

THE NARTHEX

July-August 2020

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

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

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Idol Worship

Our Lord, in His life among men, did not come for the Final Judgement; that would await His Second Coming. At one point He even refused to act, as Rabbis often did, as an arbiter in a dispute over an inheritance [Lk.12:13-14]. He did, however, pass judgement on hypocrisy, especially among the religious sect of the Pharisees, such as when they made an open display of their piety, or sought public recognition for their acts of charity [Matt.6:1-7].

The same hypocrisy is still recognisable in modern societies, of course, only now it appears under the guise of virtue signalling and moral grandstanding (as the current vernacular would have it) among those in the public eye. The recent pandemic has offered a field day for those anxious to display their public spirit and have it applauded by all in sundry. This is nowhere more evident than over the hero-worship of the NHS. In as much as the German Lutheran Theologian, Paul Tillich, once defined religion as *ultimate concern*, it is clear that the newly established religion of this country is an over-managed, poorly adapted and centralised institution that has a licence to act as a black hole for the tax payer's money. In our more whimsical moments, we might wonder whether Westminster Abbey might soon become a shrine to the ancient Greek goddess, Hygeia, and St Paul's Cathedral, the centre for the cult of Asclepius. I am sure that the Prime Minister, a keen Classicist, would approve such idol worship.

Even more peculiar, coming as it did as we approached the feast of Pentecost, was the Babel-like *confusion of tongues* regarding the rainbow symbol: in recent history purloined by those of perverse sexual proclivities, now being taken up by those who thought it necessary to stand on their doorsteps and applaud the NHS in order to demonstrate their public virtues.

The difference, of course, between the ancient Pharisees and the post-moderns of our day is that, whereas the Pharisees hoped to curry favour with both God and men at the same time, the current hypocrisy has no place for God at all. As a result, morality is reduced merely to an appearance; what can be perceived by one's contemporaries.

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There is now a new moral world out there (it began to creep into Britain around the nineteen-eighties, by the way) which has dispensed with the need for divine authority for its chosen mores. And, of course, the new authority has come left of field in the guise of the Neo-Marxist interpretation of social relationships.

Orthodox Christianity is not, of course, a theory, neither is there a specific subject of Orthodox Ethics as a branch of Moral Philosophy. There are no sets of criteria, rules, protocols, or attitudes established in Orthodoxy in order to mark out a person as worthy of esteem by others. The herd instinct, a common feature or post-modern morality that has people rushing to demonstrate their publicly acceptable virtue, has no place in our faith. What we would call a good life, does not seek the approbation of men; the only relevant judgement is that of God Himself. It is precisely this divine judgement that is missing from current ethical theories. Whereas, the only way we judge our actions, words, and thoughts, is to ask whether what we do is done *in Christ*; does this unite me in Christ, or disunite me? Simply put, it is the awareness of Sin against God; a concept entirely alien to the popular social mores and moral protests busily trying to dismantle the traditional Christian and patriotic structures of our way of life in Britain.

As I have suggested before, in all this we, as Orthodox Christians, may ask ourselves whether we are witnessing the sad and demented end of a once great culture that has lost its way and its faith in its very own foundations. Again, the Prime Minister, as a Classicist, would appreciate the parallels with the Grandeur that *was* Rome. It is hard to think of a great civilisation that, in some way, did not acknowledge the importance of divine approval in its endeavours. Need I draw attention to the fate of Nazism and Communism, once so confident in their own atheism?

At one point the ultimate liberal, almost anarchic, moral creed had but one precept: you are free to do as you wish, as long as you do not interfere with the freedom of anyone else. But the cult of

individual freedom (another false idol) buckles under the fear of death. It has been alarming to observe how willing people have been to let their freedom of movement and association be taken away by government diktat during the current panic. But when one believes that all there is, is *this* life, and this life alone, sheer dread will usually trump liberty for most people, most of the time.

An interesting aspect of the recent restrictions is how willingly the majority have accepted them. Indeed, surveys indicated that large majorities were very anxious to maintain them. Clearly alarmed by unease among the people, whipped up by the Media, politicians were in turn, eager to be seen acting on the science, albeit a selective idea of what constituted *Science*. Never was the old adage truer, that a people gets the government it deserves.

Meanwhile, baying mobs of 'Woke' activists are once again demanding the toppling of public monuments and the whitewashing (can one still use that term?) of our history. What will the result be, when the entire public space is manicured to reflect the current mores alone? The same thinking has been allowed to influence great public institutions, such as the National Trust which appears to have forgotten (or ignored) its primary function. Even business organizations and industries are scouring their respective histories, to discover, confess and expunge any links they might originally have had with the Slave Trade.

It reminds me of the way people in the 1930's would search their ancestry, to be certain that they had no trace of Jewish blood. The problem with this contemporary and popular approach to moral thought is that it lacks any real knowledge of History. In the sad story of fallen humanity enslavement has been an ever-present reality for many. From tribal societies to the present day, people have 'owned' and kept others in thralldom, and this is not (no pun intended) a black and white issue.

