

THE NARTHEX

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

September-October 2022

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

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THE HOLY SACRIFICE

We affirm in the Nicene Creed that there is only one Church of Jesus Christ. It was assembled, called together and sanctified by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost around 33 AD. The whole life of the Orthodox-Catholic Church, founded on the Tradition of the apostles and known to us simply as the Orthodox Church, is centred around the offering of the Divine Liturgy; everything else flows from this and always has done.

The heterodox churches which have kept, to a lesser or greater extent, a liturgically ordered life, will have retained a certain understanding of this. This would be evident in the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which takes the same view as we do, that the Eucharist (the Mass) is central to Church life. It is also known among Anglicans and Lutherans, but only to a limited extent. However, where those churches that were formed at the Protestant Reformation differ from us, the Orthodox and Roman Catholics, is that we retain firmly the idea that the eucharistic liturgy is a sacrifice. I preached on this recently at St Dunstan's and I should like to develop the theme once more in this edition of the Narthex.

The liturgical life of the apostle and the first congregations around the Mediterranean, is largely a mystery to scholars, if we are honest. Even the letters of St Paul provide scant information directly. In 1 Corinthians 9, the apostle is concerned with correcting aberrations. It is misguided to hold that the New Testament, though holding much liturgical material is, somehow, an all-sufficient handbook of Christian worship. No more than it is intended to be a guide to church government: why else would we need further to have the Holy Canons of the ecumenical councils? What we can surmise is that assembling for the Breaking-of-Bread was the signature mark of a Christian community and, as we find in the Acts of the Apostles, they met regularly for, 'They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.' [Acts 2:42]

St Justin Martyr (c. 150AD) is one of the earliest writers to describe both the basic shape of the eucharistic service and what

was believed: : 'And this food is called among us *Εὐχαριστία* [the Eucharist]... For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.' [First Apology, ch.66.]

St Cyprian of Carthage, in his letter to Caecilius writes: 'The bishops who are set over the churches of the Lord... do not... depart from that which... Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, the founder and teacher of this sacrifice, did and taught... ..Jesus Christ...is Himself the chief priest of God the Father, and has first offered Himself a sacrifice to the Father, and has commanded this to be done in commemoration of Himself, certainly that priest truly discharges the office of Christ, who imitates that which Christ did; and he then offers a true and full sacrifice in the Church to God the Father, when he proceeds to offer it according to what he sees Christ Himself to have offered.'

Clearly Cyprian knew that, firstly, the bishop/priest was doing liturgically what Christ Himself did in offering Himself, both at the Mystical Supper and as consummated upon the Cross: that is, offering a sacrifice. And, secondly, it was important to get the celebration of this eucharistic tradition correct in its particulars.

This idea of the sacrifice was lost among the Protestant churches of the West. Indeed, it was the very purpose of reformers like Cranmer in England to remove any idea that the eucharist was a sacrifice. He ended his *Prayer of Consecration* at the Words of Institution, having removed all references to sacrifice that were to be found in the old Roman Canon of the Mass. The only idea of sacrifice to be kept back was that of *the sacrifice of praise*, undoing fifteen hundred years of Christian tradition.

Orthodox Liturgical Theology has always maintained a concept of the holy sacrifice being offered in the Divine

Liturgy. It identifies that sacrifice with the supreme and final sacrifice of its Lord, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they are the same mystery. However, before we can explain (as far as it is possible to put a mystery into mere words) what we mean by sacrifice in the Liturgy, we need to explore, by way of background, the place of sacrifice in religious history in general and, more particularly, its foreshadowing in the religion of the Old Testament.

The ancient Hindu sacred text, the Rig Veda (c.1500 BC or earlier) contains a reference to Purusha, a cosmic being or first man who is sacrifice to the gods. You will be familiar, no doubt, with the human sacrifices of the ancient civilisations of Central and South America. These are, of course, the extreme end of what seems to be the human need to sacrifices to their gods. The Roman and Greeks offered animal sacrifice, often in connection with divination, but their mythologies and literature seem to hint at the idea of more primitive offerings involving human beings; perhaps the memory of what used to be done before the substitution of animals. Whatever the case, this suggests that mankind has always felt there is something intrinsically lacking in the balance of creation; that somehow, offerings to the gods, whether cereal offerings, livestock or even the blood of fellow human beings, can make up for or appease the unpredictability of their deities.

