

THE NARTHEX

September-October 2019

'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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The Cloud

"But now you will ask me, 'how am I to think of God himself, and what is he?' and I cannot answer you except to say 'I do not know!' For with this question you have brought me unto the same darkness, the same cloud of unknowing where I want to be! For though we through the grace of God can know fully about all other matters, and think about them - yes, even the very works of God himself - yet of God himself can no man think."

These words come from a book called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a mystical treatise written probably by an English country priest some time during the late fourteenth century. It is interesting to note that those times were ones of transition. The Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt had irrevocably changed society, the Papacy was split, and emerging heretical ideas already prefigured the Reformation that would lead to the disintegration of western Christendom.

The spiritual ideas of *The Cloud* did not, of course, emerge suddenly during chaotic times, but had their roots in ancient mystical theology. Knowledge of God in western thought has tended towards the *via positiva*, concentrating on the revelation that God has actually given of Himself. The graces and virtues that we know as human beings are here seen as reflections of the Divine as we seek out the power, majesty and beauty of God. One great exponent of this way was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm (1033-1109). He promoted the use of human reason as a faculty for the contemplation of God. This theological method was developed in what is usually called *Scholasticism*, typified by the writings of Thomas Aquinas.

In Orthodox Christian thought this positive approach is called *Cataphatic Theology* (that which has come down to us) but is treated with a certain caution. We have tended, rather, to prefer *Apophatic* (negative) *Theology* in our approach to the Divine. For although we can know and possess the fulness of salvation through Holy Tradition (all that comes to us through Church dogma, the ecumenical councils, the scriptures, the sacred ministry, the holy canons, the Liturgy etc) yet when it comes to God

Himself, His divine essence can never really be known. Even our words about God such as, great, holy, good, a person, almighty, etc can only be understood from the human perspective.

For this reason, we as Orthodox have greater sympathy with the approach of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, rather than with Anselm and Aquinas. Indeed, the roots of this mystical treatise can be traced back to theologians of the sixth century, to such writers as the so-called Dionysius. In short, according to *The Cloud* the only way that God can be known is through love, and certainly not through the human intellect because of its limitations. The writer of this treatise invites whoever would contemplate the mystery we call 'God' to put a cloud of unknowing behind them, blocking out the world, and also before them, dispensing with intellectual speculation about God; in other words, to enter into the darkness where God is. We might recall how Moses, having been called up onto Mount Sinai '...drew near the thick darkness where God was.' (Ex.20:21) As the writer himself says, "For whoever...thinks that it is fundamentally an activity of the mind, and proceeds to work it all out along these lines, is on quite the wrong track. He manufactures an experience that is neither spiritual nor physical. He is dangerously misled and in real peril."

Having recently celebrated the feast of Christ's Transfiguration, we can call to mind how the apostles were confronted with a fuller revelation than that earlier one experienced by Moses. 'For we... were eyewitnesses of His majesty... when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.' (2 Pet.1:16-18) In the gospel they too entered a cloud, a paradigm for such a religious experience, epitomising what the writer of *The Cloud* was attempting to describe: "Do not think that because I call it 'darkness' or a 'cloud' it is the sort of cloud you see in the sky, or the kind of darkness you know at home when the light are out. . That kind of darkness or cloud you can picture in your mind's eye in the height of summer, just as

in the depth of a winter's night you can picture a clear and shining light. I do not mean this at all. By 'darkness' I mean 'a lack of knowing' - just as anything that you do not know or may have forgotten may be said to be 'dark' to you, for you cannot see it with your inward eye. For this reason it is called a 'cloud', not of the sky, of course, but of 'unknowing', a cloud of unknowing between you and your God."

We can see in this a way of approach that is very similar to that expressed in the writings of the *Philokalia* and the practice of *The Prayer of the Heart*. Here, all imagination is dispensed with and the mind is to descend into the heart, occupied only with the slow, attentive recitation of a simple prayer, such as *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me*.

In practice, of course, this pursuit, certainly to the writer of *The Cloud*, can only realistically be followed by those engaged in the contemplative rather than the active life, as characterised by him in the story of Martha and Mary in the gospel (Lk.10:38-42). From our perspective this entering into 'the cloud' is what we would expect from those who have been called into monasticism, whose very purpose is to leave behind and let go of this world for the sake of the love of God. The question therefore arises as to how relevant any of this might be for us who must live in the world, we who have not been called out of it by God, and must work out our salvation amidst the bustle and noise and busyness. We, after all, have families to care for, jobs to do, businesses to run, households to organise and provide for, alongside, of course, our belonging to the church and having to fit in our worship together at the Liturgy. Indeed, the writer of *The Cloud* recognises this at the very beginning of his work when he distinguishes between four kinds of Christian life: the common, the special, the solitary and the perfect: "Three of them may be begun and ended in this life; the fourth, by the

grace of God, may be begun here but it goes on for ever in the bliss of heaven!"

