

## Archive 2004

### 3. Windows into Heaven - The Holy Icons

by Fr. Chrysostom MacDonnell

For it is God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." [II Cor. 4:6]

In the year 843 the Empress Theodora, together with the Patriarch Methodius, restored the use of holy icons to all churches in the Byzantine Empire. So ended a century of dispute on the legitimacy of iconography within the Orthodox tradition of Christianity.

For anyone who encounters Orthodoxy for the first time the most noticeable and characteristic feature must be her iconography. Exotic and otherworldly in appearance at first, they perhaps take some getting used to. Certainly, they are attractive and beguiling when considered as works of religious art, but this would be a very facile judgement. Clearly, as one of the central manifestations of the Orthodox faith, lying at the very heart her religious experience, icons have not only a theological function and meaning, they have a controversial history which is worthy of study.

From the earliest days when Christians could gather regularly in the same place, religious paintings and decorations adorned their walls. The art of the latter Graeco-Roman world was evidently carried over into the Primitive Church, supplying a means of visual expression to the nascent faith. In legend, the Apostle and Evangelist, St. Luke, had painted the first icon, an image of the Theotokos, the God-bearer, Mary. Of similar provenance, is the story of King Abgar of Edessa, who, living during the lifetime of Christ, lay desperately sick, yet had heard of the Jewish healer and had asked him to visit. Jesus replied that he was unable to come, but sent instead, his image imprinted on a miraculous piece of cloth. This object, when placed on the king, instantly restored him to health. The cultus of the divine image had begun.

By the time of the Emperors Leo III (died 741) and Constantine V (died 775) the opponents of Christian iconography accused the Orthodox of a devotion to the holy icons that had grown in many quarters to exaggerated or even idolatrous ways.

A church council in 753 formally ordered the removal of the holy images. The origins and reasons for this controversy are hotly debated amongst scholars: two possible reasons might be, first, an imperial desire to control the Church and second, the influence, through various contacts, of the newly arisen force of Islam. It is no co-incidence that Islam, a religious reversion in many ways to the Old Testament - with its concomitant ban on images - had established itself by this period.

Yet laying aside accusations from the iconoclasts of devotional excess, something fundamental was at stake here; something the concerned not merely how churches should be decorated, but something which concerned, as we shall see, the Church's understanding of her basic doctrines. The years 762 - 775 became known as the 'Decade of Blood' as so many Orthodox, especially monks, were imprisoned, tortured and killed for their harbouring and veneration of the holy images. It was a mark of how important the issues at stake were that so many were prepared for martyrdom at the hands of the imperial power.

It was only with the accession of the Empress Irene (780-802) that a Church Council, later received as the Seventh Ecumenical Council of the Church, was held, that re-established the holy images and defined their legitimate and proper use in Christian worship. It followed the teaching of the Great Antiochian Orthodox saint, John of Damascus (d.749), arguing that icons may be made and venerated, but not worshipped in themselves.

Here we come to the centre of the Christian faith in its Orthodox understanding. For the doctrine of the Incarnation proclaims that God, the Son of God, became man, taking human flesh. God, in his essence, is indeed invisible, but he has been made known and, more importantly for us here, made visible in Jesus of Nazareth. To look upon Jesus is to look upon the Father (John14:8). If we believe this, then it is no more idolatrous to see and venerate Christ in an icon that it was to look upon him and venerate him in the days of his flesh, as did his contemporaries. By extension, to kiss an icon is no more extreme an action than that of the sinful woman who kissed his feet and washed them with her tears in the Gospel. In fact, not only are icons legitimate, from the Orthodox perspective, they are imperative: Christianity without icons is deficient, lacking a real acknowledgement of the Incarnation. If it is legitimate to proclaim Christ in printer's ink on the pages of the Gospel texts, then it is certainly so in wood and paint. For God became matter, and by extension, he is still proclaimed. God indeed had laid down in the Decalogue that graven images must not be worshipped, yet God had 'broken' his own commandment in the Incarnation and graven for himself an image in the face of the Son of Man.

Strictly speaking, God the Father and God, the Holy Spirit could not be portrayed in icons, yet it must be remembered that no icon presents the essence or metaphysical being or nature of anything; certainly not the divine essence. Rather, the iconographer presents us with the person (Hypostasis). This is most important to remember. Similarly with the saints, whether the Theotokos, the God-bearer, or the other saints, those who now bear the divine nature and have won the victory; they too, the Council decreed, may be iconographically portrayed and honoured.