When we move into the context of ancient Hebrew religion as recorded in the Old Testament, we also find sacrifices commanded and laid down in particular detail. The Book of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain very detailed instruction on various types of sacrifice, involving both livestock and the fruits of the earth. The difference, especially in reference to offerings for sin, is the moral purpose of this form of worship. This is not a ritualised form of magic to manipulate or appease the supernatural powers, but are part of a code of holiness, a way of maintaining the covenant relationship between the Lord

God and his chosen people.

The purpose of the fine detail in the Torah is to ensure that the sacrifice, for whatever purpose, be acceptable to God. Without being received by the Almighty, the offering loses its legitimacy and become ineffective. We might start, for example, with the worship offered by Abel being received by God (Gen. 4:4); and that of Noah as well (Gen.8:20-21).

The story of Abraham offering his son Isaac (Gen.22:1-14) might well contain primitive memories of human sacrifice, yet, nevertheless, it foreshadows the fundamental point underlying the gospel message, that God the Father so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (Jn.3:16).

In the Torah Moses, directed by the Lord, commands priestly sacrifices from Aaron. The Levites were given very precise instructions on how the sacrifices were to be offered, in order to purify the worshippers from their sins. This notion of purity and the sanctification of the worshippers, (which is temporal and not an eternal means of salvation) is found also in the beginning of the book of Job. Job would send for and sanctify his own children, and would offer burnt offerings for them all, saying, *'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.'* (Job.1:5)

In the Church we hold these references to be 'types' of what was to come in Christ. [Typology is a symbolic way of reading laws, events, and people in the Old Testament, interpreting them as a kind of prophecy of Christ, who is anticipated in them.] The essential point to be grasped is that the offered victim, particularly in sin offerings, was directly identified with the sins of the worshippers; the victim *became* the sin, which was then consumed by fire in reparation to God. On the Day of Atonement (Lev.16) Moses ordered that, after the blood sacrifices, Aaron was to confess the sins of the people over the scapegoat that was to be driven out into the wilderness, bearing away the people's sin. We see this as a 'type' of Christ, who was crucified outside, what were then, the walls of the holy city.

This idea, and indeed, practice, of a purifying sacrifice was to last in ancient Judaism right up to the destruction of the second temple in 70AD. By then, Christ had already come and fulfilled what we call, *the mystery of His dispensation*. So Christ, in fulfilment of the what was prefigured under the old covenant, took our sins upon Himself, for as Paul tells us, God the Father, *'Made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.'* [2Cor.5:21] And as St Peter says, *'Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness.'* [1Pet.2:24] We might see the occasion of Jesus' baptism by the Forerunner as the point at which he takes all the sins of mankind upon his own shoulders, immersed in the very waters where others have confessed their sins. So it is that Christ says in St Matthew's gospel, *'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'* [Matt.3:15]

Each time we participate in the Divine Liturgy, time is surpassed and we are offering the final and holy sacrifice of Christ. All other sacrifices are fulfilled and now rendered redundant. What we do in Church is identified totally with the offering of the same eternal sacrifice of Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us. (Heb.7:25) But this sacrifice is not offered in the profane place, this is not in the outer court: the blood of the eternal sacrifice, the offering of Christ is actually brought into the Holy of Holies itself. And since the Ascension of

Our Lord, not into an earthly copy or antitype, but into heaven itself. This is why the Anaphora begins with the words, *Lift up your hearts*.

