

THE NARTHEX

'And the disciples were first called
Christians in Antioch' (Acts 11:26)
JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2022

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

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Eschatology

At the risk of sounding perverse at the start of a new year, I wish to consider the end, what the New Testament presents as the last things.

We may lay aside any consideration of the more bizarre manifestations to be found in the religious imagination, often prominent in those heretical sects that prognosticate the end of the world. We may dispense with Millenarianism, Raptures and apocalyptic (usually a misused adjective) nightmares and the other disordered longings, rooted in a misguided understanding of certain biblical passages.

We cannot doubt that there is purpose in the mind of God for His creation: there is a beginning and a fulfilment; there is a Last Judgement, as we shall commemorate on 27th February. As to the actual form of that end and that judgement, I should hesitate to predict, for it is given to us only in parables and the language of symbols.

What we can say from the revelation imparted to the Church is that the Last Things will come, the final elements of the current state of this creation. The western Christian tradition named these as death, judgement, heaven, and hell. They are the themes for the season of Advent in the old Western Rite, but I wonder how much they still figure in teachings of the heterodox churches these days.

Interestingly, the same theme occurs in our rite, concentrated in Matins on the first three days of Great and Holy Week, with the image of the nocturnal arrival of Christ, the Bridegroom. The words of the Troparion set the scene:

'Behold the Bridegroom comes at midnight and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching, and again unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself crying: Holy, Holy, Holy, are You, O our God! Through the Theotokos have mercy on us!'

This expectancy, waiting on

Christ and His Second Coming was a marked feature of the life and liturgy of the early Christians. Liturgical gatherings of the Church would begin on Saturday evening, the start of the first day of the week, [the biblical and liturgical day begins at sundown on the previous evening, cf. Gen.1:5b] and continued into the early hours of Sunday. St Paul is shown present at one such a gathering at Troas in the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 20:7ff]. This practice remains in the idea of the vigil services still observed among us. But what was significant for the early Christians was that, when their watching through the night ended with Our Lord still to return, they were 'compensated' by the reception of His body and blood in communion. It is to be noted that with the demise of this expectancy and longing for Christ's return, so did the regular reception of the Holy Gifts by the laity. There were, no doubt, other causes for this spiritual malaise and laxity, such as the obvious expectation that communicants should be living a holy life, but if you are not looking for The End at any moment, why would you worry about the Judgement until, of course, some disaster happens. As St Paul writes,

'The day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them.'
[1 Thess.5:2-3]

Studying the letters to the Thessalonians is instructive in this respect. Although it would be difficult to reconstruct exactly what was imparted, it is clear from these epistles that the apostles and those who followed them had a definite body of teaching on The End that they delivered to those who accepted the gospel and were baptised. Alarm bells about the appearing of the Antichrist (only mentioned in the first two epistles of St John) have often been sounded in history. St Paul reminds his reader at Thessalonika that, first, must come the great Falling Away (apostasy) and the appearance of the Man of Sin usurping the place of God. But what is clear from Christ's own words in the gospel, is that no one knows when this will be.

'But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. for you do not know when the time is.' [Mk.13:32-33]

The great paradox of the Church (by which I mean the one and only, holy, catholic, and apostolic Eastern Orthodox Church of Jesus Christ) is that she lives her life among the Last Things; she belongs to the end. The Greek term, Telos (Τελος/end) refers not so much to a finality in time, but rather, to an achieved goal, *the end* and purpose towards which we strive.

This means that the Church on earth cannot be seen as just another social institution engaged in a power game, or a convenient assistant to the state for social control. And not even as a useful agency for good, busying itself to improve the world. This is because the Church belongs to the world to come, Christ's kingdom that is not of this world (cf. Jn18:36).

The message given by the New Testament writers engages with the world in order to announce the coming judgement, to contradict, to evaluate, to redeem and transfigure the whole life of Man. *'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.'* [2 Cor.6:2]; *'Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.'* [Rom.13:11]; *'Surely I am coming quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!'* [Apoc.22:20]; *'You yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return...'* Lk.12:36]

Sadly, many are all too happy to accept the separation of the forms of religion from the radical content of their meaning. This separation blocks the progress of the Church's mission in the world. Where the spiritual content and implications evaporate, all that is left are social convention and public ritual, emptied of their eschatological power and purpose. Yet, although this state of affairs might call for judgement and condemnation, this is bound to be the way matters lie in this world and we are warned to be cautious, as in the parable of the Wheat and the Tares: *'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them.'* (Matt.13:24-30)

The first Christians maintained a powerful sense that the kingdom of God was already to be experienced in this life, whilst at the same time knowing that they were in but not of this world.