Thus, as Council defined, "...the honour rendered to the image ascends to the prototype, and he who venerates an icon adores the person." Just as the lover holding a photograph of the beloved, will kiss it tenderly 'goodnight', as if kissing the object of their affection.

The attacks on the Iconodules by the Iconoclasts lasted with fearful persecutions until, as we have said, the year 843. The holy images have remained an integral and unassailable part of Orthodox experience ever since in churches, homes, businesses, and schools; anywhere the Orthodox find themselves.

I do not intend in this lecture to describe the artistic techniques of iconography apart from pointing out that there are clear canons regarding what is and what is not an icon within the authentic tradition. There have been in recent years considerable moves to recover that authentic style following the often romanticised and debased forms produced in the nineteenth century. Clearly, icons should be painted in egg tempora on seasoned wood upon a base of gesso ( ground chalk). However, lithographic reproductions often serve in churches and homes, but only as a second best.

We are more concerned, here therefore, with how icons are used within Orthodoxy and with their inner meaning.

When you gaze into the face of an icon you are viewing the universe inside out. Your perspective is reversed and your starting point is infinity, looking back, so that the parallel lines splay outwards rather than appearing to join at some vanishing point. This reverse perspective is not always evident, but can be particularly marked in icons featuring the lines of buildings or items of furniture in their background. Without the proper religio-cultural appreciation of the place of the holy images, it is all too easy to misunderstand them. Either to dismiss or condemn them as idols, breaking the command of God, or perhaps, merely to see them as works of religious art, decorating church walls or, at least, simple aids to prayer for simple people. In fact, you yourself, imagining at first that you are the viewer, come to see some work of art, some picture on a wall, become instead the object: it is the icon that is looking at you; you are the one being inspected and you must stand before the holy images humble, penitent; a supplicant entreating the mercy of heaven. It is precisely this humble approach, mentally, spiritually and even physically, as we shall see, that differentiates between the Orthodox and heterodox appreciation of the holy icons.

It is too easy, being all too human, to forget this, but when we stand before the holy images we are in the presence, not of great art but rather, of great and holy persons. Indeed, it would be more correct to

say that the making of icons is, in reality, not an art form at all but a work of Theology. The iconographer, as the word implies, writes the image of the person depicted, not with ink on paper like the Evangelists, but with paint on wooden boards. The image of the second person of the Holy and Life-giving Trinity is clearly proclaimed in the Gospels. Likewise, his image shines forth from his icons. Ever since the Annunciation, the invisible Godhead whose image could not be graven according to the commandments of the old dispensation, has now taken concrete, material form. Not only was this form shown forth in the God-Man, the one known to history as Jesus of Nazareth, it is now continually held in honour in visible form, painted, cherished and worshipped in the holy churches of God. In short, icons have their *raison d'être* in the dogma of the incarnation; to deny the veneration due to the holy images is ultimately to doubt the reality of the coming in flesh of the creator of matter Himself.

Divinity, as ever, remains in itself invisible, un-graven, un-represented, whether in words or paint. Even the Gospels demand faith on the part of the reader, written "from faith for faith". The icons, on the other hand, aim to bring us into the presence of the persons depicted, whether those of the Godhead Himself or the persons of the saints whose very humanity itself is revealed as transfigured in the uncreated light of grace. Standing humbly before the holy icons, we too come into the presence of that same transforming light. The troparion, or hymn recited before the Icon of the Saviour runs:

We reverence Thy sacred icon, O gracious Lord  
and ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ our God,  
for of Thine own good will Thou wast pleased to ascend the cross in the flesh  
that Thou mightest deliver from bondage to the enemy those whom thou hast fashioned.

Wherefore we cry aloud unto Thee with thanksgiving:

Thou hast filled all things with joy,

O our Saviour

for Thou didst come to save the world.

If we take the example of the icon Christ the Teacher, we see Christ staring out at us, his hand raised in blessing. He wears a red inner-garment and a green or blue outer-garment. We have many teachers on earth, but Christ tells us in the Gospel (Matt. 23:8) that we have but one teacher, Christ himself. He is portrayed in these icons, book in hand, as the true master. This is not to denigrate our earthly teachers, but to point out that ultimately the only teaching that will really matter will be that which forms Christ within us and brings us to salvation.

Here, the divinity of Christ is clearly indicated in the red under-robe; red once again the imperial, divine colour. Yet, in the incarnation, Christ became Man and took on our human nature, revealed in the outer garment, the one he has put on. This reflects the dominant blue-green colour, the sphere of our own earthly dwelling. The fingers on right hand, held up in blessing, take up the form of the Greek letters which spell the name Jesus (IHSOUS).