On behalf of us all, the priest offers the Eucharistic Prayer (Anaphora). After he has recited Our Lord's own words at the Mystical Supper, authorising the offering, he makes *anemnesis*, a remembrance, of the whole mystery of Christ dispensation: the cross, the grave, the third-day resurrection, his ascension, the sitting at the right hand and the coming again. Then in fear and trembling the priest must beseech the descent of the Holy Spirit, firstly, on us all and then, upon the gifts that have been offered up, sealing, ratifying, fulfilling and completing the consecration of the oblation. This is the mystery once foreshadowed when the great prophet Elijah called down the fire of the Lord upon his sacrifice, confirming the reality and presence of the Lord in his contest against the false prophets of Baal (3 Kings 18:38).

But it is not just a matter of reciting the prayer. Those who offered the sin offerings of the Old Testament would also share in them, a communion sacrifice, eating a portion of what was offered, after the blood, representing the life, had been given to God. In fulfilment of that, we who receive the Holy Gifts in communion participate likewise, not in the shadow but in the reality of Christ's body and blood. So that, whilst we are still in this world, whilst we still contend in the ascetic struggle against sin, we may bear Christ's risen body within and live in the realm of God's grace, not His wrath. Here we see the importance of receiving Holy Communion if we are to share in and remain in the grace of God unto eternal life. It also highlights how important it is to prepare: to empty ourselves both spiritually and physically, in fasting beforehand, not only with an empty stomach that is ready to receive Him, but also, that openness of the mind, laying aside, as we say, all earthly care when we come together here. How important it is to pray beforehand, that our souls, our minds be fired with a love of Christ with the chamber of the heart ready to receive Him. And most of all to come in repentance, and from time to time or certainly, when necessary, to go first to confession. Any sacrifice is only effective if it is accepted by God, and it is those who share in it who reap the benefits. And our eucharistic sacrifice is received by God for it is God's whole initiative to begin with; because it is the offering of Christ Himself. Within this sanctuary we offer up Christ Himself, who is both priest and victim. As the priest says quietly in the Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn, before reciting the Anaphora, *'For Thou Thyself art He that offereth and is offered, that accepteth and is distributed, O Christ our God.'*

It is, therefore, important for Christian people to have some understanding, at least, of these holy mysteries and the sacrifice that we offer. Pope St Gregory the Great, the Diologist wrote that, *'At that hour of the Sacrifice, at the words of the Priests, the heavens are opened, and in that mystery of Jesus Christ, the choirs of angels are present, and things below are joined with things on high, earthly things to heavenly, and the service is both a visible and invisible event.'*

Fr Chrysostom

ASK YOURSELF...

Yes, of course it is easy to attend the Divine Liturgy on Sunday at Saint Dunstan's, and to think that this is the sum total of what your Orthodox Faith requires of you. Perhaps you bring your babies and young children for communion, often arriving well after the readings of the Epistle and Gospel, or even just 10 minutes before communion.

But is this is being part of a parish or of being a true Christian? Is this really being part of the

Body of Christ? Or is this just paying lip-service to your faith. Holy Communion for your children is not some sort of pagan talisman against evil confession? Do you bring your children for confession? Are you a real part of the congregation? Do you engage with activities the priests and their wives take great pains to organise? Are you really a member of our parochial family, or do you treat your Sunday visit to our Church as just another social occasion to meet your friends?

Church membership has always been a matter of concentric circles; people vary in their commitments and involvement. So, if you are on the outer rim, what can you do to draw nearer to Christ? You can set up a prayer corner with icons at home. You can teach your children morning and evening prayers and read the Epistles and Gospels together. And do you take part in the life of the parish?

It is not sufficient to show up on Sunday for 15 minutes and to sometimes put a few pounds in the donations box (thank you, to those who actually do so!). As a congregation we need to forge a family, across nationalities and ages, to be a strong bastion in today's society.

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

September

Sun 4th 12th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 11th 13th after Pentecost
Sunday before Holy Cross
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 18th 14th after Pentecost
Sunday after Holy Cross
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 25th 15th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

October

Sun 2nd 16th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 9th 17th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 16th 18th after Pentecost
Fathers of the 7th ecumenical Council
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 23rd 19th after Pentecost
Holy Apostle James, Brother of the Lord
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 30th 20th after Pentecost
Divine Liturgy 10.30am