

# THE NARTHEX

May-June 2018

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

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## Babel

There are an awful lot of opinions being expressed. It was, no doubt, ever thus. The difference today, thanks to the ever-available public media, is that anyone can now go public and tell the world what he or she thinks. For a variety of reasons the general public seems to have lost confidence in (or at least, become dismissive of) the considered views of experts, scientists, commentators and pundits of all kinds. In the past, largely restricted to TV, radio, books and the Press, differing ideas and opinions from learned authorities would be expressed and in due course they would be dissected and criticised, by other, opposing, learned authorities. The general public, apart from those inclined to write indignant letters to the BBC or the newspapers, were not really consulted for their reactions, except through such means as the occasional opinion poll or general election. The Internet has changed all that.

Yes, technology really does change things. At the Reformation in Western Europe it was largely the printing press that enabled every man to become his *own pope*. Having kept the liturgy and the biblical text in Latin, the scholastic thinkers of the Roman Church knew exactly what might happen if the Bible were unleashed. It has been the wisdom of the Orthodox Church always to have the liturgy and biblical texts read in the language of the local people or, at least, in some classical form of that language. Protestantism, however, given its individualism and independence, has given rise to more than 30,000 different denominations, each with its own opinion about salvation.

With free access now to the Internet anyone, using a variety of social media, can express their thinking on public platforms and claim legitimacy for their own ideas and opinions. On all matters social, moral, political, philosophical and even scientific, everyone might now be heard. In other words, a form of 'political Protestantism' currently prevails, so that, alongside TV, radio, books and the Press, Facebook and Twitter provide another section in the great towering edifice of conjecture and supposition that looms over us.

This has been brought to my mind recently by two events: the reckless use of a nerve agent in the attempted assassination of the Skripals in Salisbury and the alleged use of chemical weapons in Douma, Syria.

The question laid before the bench of public opinion was whether the resulting actions (diplomatic expulsions and missile attacks) taken by our government were justified. There has, of course, been a rich feast of opinion, from the voices of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition to individuals taking their own moral grandstand and signalling their popular virtue. There was even the bizarre spectacle of a group of establishment clergymen and peers of the realm

clergy who paid a visit to religious leaders in Syria to express their condemnation of what our government did.

It is true that, with hindsight, even the most benign governments can make mistakes or become guilty of a blind hypocrisy. Why, for example, did they strike at Syria with missiles for the use of chemical weapons but not at Russia? (The answer is, of course, tactically obvious!) What we have received in return from the governments of Syria and Russia are the expected denials of any skulduggery or infringement of the rules of war, employing explanations that range from the contrived to the ridiculous (but that's only my opinion).

No doubt there is much to criticise in the use of this modern form of 'gunboat diplomacy' and I can understand the protestations of our own Patriarch at more explosives wrecking his homeland – in exactly the same way as the good citizens of Salisbury must object to the polluting of their own streets.

What I find interesting is the swordplay between the various experts, politicians, security services, retired military types and, indeed, every blogger in the business. The question that I ask myself of anyone who has voiced an opinion outside the confines of the Cabinet Office and its security advisers, the Kremlin and the Syrian government, is: *how can they possibly know?*

I think it highly likely that the Kremlin was behind the poisoning of the Skripals; I think it most probable that Mr Assad's regime was guilty of using chemical weapons *but I don't know*; how could I? The rush to opinion and especially to express it publicly, reminds me of what Evagrius of Pontus (346-399) wrote that, '*In every man self-opinion destroys self-knowledge.*' In other words, the rush to opine on such matters tells us more about how someone wishes to position himself and how he wants to be seen publicly, rather than enlightening us with facts about the particular situation. The current debate around how best to pursue the course of Brexit is another interesting case in point, seeing how often people appear to clothe themselves in the colours of a particular tribe, their arguments and opinions either serving a hidden agenda or based on selected 'facts' from an unverifiable source. It seems that you may not only choose your opinions, you can even choose the facts to support your selected standpoint.

