

Archive 1998

The Lichfield Pilgrimage

The Deanery Pilgrimage to Lichfield in veneration of St. Chad on 18 July was a great success again this year. We were honoured this year to have His Grace, Bishop Basil of Sergievo (Diocese of Sourozh, Moscow Patriarchate) serve at the Divine Liturgy in Lichfield Cathedral and lead the Pilgrimage to the Well of St. Chad some 15 minutes walk from the centre of the city.

The Deanery presented an icon of St. Chad to the Anglican Dean of Lichfield Cathedral, Dr. Tom Wright, whose hospitality we shared. The icon had been written by Fr Aidan of the Hermitage of St. Antony and St. Cuthbert who explained the purpose of the veneration of icons in the Orthodox Church upon the presentation.

We were blessed with glorious weather again for the procession to the Well for the Molieben and Blessing of the Waters, deftly avoiding a rather bemused wedding entourage which had arrived at nearby Anglican church! The waters at the well are remarkably sweet; but we should not be surprised. The sanctity and missionary endeavours of St. Chad are part of the bedrock of the Orthodox Church in Great Britain. We have indeed tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

The Orthodox New Year

It can be frustrating to move suddenly from the end, back to the beginning of something. But this is what Orthodox believers do as we move from August 31st - the last day of the old year, to September 1st, the first day of the new year. It is part of the goodness of God, that He, who has no beginning and no ending, the Eternal Trinity, should take such care to give us a year which begins and ends, and then begins all over again. In our human and finite state we need fresh starts, and this is one of them. From the peaks of Pascha, Ascension, Pentecost, and Transfiguration, we move back to beginnings, the Nativity of the Mother of God, and then in December of the Son of God Himself. We start this wonderful cycle all over again. But the Holy Spirit, as we trust Him, will renew this new year to us, and give us a whole new understanding of it.

"Behold I will do a new thing", God says through the prophet Isaiah (43:19). The new wine will come to us in new wineskins.

The God who has put eternity in our hearts, knows our human frailty. He knows that marriages need their anniversaries, and all of us, especially children, need their birthdays from year to year. We in the Orthodox Church also hold a special place for the anniversaries of those who have died in Christ. We recall every year the glorious deaths of the saints. But the whole of this is held in a solid framework - the Orthodox Calendar. Through the God inspired wisdom of our fathers and mothers, we have a beautifully constructed lectionary, which flows through the year, like the streams of an effortless river, blessing whatever they touch.

It is significant that the last great feast of the old year is that of the Dormition of Mary, the Mother of God. Her human passing was to heaven's glory. And the first great feast of the new year is her Nativity. It is not that Mary is more important than Christ, around which most of the Calendar revolves. Mary is not God. She did not exist from eternity. But she is honoured in this way because she is our supreme example. She lived a life of complete obedience to God.

Father Michael Harper
Dean

A Sound Mind!

"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline (sound mind AV)" 2 Timothy 1:7

St Paul here is referring to the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the life of Timothy, by nature a timid person, and young in years. The Holy Spirit is the cure for our fears and inferiorities. He gives us power, love and - a sound mind.

Forty-six years ago a young undergraduate at Cambridge University was similarly overcome with fear. He had gone up to Cambridge to study law with a view to becoming a barrister. But God had intervened, and now he was starting to study theology. His fear was that he would lose his faith (some have after studying theology). One Sunday morning he went to a Church in Cambridge where the preacher (Bruce Reed, the chaplain at Fitzwilliam College) preached on this text. His fears evaporated, and he plunged with enthusiasm into the Theology Tripos. That same student has now moved back to Cambridge; yes, you will by now have guessed who it is. I did not lose my faith. It has grown and developed, and the same Holy Spirit of God guides into all truth, and is the Spirit who inspires love, empowers us and gives us a "sound mind".

Make no mistake about it, the proposed new **Orthodox Institute in Cambridge**, may well prove to be a turning point in the history of the Orthodox Church in Britain. The vision is clear - something by all Orthodox, and for all Orthodox.

Indeed the vision is also to make it possible for non-Orthodox to study Orthodoxy as well. The committee has Greek, Russian and Antiochian members. We welcome all Orthodox to take part and make it their own. But it is also intended to make the Institute available to all Orthodox, and to use every kind of modern technology to bring its teaching to the people. Thus there will be correspondence courses, as well as provision for study via the internet. The Open University model will also be used. But we plan also to have residential courses for Cambridge degrees, and to prepare men for the priesthood. The target is to take the first students, and begin the first courses in October 1999.

The fears I had as a student sometimes grip the Orthodox in this country, and have driven some of them to take up defensive positions, avoiding contact with non-Orthodox. The Cambridge project is not going to be a ghetto, or a theological fall-out shelter. If we are filled with the Holy Spirit we will have the outgoing fearless love of Christ, and the sound mind to discern between truth and error, doctrinal purity and heresy.

In a hard hitting article in Sourozh magazine, Hieromonk Hilarion Alfeyev, writes about the poor state of Orthodox education in Russia. Rightly he sees the future healthy development of Orthodoxy dependent on a high standard of education. His final words are directed at students, which should be all of us.