We are not concerned with changing this world into that which is to come by our own efforts, for then we would merely produce a pale imitation in place of the real thing, *which is not yet*. Plenty have tried and indeed, are still endeavouring, to build a better world. ('build back better,' or 'the Great Reset,' I believe, is the current usage.) We are present here in this world, rather, as the sign, the sacrament, the very mystery of that which is to come.

If our baptisms are merely to be valued as social rituals, rites of passage, observable to anthropologists, and not the rejection of the world, the flesh, and the devil, then the Church might as well be reduced to an outreach of the Civil Service, registering births, deaths, and marriages. This must not be misconstrued: it is perfectly correct for the Church to cooperate with the State for the public good. (Our parish after all is licenced for state-registered marriages.) But this in essence must remain of far lesser significance than our understanding of the purpose of the gospel.

Orthodox Christian marriage is indicative here. The earliest evidence outside the New Testament for the Church's understanding of marriage is found in the letter of St Ignatios of Antioch (early 2nd Century)



St Ignatios says that Christians should seek the bishop's blessing for any marriage. A distinctively Christian rite for a wedding service was yet to develop. St Paul had famously wished that all were as he was, that is, celibate. For expecting The End to come soon, he wished to spare believers the obligations and complications that were bound to come in married life, distracting the soul from prayer. But with the realities of life in this world marriages, obviously, took place, and Paul advised temporary celibacy for couples at certain times, to make undisturbed room for their spiritual lives.

What we might well have lost hold of here, all these centuries later, is the eschatological nature of Christian marriage. By that, I mean, marriage as one of the mysteries (sacraments), although manifested in this life, in truth, points to the age to come. It is an icon of the relationship between Christ and His bride the Church (cf. Eph.5:31-32). We do

not read the Book of the Apocalypse liturgically in church. It was late being admitted into the canon of scripture and was prone to the controversial interpretations. It does, though, contain a beautiful vision of The End (Τελος) which is symbolised in Christian marriage, and in which married life finds its final fulfilment:

'Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'' And he said to me, 'These are the true sayings of God.' [Apoc.19:7-9]

On the other side, Christianity also developed the celibate monastic life, what St Basil the Great called, *'Men living on earth as angels.'* If Christian married life points us toward the coming of the kingdom of heaven and its consummation, the monastic life, by contrast, reveals the life of the kingdom present in this world now.

There were Emperors of Constantinople who, towards the end of their careers, laid aside their crowns, as well as their marriages, for the monastic tonsure: thus ending their reign in this world. That they thought this expedient, reveals that the two kingdoms, this world and that which is to come, are not the same, nor ever can be. The empire might have protected Orthodox Christianity and esteemed the kingdom of God as the aim of this life, but the Byzantine Empire was never the political manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth. The new Rome's fall in 1453, no matter how much lamented in the Hellenic world still, in a salutary lesson, proved this to be the case. Unlike the once Great City, nothing can prevail against the Church herself (Matt.16:18).

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.*
—T.S. Eliot, from "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*

If we resolve to do nothing else at the start of this year, we could do much worse than to look again at the inner meaning of our religious life, its forms, rituals, and disciplines. Exploring in this way we might well arrive where we began in Christ.

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. Fr Filip is available for Confession by appointment.

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

January

Sun 2nd Sunday before Theophany
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Wed 5th Eve of Theophany
Vesperal Divine Liturgy of St Basil &
Great Blessing of Waters 6.00pm



Sun 9th Sunday after Theophany
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 16th 30th After Pentecost
Baptism & Divine Liturgy 10.00am
[NB the time. No Orthros at 9.45]

Sun 23rd 31st after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 30th 32nd after Pentecost
Synaxis of the Three Hierarchs
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

February

Wed 2nd Feast of the Meeting
(Candlemas) Service time to be
announced

Sun 6th 33rd After Pentecost
The Canaanite Woman
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 13th Sunday of the Publican and
Pharisee Beginning of Triodion
Divine Liturgy 10.30am



Fast-Free Week

Sun 20th Sunday of the Prodigal Son
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 27th Sunday of the Last
Judgement (Meatfare Sunday)
Divine Liturgy 10.30am
Cheesefare Week