On 27th May we shall celebrate the feast of Pentecost. At Vespers on the eve we shall sing, '*Of old there was confusion of tongues because of the boldness of the tower builders. But those tongues have not uttered wisdom for the glory of divine knowledge... now the unison of tongues has been renewed for the salvation of our souls.*' [Doxastikon of

These verses call to mind the story of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis, contrasting the confusion of tongues with the unity brought about by the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost. It reminds us that, having received the anointing of Chrismation after our baptism, we each have the grace of the Holy Spirit abiding within us, in proportion to our conformity to Christ; we are sealed with the knowledge of God within.

We have an inner relationship to Christ, the Word of God and thus a communion with the three divine persons of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, as Orthodox Christians we are of one mind in matters of dogma and the whole economy of salvation and have no place for chosen opinions, private interpretations or personal confessions of the Faith. We do not depend on a body that exercises a teaching authority or *Magisterium*, like the Mediaeval Papacy, set above the rulers and peoples of Western Europe. Neither do we recognise that any sense can emerge from giving credence to a multitude of 'reformed' theological opinions. Our unity is established in the anointing of the Holy Spirit and is established through the apostolic tradition, the Liturgy, Holy Scriptures, Creed, Canons, Sacred Ministry and the writings of the fathers.

In our view of the world outside the Church we might well debate and express opinions; we may well agree to differ when it comes to our own ideas about politics, justice, social cohesion and the other great issues of our day. Wisdom, however, directs that judgements are often best if allowed to develop slowly with the gathering in of the facts. Immediate reactions to events are often proved wrong in hindsight and even the academic considerations of historians, even after long reflection and analysis, still tend to betray the particular standpoint of the historian. It might well be wise to keep silence beneath the present media tower of Babel. Christ was once asked his opinion about a woman caught in adultery (Jn.8:1-11): His reaction is interesting.

As Orthodox Christians, we know well the answer to Pilate's question '*What is truth?*' (Jn.18:38). The *Truth* stands before the Roman governor but at the time, he is more concerned about the opinions of a hostile crowd. In a world of governmental propaganda, fake news, manipulation, moral grandstanding and opinions, God knows who is right.

Fr Chrysostom

## Holy Communion

*Previously published on our Facebook page*

One of the duties given to a priest at his ordination is to become the guardian of the chalice. According to the rules governing our own Antiochian Patriarchate, in administering the Holy Gifts at communion, the priest should be assured (as far as possible) that the person receiving holy communion is either: a) An Orthodox Christian in full communion with the priest's own Patriarchate and that the person is not under any sort of ban or, to the priest's knowledge, has not fallen into serious sin; b) a lay-Orthodox Christian from a Patriarchate, currently in dispute with the priest's own Patriarchate (as currently between Antioch and Jerusalem); c) a lay-Christian from one of the oriental Orthodox Churches, unable to attend their own church; d) with the dispensation of both the relevant Orthodox and Roman Catholic bishops, a lay-Roman Catholic unable to get to their own Church. Further to this, Holy Communion may not be given to those from the Protestant faith and others who have emerged since the Reformation. Generally, it can be seen that the Orthodox Church does not practice 'open communion,' as in many of the Protestant churches. This is not because we wish to appear exclusive and seek to deny grace to those who do not belong to us. Primarily, we guard the chalice for two clear reasons that have stood the test of time and we are not going to change our practice.

Firstly, to receive communion you have to be 'in communion.' This implies a common faith and is one of the reasons that the Nicene Creed was introduced to the Liturgy. There are clear lines of demarcation between Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy, to the point where we vehemently contradict ideas they hold dear. In other words, for a heterodox believer to seek communion from us would be to live a lie. And to assert that such things do not really matter is a failure to comprehend what communion is for the Orthodox. To use a term borrowed from mathematics, for us there is no lowest common denominator when it comes to the Christian faith, as so often proclaimed by the Ecumenical Movement. For us, there is only the fullness of Orthodoxy, the Holy Tradition, as received through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and teachings of the Apostles and fathers, Councils, Canons and Creed.

Secondly, the guarded nature of communion is observed for protection where it might prove blasphemous or spiritually or even physically harmful to the would-be communicant. To attempt such would be to compound their sin even further and would entail the wrath of God, not His grace, as Paul noted among the Corinthians (1 Cor.11:27-32). Further to this, of course, there is the fast we practice before receiving the Holy Gifts; there should be proper spiritual preparation and prayer (this can be found in our Orthodox books of personal prayer); we should go to Confession from time to time and certainly if we have fallen into serious sin.