"Dear students, study the Holy Scriptures, read the writings of the Church Fathers, do not get weary of partaking of the 'fountain of knowledge' contained in the affluent tradition of the Orthodox Church. Study ancient and modern languages. Do not be afraid to draw knowledge from the treasury of secular learning. And most important constantly stir up in yourselves the fire of faith which has led you to the Orthodox Church. . . Do not let it die out even if everything around you is aimed at extinguishing it."

I do not believe there will be a single person in our Deanery who is not going to benefit from this project, and I hope we will all support it wholeheartedly.

Father Michael
5th October 1998

A Christmas Message from Bishop Gabriel

- *"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:2,6)*

This prophecy has been fulfilled on holy ground – in the village of Bethlehem in a crib inside a cave. Jesus was born there. God has come in the flesh. He has become Man in order to deify us. The hymn of the angels, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth" echoes henceforth in heaven and earth – glory to God incarnate and that peace which God wants both in the world and in the heart of every man called to become a child of God by faith.

We must take to heart the immensity of God's love expressed in His Son Jesus; it is then that we will come to see at its true value the divine God who helps us to renew our life and free us from fear and anxiety. This Gift gives us the resources we need to live worthily and in moral uprightness. We are enlightened by the power of God which burst forth from the cave. It is then, too, that we will understand that "unto us a Son is given and the government shall be upon His shoulders and His name shall be called the mighty God ... the everlasting Father." (Isaiah 9:6).

The child of Bethlehem has come into this world in order that those who do not see should see (John 9:39). By accomplishing the mystery of the Incarnation, God has put within our reach all we need for our salvation. This salvation becomes realisable through a spiritual relationship linking us with Jesus Christ from that moment on. He is at once God and man. And we follow His life both through receiving His Spirit and by living according to His will and His teaching. The Church also, which He instituted on earth, is herself at once human and divine. She is human in that she is a gathering of the faithful called together by a true faith and confession – "he that believeth on him is not condemned but he that believeth not is condemned already." (John 3:18)

The Church is also divine by the power of the Holy Spirit working in her – the Holy Spirit fills the heart of the faithful with the Word of God and helps them to draw nearer to the fullness of God in his heavenly Kingdom. God's Child is born of a Virgin and He is come into the world in order to be the Witness to the truth, to save sinners, calling them to repentance. By His Incarnation he has given us the opportunity of distancing ourselves from the old man and putting on the new man like a garment – entering into a new life. "He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold is a thief and a robber; He that entereth in by the door is the Shepherd of the sheep. To Him the porter openeth and the sheep hear His voice and follow Him. A stranger they will not follow but will flee from him for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:1-5)

My Well-Beloved, God has declared to us by His intermediary, Isaiah, "a Child is born to us. His Name shall be called the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). God said to us through Jeremiah, "the thoughts that I think towards you are thoughts of peace and not of evil." (Jeremiah 29:11) The new-born Child is, therefore, our Peace. He is our only Head and Guide. He is the Shepherd who knows His sheep and they do not flee from Him. We then must work to keep his teaching 'alive' in us. We must watch not to let workers of darkness, deceivers and troublemakers drag us back and hinder us. These are the ones who jump over walls in order not to enter by the door – which is wide open and leads to a safe home.

On this day of the Nativity of God's Child, we offer our prayer to God in repentance, asking Him to have mercy on mankind, which groans under the weight of wars, terrorism, violence and murder. Let us ask Him that He may enable us to approach the third millennium with a heart ready to rest in the light of the Lord. The light of Jesus burst forth from the crib so that we ourselves may always be children of light!

I send warm Christmas greetings to our British Deanery!

Bishop Gabriel

Beyond our Understanding

*"The things above the earth and on the earth were amazed at Thy power as they beheld Thee, O my Saviour, upon Thy throne on high and in the manger below. For **beyond our understanding** Thou hast appeared in two natures, God and Man."*

First Canticle of Christmas Eve Compline

Tony Blair, in his speech in the Irish Dail in Dublin, the first English Prime Minister to speak there in this century, made the statement "there are no absolutes". Thus our first post-modern Prime Minister revealed his New Age credentials, and few even noticed it. But it is in this relativistic atmosphere that we live, and the Gospel has to be proclaimed.

1998 is the centenary of the birth of C.S. Lewis. This autumn my wife and I have been attending a series of sermons in Magdalene College, Cambridge on C.S. Lewis. Although primarily an Oxford man, C.S. Lewis spent much of his later life in Cambridge, at Magdalene College, where he was a Fellow and a Professor of a Chair which was specially created for him. Lewis wrote a book called *Beyond Personality*. He was able to see so much that his contemporaries missed - beyond the bounds of credibility into the realms of faith.

In one important respect C.S. Lewis reflected the Eastern way of seeing things. He delighted in the use of symbols and allegories, of which perhaps the Nania stories are the most famous, and still enthrall children of all ages.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* he describes the effect that the wicked witch has on the land she held in bondage. Lewis writes, "it was always winter and never Christmas".

We live in this winter darkness of faithless and confused post-modernism. In it the witch is pleased that people claim no absolutes, for then they don't meddle with her sovereignty. But for us there is always Christmas, when the true light of Christ pierces the cold darkness of our perennial secular winter.

Christ's birth is in many ways "beyond our understanding", but the simplest person can grasp its essence and rejoice in both its simplicity and its absoluteness.

May God bless us all - and our families and friends this Christmas!

Father Michael Harper