

1] ‘When You, O God, shall come to earth with glory, all things shall tremble and the river of fire shall flow before Your judgment seat; the books shall be opened and the hidden things disclosed! Then deliver me from the unquenchable fire, and make me worthy to stand at Your right hand, Most Righteous Judge!’ So runs the Kontakion for this Sunday of the Last Judgement. Glory, trembling, record books and unquenchable fire combine to evoke a terrifying image when God has the last word.

2] This is every bit as awesome and alarming as that Sequence from the mediaeval Western Rite, the famous Dies Irae, beloved of so many musical composers, foretelling a future event that instilled the fear of God in so many hearts:

Dies iræ, dies illa, Solvet sæclum in favilla: Teste David cum Sibylla. Quantus tremor est futurus, Quando Iudex est venturus, Cuncta stricte discussurus!

The day of wrath, that day, will dissolve the world in ashes: (this is) the testimony of David along with the Sibyl. How great will be the quaking, when the Judge is about to come, strictly investigating all things!

3] Such is the Last Day in the popular religious imagination. There have been many heterodox Christians and groups on the fringes of our holy faith who have dreamed up all sorts of ideas around this theme, even vainly trying to predict that day according to the calendar, albeit, no one on earth knows the hour, according to the holy scriptures.

4] We cannot, of course, deny the seriousness of the Judgement, or the reality of its impending arrival in God’s time. But there lies the problem! It is our understanding of what we call Time; what we experience as linear time: a movement from point A to point B. If we are fixed in a literal understanding of today’s gospel, we shall have problems in understanding the parable. We are certainly told that the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, but what

follows is a parable, outlining the criteria upon which judgement will be made.

5] We need to start by putting aside our linear ideas of life and time, especially if we are to understand what we are now preparing to celebrate. We are getting ready in these current Sundays to enter into the Great Fast. But the Lenten season itself is a preparation, in order to experience once again, in time, the mystery of Pascha. At first, it might seem counterintuitive: what has Pascha to do, directly, with the Last Judgement? But we need an understanding of what we call God's time, if we are to come to a real understanding of what has happened in the resurrection of Christ.

6] The mind of Christ, described for us in the gospels, can strike the reader as quite strange; 'thinking outside the box,' as they say. The eleven resurrection gospels are read, in course, at Orthros, (Matins) on Sunday mornings. Fitting them together in a logical, time-bound sequence seems to present a real challenge to the mind.

7] When asked in St John's gospel, how He knew that Abraham the patriarch had rejoiced to see His day, for He was not yet fifty years old, Our Lord replied, 'Before Abraham was, I AM' (Jn.8:56-58)

8] In the book of the Apocalypse, Christ says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." [Apoc. 22:13]

9] In these examples Christ is not playing at mind games; this is not obfuscation or just a crafty use of language. They are clear revelations to us of Christ's divinity. They use our language of Time, but Christ who is in all eternity, cannot be enwrapped by our linear time. St John in the Apocalypse, goes on to speak of the unbelieving world, those who have not had their names entered in to the Book of Life. They will come to the awful realisation that Christ is the Truth and will worship Him whom he calls, 'The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.' (Apoc.13:8)

10] But was not Christ slain at Golgotha, executed under Roman authority by crucifixion around 33AD, once, in history? Indeed, He was. But His Pascha, His passage from Death to Life, is both

historical and eternal, local yet also cosmic. The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world was prefigured long before in the Old Testament, in all those sacrifice offered in the temple. Perhaps even foreshadowed and longed for by an emptiness in human hearts, in those ancient pagan myths of dying and rising gods. Using the language of Jewish religious metaphors, St Paul connects Christ's death with the paschal lambs of the Exodus; he says in First Corinthians that, 'Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.' [1 Cor.5:7]

11] But the same transcending of Time is here in our very worship. The liturgy of the Orthodox Church, though scheduled according to our calendars and diaries, takes place in the kingdom of God. Every time we come together here to offer worship to God, in the Spirit we step out of time and share in the eternal liturgy of the heavenly host. Our altar on earth manifests physically that true spiritual and noetic altar in the heavens, whereon Christ is offered up for us; where He ever lives, says the epistle to the Hebrews, making intercession for the His saints (Heb.7:25). No wonder, our Divine Liturgy begins with the words declaring the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, blessed!

12] And in that Liturgy, during the Anaphora, (the Eucharistic Prayer over the offered gifts) the priest prays, using the past tense, for Christ's glorious second coming. Yes, his second coming, which according to linear time, has not happened yet.

13] What can all this mean? It means that we who have been baptised into Christ's death and resurrection are already sharing in the life of the kingdom to come; even now we participate in the age that is yet to be realised. In St John's gospel, when Christ comes riding into Jerusalem before His passion, He says, 'Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' [1Jn.12:31-32]

14] We stand with Him who is both Alpha and Omega; we have communion with Him who is both the beginning and the end of all things. We have no need to dig up an 'historical Jesus,' nor do have to sift the news, assiduously seeking out the signs of the end of this

world, for Christ is not time-bound. Any idea of a linear, time-bound Christ is no use to us, for that time is past; of no more real relevance than any other historical figure, for to be bound by time is to be bound by death, and Christ has abolished death!

15] What matters now is what kind of people we are to be. We cannot be content with just being good people, or even moral people: anyone can be that. What matters is that we are transfigured, that we stand in the newness of Life. Listen to the message of today's parable. As we approach the Great Fast, it is worth being reminded of the hierarchy of ascetic practice in the Orthodox spiritual life: Fasting, yes, prayer, certainly, but charity takes the first place. What use fasting, if you let others starve; what use praying for God's mercy, if you don't have pity to others?

16] We who are in Christ, we who participate in His Holy Mysteries, especially in the communion of the Holy Gifts, do not have to live as prisoners of life-decaying time, for Christ has overcome the world and we live this new life through the grace of God that transforms the mode of our existence here. As St John tells us in his first epistle, 'We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other.' [1Jn.3:14]