For most of us, therefore, under normal circumstances, Holy Communion should be a frequent and regular part of our belonging to the Church. It is perfectly proper to seek weekly communion, as taught by so many of the great spiritual writers of our Church such as St John Chrysostom, St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and St John of Kronstadt. Children baptized into the Orthodox Church, under the age of about seven, may, of course, receive communion freely and we can introduce them

to the communion fast gradually, as practical.

However, there is one matter which must be condemned as very dubious practice, not only with our children but sometimes among adults. That is the way that some bring their little ones to the chalice, having arrived in church a few minutes before communion. Some have even asked for communion for their children after the service has ended. In both cases, parents should not be surprised when communion is refused. Holy Communion is not magic, it is not a kind of inoculation against misfortune. Communion is the culmination of a liturgical act, both the means and expression of our belonging to Christ and should not be divorced from that context. Even the bringing of Communion to the sick or housebound outside the service is a celebration of the same mystery by extension. For those who are able to get to the service, they should be there, participating in the whole Divine Liturgy from the beginning and especially so if they intend to receive the Holy Gifts.

This is not a question of denying the 'full wage' to those who, as in the parable, came at the eleventh hour. That would be to grossly misunderstand the purpose of the parable (Matt.20:1-15). It is important, therefore, that if anyone has a real problem in attending the Liturgy from 10.30am they should consult one of the clergy for advice. Similarly, it is always proper practice, if you are new to our congregation or attending any other Orthodox church for the first time, to inform the priest and ask a blessing if you wish to receive communion.

There is an obvious reason why your children should be in church for the whole service and that is, to be trained and taught and absorb Orthodox practice as early as possible. We do have a Sunday school now where the little ones can be taught at their own level and we hope soon to extend such catechetical teaching and formation to older children and young adults. If you bring a child, seeking communion, only at the end of the service, you must ask yourself what effect is this having on your child; what are you silently teaching it?

In some congregations you could, as an outside observer, imagine that communion is only something that children do. This brings us to a final point. There are a number of adults who come either regularly or from time to time to the Liturgy and they never approach the chalice. Why? Well, they must ask and answer that question themselves.

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## The Orthodox Church has 20 centuries.

Once, not too long ago, a Protestant missionary to the Middle East came to a little Christian village in the desert. He struck up a conversation with a young man, and asked, in the boy's language "Son, do you know about Jesus Christ?" The young man responded and said "Of course! Everybody in this village is a Christian!" The evangelist, delighted, inquired "Wonderful! Who brought you the Gospel? The Lighthouse Baptists? The Presbyterian Gospel Coalition? Lutheran World Missions?" The young man responded and said "You know, I actually don't know. Everybody has been a Christian here for as long as I can remember. Let me ask the village elders." The young man then walked over to a group of old men sitting under a shade tree, drinking Arak and trying to keep cool. He spoke to them in their language briefly, and walked back over to the missionary. "They said it was Paul."

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## SERVICES

*Vespers is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm and on Wednesdays at 6.00pm. Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards. Orthros is served before the Divine Liturgy on Sundays at 9.00am*

### May

Sun 6th 5th Sunday of Pascha  
The Samaritan Woman Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 13th 6th Sunday of Pascha  
The Blind Man Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Wed 16 The Ascension of Our Lord (Possible service time to be announced)

Fri 18th Eve of the Feast of St Dunstan Vespers 6.00pm

Sun 20th Afterfeast of the Ascension Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 27th Holy Pentecost  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

28th - 30th Archdiocesan Conference. [No Wednesday Vespers]

### June

Fri 1st St Wite, Patroness of Dorset Molieben 10.00am

Sun 3rd 1st after Pentecost  
All Saints Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Mon 4th Beginning of the Apostles' Fast

Sun 10th 2nd after Pentecost  
All Saints of Britain Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 17th 3rd after Pentecost  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 24th 4th after Pentecost  
Nativity of St John the Baptist  
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Fri 29th The Apostles Peter and Paul (Possible service time to be announced)