

The idea of *the future* was invented in the eighteenth century, during the Enlightenment, when new ideas around science, politics and social life appeared in the western world. Before that, most people would have thought that life had always gone on as it had and would continue to do so until the second coming of Christ and the Final Judgement of the world. Slowly, however, over the last three hundred years, the human mind has imagined different kinds of future for itself, one where we made our own world that we might control, whether through political ideology, social change, or even the alteration of our own bodies.

I do not like the term, *the modern world*, very much; *the current age* might be a better term to use. Most people in recent times have thought of themselves as modern, implying, of course, a certain disdain for what is old fashioned, or regarded now as obsolete. For such a mind, the old might have an attractive charm but one would not want to live there. All the trappings of a Dickensian Christmas will soon be brought out once again, to add a nostalgic atmosphere to the coming celebrations, but who would actually wish to be *Dickensian*?

It is ironic that this paradoxical interest and attraction for old things has such a powerful hold on the modern, secular mind. But it is not too surprising: after all, modern man, the current man, lives in such a boringly flat universe. For him, science has explained everything away; the lights have been switched on; all mystery is but fraud, obfuscation and delusion. Our ancient forefathers, on the other hand, knew a symbolic world, where they lived in a middle earth, with heaven above and hell below, and all affairs were generally governed by a benign order. But this richness is denied to the modern mind that exists in a flattened, impersonal universe, so vast that man can only be alone in the dark, where there can be no actual meaning to human life.

For those who have the modern mind it seems obvious that, once released from the scrutiny of a moral god, that the meaninglessness must be ignored, quickly forgotten, and certainly not faced. No wonder the modern mind hates silence and seeks to fill the time with entertainments, pleasures and the possession of things. People have always loved those diversions and delights, of course, but not in order to fill an awful emptiness.

The Orthodox Christian mind is not the current mind; it is a spiritual mind that fills the heart with meaning and purpose. I do not mean that we are unscientific or unenlightened, but we are not only that; we do not leave our attention there. *'For those who live according to the flesh,'* St Pauls writes to the church at Rome, *'set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.'* [Rom.8:5-6]

But the Orthodox way of seeing the world is much more than just one that holds onto the old, three-decker universe of the ancients. Just as in this age, there were plenty of worldly minded people before the Enlightenment; sin has always been an ever-present attraction, even for those who might have imagined that they could feel the heat of hell beneath their feet. Even the Christian people of the past had to consider Paul's words to the Romans, *'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.'* [Rom.12:2]

Today we celebrate the Synaxis of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and all the Bodiless Powers of Heaven. The secular mind has no room for angels. There are, of course, those who want to flee the meaningless world of the current age, the spiritually lost, who will choose to engage with all kinds of fantastic beliefs, superstitions, esoteric ideas, occult knowledge and selected notions from the supermarket of religious practices. They are spiritual people, but not guided by religion. But beware! If you are spiritual, how do you know what spirits you are dealing with?

The Orthodox mind knows the protective ministry of the Bodiless Powers, but it also is aware of the malevolence of the demons as well.

We who have set our minds on the things of the Spirit; we who are transformed by the renewing of our mind; we who have set our mind on things above, not on things on the earth, live this life amidst the company of the heavenly powers. '*There are more things in heaven and earth,*' Hamlet tells Horatio, '*than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*' Those who seek the Kingdom of God, those who stand on the threshold of heaven and are heirs of salvation, are accompanied by ministering spirits (Heb.1:14).

The word '*angel*' means a messenger. Properly, though, they are spiritual beings, individually persons, the creation of God but without bodies, not part of this physical reality around us. It was an archangel who announced the gospel first to the Theotokos when she encountered Gabriel at Nazareth. It was angels who proclaimed the gospel to the shepherds of Bethlehem, who reassured Joseph the Betrothed, who ministered to Jesus in the wilderness, and who proclaimed the resurrection at the empty tomb.

An early sixth century treatise, *The Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies*, is a mystical work describing the ascent of the human soul to God through the *via negativa*, the way of *unknowing*, that is, the abandoning of worldly ways of thinking, to attain to the silence of the Divine Darkness that Moses knew on Sinai (Ex.20:21). It also describes the bodiless powers in their nine hierarchies, under whose guardianship lies the whole of the physical creation.

And these angelic powers are hypostatic realities, that is, they are persons, as we are persons. And each one of us has a guardian angel appointed by God, standing alongside us, who since our baptism, like spiritual godparents and sponsors, are in earnest for our salvation. These pure minds are ever with us; whatever we do or think or say, in open or in secret, we do in the presence of our guardian angel. Confess your sins to one another, says St James: we must do the same before our angel. We must remember them and ask their guidance and ministry as part of our own prayers each

morning on rising, and each night upon retiring to our rest. Invoke them in all dangers, physical or spiritual, in all temptations and confusion, in undertaking any enterprise, making a journey or faced with confrontation. We can do that rather than stride out alone in false self-confidence, only to encounter spirits of a malevolent nature who would be only all too happy to 'assist' us.

But more than anywhere it is when we come together as the Church to offer the Liturgy, and especially in the communion of the mystical sacrifice itself, that we are closest to the heavenly host. For where does the Liturgy happen? Is it not firstly in heaven itself, on that altar above the heavens, where Christ is, ever making intercession for His saints? Where, at present, having only these heavy, fleshly eyes, we can see the priests and ministers moving within the sacred altar beyond the screen, we see a figure, a symbol, an earthly manifestation. But in the heavenly reality, the Seraphim dare not even gaze at the divine countenance, but veil their faces before the awful glory, whilst singing the eternal thrice-holy hymn.

As with the angels, so the whole vocation of man is to become a worshipping being, one for whom liturgy, the service of God, fulfils our existence: *homo adorans*. This is impossible for the worldly mind, the secular, the current mind, for such a mind cannot conceive this; it has no way of seeing this, where all things can only be flat and meaningless. But the mind opened by faith (*credo ut intellegam* - I believe in order to understand) stands with the angels. The only alternative is to fall victim to those angels, who like Satan in his pride, fell away from God into black holes of darkness, into that terrible emptiness without the divine. The most fearsome thing about hell is that in that state, the mind forgets God. But we, ever remembering, call to mind the angelic command of the deacon: '*Let us stand aright! Let us stand with fear! Let us offer the holy oblation in peace!*'

The eighth Psalm, looking forward to the incarnation of Christ, asks, *What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honour.* If our minds can wonder at God humbling Himself, to become as we are, imagine how the angels became dumbfounded at His

condescension, and even more so when they saw Him ascend above them once again, but clothed in that, our humanity. And likewise, how they were astounded at the assumption into heaven of the one who had borne Him in her womb upon earth. But think further: that although the secular mind may image and plan all kinds of futures for itself, we shall await the only assured future that abides for ever, when He returns in glory with His holy angles to judge the living and the dead, when God willing, we too, for a little while, lower than the angels, will be crowned with glory and honour.