Nevertheless, though we are all engaged in the common Christian life and must, of necessity, deal with this world, there is no reason why we may not learn from all this and even begin to taste something of that life of union with God even now. To this end we can make provision in our own lives by the way we organise our time. In practical terms our days and weeks can be organised rather than random, our activities can be disciplined rather than unruly, our attention can be controlled rather than being the constant victim of distractions. In fact it is the distractions of modern life, especially those offered by various type of technology (information rather than knowledge!) that can become the way we lose spiritual energy, diverting the mind from pondering that *better part* which Mary had chosen (Lk.10:42).

For us, indeed, standing in the liturgical service of the Church, is itself a way of setting the "cloud" behind and before us, symbolised in the incense that envelops us. It is necessary for us whose eyes are still on this world to have the holy icons before us, to call us back and fix our attention. Let us also, as far as we are able, be sure to make provision for silence in our daily routine, some time set apart if only just to be with God and nothing else. If we think only in physical terms and imagine that locking out the world, and indulging in a warm, comforting hot bath is delightful for the body, surely for the spiritually minded, to bathe in the depths of God is more inviting for the soul.

We shall end with a quote in fact from Anselm, for leaving aside his faith in the importance of rationalism and the power of the human intellect, we, nevertheless, (giving credit where credit is due) find in his work, *The Prologion*, this delightful introduction and intriguing invitation:

"Come now, little man, turn aside for a while from your daily employment, escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside your weighty cares, let you burdensome distractions wait, free yourself awhile for God and rest awhile in him. Enter the inner chamber of your soul, Shut out everything except God and that which can help you in seeking him, and when you have shut the door, seek him. Now my whole heart, say to God, 'I seek your face, Lord, it is your face I seek.'"

Fr Chrysostom



New School Year

There are traditional prayers in our liturgical books for students and school pupils, asking God's blessing on their learning, especially for those beginning school for the first time.

On Saturday 7th September Fr Alexander will serve a Paraclesis for students and pupils to which all are invited together, of course, with their parents. The short service begins at 3.30pm (following a Baptism at 2.30pm). We hope that many of you will be able to come and join us.



The Shop

Most of you will have seen the newly ordered shop, organised by Presbyteria Olympias and Cristina Hammond, in the narthex, at the back of the church. We have a number of Orthodox books that have been donated for sale, second-hand. If anyone has any devotional, liturgical, historical or theological books by Orthodox authors, and they are no longer required, we shall be happy to receive them and sell them at a reasonable price, helping to raise funds for the needs of the church.



Parish Committee Elections

The Parish committee that debates and runs parish affairs and the maintenance of the church building consists of people elected from the congregation, together with the directors of our charitable foundation (The Bourenmouth Poole Orthodox Christian Foundation).

It is now three years since the last election, so the new elections will take place in September. Nomination papers will be available from Sunday 8th September. Candidates willing to stand for election have to be proposed by two people, a *proposer* and a *seconder*. Only if the number of proposals is too many will an election follow. In the past, however, our problem has been in people willing to stand. Council members represent the congregation and are asked to attend the regular meetings at church (usually every two months). The new council will be announced on Sunday 29th September.



You may be interested to know that our parish serves the Divine Liturgy at Sarum College, Salisbury (on behalf of the Thyateira Archdiocese). The service is at 10.30am on a second Saturday, every other month. All are welcome. The next will be on 12th October, followed by 14th December. Further details from Fr Chrysostom.

SERVICES

Vespers is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm and on Wednesdays at 6.00pm. Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards or by appointment. *Orthros* is served before the Divine Liturgy on Sundays at 8.45am

September

Sat 7th Paraclesis for the new school year 3.30pm
Sun 8th Nativity of the Theotokos
Divine Liturgy 10.30am



Sun 15th Sunday after The Exaltation of the Cross
Divine Liturgy 10.30am



Sun 22nd 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 29th 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

October

Sun 6th 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 13th 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 20th 18th Sunday after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 27th 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