Next, we might consider an icon of the Theotokos, the God-bearer, Mary. This title, affirmed by the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Church, points, again, to the reality of the incarnation.

Within the canons of Orthodox iconography, these holy images of Mary portray and proclaim a mystery beyond human comprehension. We must not see these them in psychological and sociological terms, attempting to understand what is going on here in terms of, for example, the elevation of the feminine ideal, or of seeing the Virgin as the apotheosis of the Byzantine princess, benignly pleading for the subjects of the empire. This would be to miss the point entirely. For Orthodox Christians, the

Theotokos, the God-bearer, is truly of our race, but she is enthroned now, for by the fullness of grace she became the one who was most intimately connected to our Saviour through her motherhood.

Any true icon is a symbol in the Eastern Orthodox sense, being not a stand-in for something absent but rather, the physical manifestation of something truly present in the Church. It is this dynamic understanding of symbolism which differentiates between much of the Orthodox understanding of Christianity and other traditions. We shall hear more of this next time when we study the Sacraments in the Orthodox Church.

There is no special or separate cultus of Mary in the Orthodox tradition. Rather, her veneration is interwoven throughout all the church services and she is frequently referred to and invoked in the liturgical texts. We recognise her as both an integral part of the Church and the most highly venerated member of it. Moreover, she is regarded as the most blessed of all human beings in the kingdom of God. Notice the colours here; traditionally, they are the reverse of Christ's colours. Her outer garment is red, the sign of divinity, for she has been made full of grace by God, but the inner garment is green or blue, the prevailing colour of the earth to show that she is human by nature, just like us.

With this understanding it follows that great veneration is afforded the holy images in church and at home. Their presence is surrounded with what, at first, must seem to outsiders an elaborate etiquette. Yet from within, this is most natural. On coming into church, for example, the faithful will greet the icons, first performing the metanoia, [bowing from the waist to touch the earth and making the sign of the cross] then greeting the persons depicted with a kiss. Candles, likewise are burnt before the icons in honour of their glory, reflecting on earth the light and glory with which they shine in heaven.

The icons are censed by the deacon and priest during the Divine Liturgy, this being a mark of honour and respect, offering worship through these earthly symbols. And yet again, the people and clergy are also censed, worshipping God through his image within the human person.

The holy icons are therefore not just a reminder, but a constant indication that the Saints are watching our progress through this life, praying for us and bidding us on, like those who have run their part in a relay race and have passed the baton on to us. In the homes of the Orthodox it is a traditional and pious custom to set up 'an icon corner'. This might range from a couple of images fixed to a wall where the family recite their daily prayers, to a considerable item of furniture with folding panels, bearing several icons; Christ, his Mother and the family's patron saints.

What are we to make of all this? Clearly, talking as we do in different paradigms, Orthodox piety will not convince the most ardent puritan Protestant, who is as vehemently opposed to the veneration of images as the most fundamentalist of Muslims. But no phenomenon may be comprehended outside the structures of its own milieu. God, we claim, walked in the Roman province of Judea two thousand years ago, yet he is with us to the end of the age. After the Ascension, Pope St. Leo the Great (6th Cent.) attested, Christ's physical presence passed over into the sacraments. We shall, of course, explore this next time. But the Orthodox assert, also, that his person is still made manifest in the holy images. He is, still among us. This has not always been appreciated in the Western Church and it is only now that icons are beginning to gain popular esteem amongst Roman Catholics over and against their traditional, three-dimensional statuary. Yet this is by no means an alien idea.

When St. Augustine first came to Britain at the end of the Sixth Century, proclaiming the Christian faith in East Anglia under the command of Pope St. Gregory the Great, he and his fellow monks, approached the pagan court, as St. Bede tells us, bearing before them a processional cross and also an image of the Saviour, painted on a board. The mission among the English was led by an icon...

# The Mysteries of the Kingdom

## *The Sacraments in Orthodox Life*

*"We are ordered to perform in this world the symbols and signs of the future things so that, through the service of the sacrament, we may be like men who enjoy symbolically the happiness of the heavenly benefits, and thus acquire a sense of possession and a strong hope of the things for which we look."*

Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350 – 428)

The subtitle of this final article is *The Sacraments in Orthodox Life*. We shall explore the part these very specialised services of the Christian Church play in both the particular and the everyday lives of Orthodox Christians. I am not especially concerned here with their history or their content, but rather, their meaning in the overall view of the Orthodox Christian experience.

