all, instructed in the Scriptures to worship God with all our mind, as well as with all our soul and all our strength. It is indeed those with a trusting, childlike faith that that enter the kingdom of heaven, but that does not mean that we must remain with a *childish* understanding, having learned nothing of the real Orthodox perspective on our human condition: wise as serpents yet harmless as doves. (cf. Matt.10:16)

All this, of course, has to be supported within the family home, especially when it comes to the raising of children in the Orthodox Faith. Alongside the religious observance, prayer life and moral example of parents, there is in parenthood the privilege of teaching children, reading to them, especially the great stories of the Old Testament, perhaps, as appropriate, from a children's version of the Bible. This is even more important in these days when the values, culture and obsessions imparted by the country's educational system are, frankly, so often morally perverse.

Orthodox teaching presents Man as essentially the creation of God, created for relationship and communion eternally with the Holy Trinity. We were created, male and female, in the image and likeness

of God. Originally, Man lived the angelic life in Paradise, expressed in the spiritual body, but falling through self-will, Man sinned, separating and alienating himself from God and casting him into the world that we know, clothed in the carnal body and subject to death.

This understanding is significant as it points us towards what we mean by salvation. Having just celebrated once again the glorious resurrection of Christ, we recall that, through our own baptism into His death, we are offered our own participation in his resurrection; that, as St Paul teaches, our mortality and carnal nature are to be clothed in immortality, regaining, once again, the spiritual body of the resurrection. (see: 1Cor.15:53-55)

Orthodox Anthropology not only presents the idea of our return to paradise (the recovery of what we lost in the Fall) but points us beyond, to the mystery of the kingdom of heaven itself.

This is a vision, a notion about Mankind that, if rooted in our souls, serves to inspire our life in Christ. Without it, without a true understanding of what we are, it is no wonder that people fall away from the Faith, see no significance in the liturgical services of the Church, or fail to experience any sense of belonging to the body of Christ.

Yet this vision of Man and his destiny is what underlies the teaching on salvation found in the writings of the Church Fathers. We end with the words of St Gregory of Nyssa outlining how he saw the eternal life that awaits the faithful:

*'After the resurrection, when our bodies will be reunited to our souls, they will be incorruptible; and the carnal passions which disturb us now will not be present in those bodies; we shall enjoy a peaceful equilibrium in which the prudence of the flesh will not make war upon the soul; and there will no longer be that internal warfare wherein sinful passions fight against the law of the mind, conquering the soul and taking it captive by sin. Our nature then will be purified of all these tendencies, and one spirit will be in both, I mean in the flesh and in the spirit, and every corporeal affection will be banished from our nature.'*

*Fr Chrysostom*



Readers on Facebook may be interested in exploring **The Fellowship of St Benedict and St John Chrysostom**.

It is a group with the aim of reacquainting any Christian with the enduring legacy of Orthodox Catholic Christianity of the pre-Conquest Church of the British Isles and Ireland. It is also the explicit aim of this group to encourage believers by providing practical routes for those drawn to this legacy to commit to its recovery in their own spiritual journeys to the Undivided Church, still present in these Isles today.

## SERVICES

*Vespers is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm (Please enter by the side door)*  
*Fr Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards or by appointment. Fr Filip is available for Confession by appointment*  
**Orthros** is served before the Divine Liturgy on Sundays at 8.45am

### May

Sun 1st 2<sup>nd</sup> of Pascha  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 8th 3<sup>rd</sup> of Pascha  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 15th 4th of Pascha  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 22<sup>nd</sup> 5th of Pascha  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 29th 6th of Pascha  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

### June

Wed 1<sup>st</sup> St Wite, Patroness of Dorset

Thurs 2<sup>nd</sup> The Ascension of Our Lord

Sun 5th 7th of Pascha  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 12th Holy Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 19th 1st after Pentecost  
 All Saints Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Mon 20<sup>th</sup> BEGINNING OF THE APOSTLES FAST

Sun 26th 2nd after Pentecost  
 All Saints of Britain Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 30th 12th after Pentecost  
 Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Wed 29<sup>th</sup> Holy Apostles St Peter & St Paul