In Iron Age Britain, before the Roman conquest, local kings were quite happy to exchange one captive for an amphora of wine from a Roman Slave trader, who then made a tidy profit in the slave markets of the empire. The Normans ended the Anglo-Saxon system of legal slavery but substituted serfdom instead. Many native people living in coastal regions of this country were kidnapped by Barbary Pirates to be sold as slaves. And from the start of British colonies abroad, the penal system transported Britons, were sent as forced labour to the colonies. Oliver Cromwell did it; the Hanoverian kings did it, especially after the Jacobite risings, and it continued into the nineteenth century. In other words, slavery was not just something done by white people to black people during a particular part of our own history. From 1807 Britain had a proud record for its part in bringing the abominable trade to an end.

The fact is, to enter into the moral universe of past generations is difficult for us. Morality is fluid and subject to all kinds of social and political pressures, which is why Orthodox Christianity is not a moral theory; it is a relationship with the Living God. The ancient world in which Our Lord lived out His ministry was one where slavery, wars of conquest, conspicuous wealth possessed only by a few, poverty and burdensome taxation were ever-present. St Paul, believing the End was soon, saw no need for people to seek to change their status when becoming Christian, and that in Christ, anyway, the slave was free and the owner, a slave of Christ. Yet it was more Christianity, rather than the Enlightenment idea of the Rights of Man, that moved the abolition of slavery in this country.

Writing this in early June it is hard to estimate what will happen by the time of publication, but it is clear that we have had to be very patient as a congregation, as well as adaptable in the way we have ministered, one to another, in our life in Christ. As regards the opening of churches, we, the Orthodox, were, to all extents and purposes, unrepresented and unheard in the great councils of state: a strange state of affairs given the number of nominally Orthodox Christians now present in this country. Meanwhile, we witnessed the peculiar situation of large political demonstrations happening of late, gathering together great crowds of people, clearly breaching the *lock-up* (as I prefer to call it) regulations, whilst the forces of law and order (some of them being themselves keen virtue signallers before the mob) took no action (other than when attacked). Yet, at one time they were keen to keep people off beaches and out of public parks. Going to churches, though, was definitely forbidden. Would it not have been interesting, as one blogger recently remarked, if the religious leaders

whom the government had consulted, had stood up and said, enough of this! We are opening our churches. You know where we are. If we have broken any laws, come and arrest us. However, do we yet see people queuing to enter places of worship in the same way that they line up to enter Tesco? So, why are churches not fully open for those who wish to take responsibility for themselves? Because, our modern moralizers will say, we have to protect others as well and protect the NHS. But disease is always with us: why was this not enforced before? There was, though, an interesting debate as to whether the need for the *lock-up* trumped the financial and commercial needs of the country as a whole. In terms of general health, wealth, and deaths, I suspect far worse may follow from the economic damage we have inflicted upon ourselves. No doubt the modern mind will all too readily point out that churches must remain closed; after all, they are not essential, are they? Well, to my mind, they are right: they are not essential, *they are far more important than that!* The issue, as I feared right from the beginning of this very peculiar time, is whether those who have grown used to being spiritually fed with a form of Docetic Christianity in the virtual world will be bothered to get out of bed on a Sunday morning in future? Will they find that they have no need for churchgoing, as it is no longer *essential*? It is noteworthy that the Church of England diocese of Chelmsford is already organizing to reduce the number of its clergy – all part of the overall management of decline in the national church. Leadership among the heterodox denominations has been pusillanimous, to say the least. None, interestingly, have called the nation to repentance in the face of this contagion, which is the usual and Orthodox approach. Oh well! Looking on the bright side, there may be more buildings available for our use in future (we are certainly not fixated on managing decline), if only we had the priests to start new missions. As I have pleaded before in these columns, we need more, not fewer priests!

In the end I have but one question about what has happened in respect of the pandemic, not just here but throughout the world. Why were none of these actions, the so-called *new normal*, not implemented before? After all, viruses have been around an awfully long time; contagions have been with us an awfully long time. It must have been a miracle that I survived seventeen years of teaching in a classroom in close proximity to potentially disease-bearing young humans. Serious historians will also need a little patience as well, but there will be a wealth of research and publishing to be undertaken in answer to my question, when all this nonsense is finally ended. So, unless we are soon ordered never to venture out, unless sealed hermetically into air-filtering plastic pods, I hope to see you very soon.

Fr Chrysostom

SERVICES

Vespers is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm and on Wednesdays at 6.00pm.

(Please enter by the side door)

Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards or by appointment.

Orthros is served before the Divine Liturgy on Sundays at 8.45am

July

Sun 5th 4th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 12th 5th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 19th 6th after Pentecost
Commemoration of the 4th
Ecumenical Council
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 26th 7th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

August

Sat 1st Beginning of the Dormition
Fast

Sun 2nd 8th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Thurs 6th Feast of the
Transfiguration of Our Lord
Divine Liturgy 11.00am



Sun 9th 4th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Fri 14th Eve of the Dormition
Vesperal Divine Liturgy 6.30pm



Sun 16th 10th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 23rd 11th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 30th 12th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am