The quotation we have just read talks of us being ordered to perform ‘*in this world*’ the symbols of the next. It is precisely for this idea that the opening quotation was chosen, for it sums up, so beautifully, the role played by the sacraments, or *mysteries*, as they are more properly called, in the Orthodox way of life. There is, to start then, an interesting juxtaposition between *this world*, on the one hand, and what Theodore calls *the future things*. We have already heard in the second article the idea of the original, paradisaical, state of man and of our fall into *this world*; of how our Lenten endeavour is to achieve, through asceticism (the practice of self-denial) and through synergy with God’s grace, a return to that paradise. The *future things* are therefore nothing less than the return to our very origins, and this world is to become what it is already in potential, the Kingdom of God.

Though it might seem strange to the western mind, I wish to begin uncovering the Orthodox conception of the sacraments not with the services themselves, but with two of the twelve great feasts in the tradition: Theophany and the Transfiguration.

Theophany, (the Western Epiphany, 6<sup>th</sup> January,) the showing forth of God, commemorates the revelation of the Holy Trinity on earth in the Baptism of Christ by John in the Jordan river. The services of the day involve the Great Blessing of the Waters, after which the homes of the faithful are blessed. Here we need to emphasise that in Orthodox thinking the celebrant of any sacrament is Christ himself. Christ himself blessed the waters by his presence once in the River Jordan. What we perform now is an extension, as if the ripples from that original act were extending and spreading outwards in concentric circles, down to our own day. By that token presence in one river all waters were cleansed from the fall wrought in Adam, for Christ came not only to save mankind, but all creation with us and, indeed, through us. [Mark 16:15] In this blessing the true, metaphysical nature of water is thus uncovered. Examined, of course, according to the modern scientific method, or rather, according to modern *scientism*, the waters have not changed at all: they are still reducible to a compound of hydrogen and oxygen in a two to one ratio, but this is to tell us nothing of the *meaning* of water. Yet in the feast their biological life-giving properties are surpassed, and the true meaning of the word, Life, (Gr: Ζωή) is revealed; that which is established by our communion with the source of life, God himself.

It is, then, in the sacrament of Baptism that we are reborn into this new life; that we take, in tangible form, the pledge of Theodore’s *future things*. Christ died once, for all people, and by extension, as it were, we enter his death. ‘*Do you not know,*’ says St. Paul to the Romans (6:3-4), ‘*that as many of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism.*’ But herein lies the essence of the sacramental realities: this transforming mystery is not something we accomplish for ourselves by pious thoughts or even by faith. It is the act of God through his Church. When we are baptised we are baptised and incorporated into the faith of the Church. Orthodoxy rejects the exclusivism of so called *believer’s baptism* found in some forms of Protestantism, as if only by our own mental attitude towards a set of particular statements of faith we could bring about rebirth. Baptism by triple immersion in the name of the Trinity is the tradition handed down by the Apostles and is therefore the means and general rule, (exceptions in extreme circumstances

only proving the rule.) This point is made clear by the fact that the form of the baptismal service is exactly the same in the Eastern Rite both when adults and infants are baptised.

Our second feast, the Transfiguration (6<sup>th</sup> August), celebrates the revelation of the uncreated light of Christ's divinity on Mount Tabor. The message is clear: not only does this glory prefigure the glory to come in Christ's resurrection and his Second Coming, but also our own in him. And indeed, again by extension, all creation is to reveal this glory. The events told in the gospels take place around the Jewish feast of weeks (Heb: Shavuoth), a kind of harvest festival. It is traditional on this feast in Orthodox churches to bless the first fruits: grapes in the Greek tradition, apples in the Russian. Once again, the message is reiterated: that sacraments and sacramental acts, taking the very matter found *in this world*, bless and transfigure them to reveal what they truly are in the mind of God: not elements for analysis, dissection and exploitation [c.f. the modern science of genetics and embryology and what they have done to and with the human person!], but rather, the first fruits of those *future things*.

Bearing this in mind, we see something remarkable about the human vocation and our role in this universe we now know. I mentioned above that Christ was the only true celebrant of any sacrament. So, as regards the sacred ministry of the Church, itself (bishops, priests and deacons) there is but one priest: Christ. And yet, in a sense all are priests; there is a real priesthood of all believers, baptised into Christ. The creation, St. Paul tells us, groans in travail, awaiting with eager longing, the revelation of the children of God. But unknown to the unbelieving world, the people of God's Church are his holy priesthood, his royal nation, as St. Peter calls us. It is the vocation of mankind to be the priest of creation, standing at its heads, and on behalf of the animal and plant kingdoms, even of the earthly elements themselves, to pray and mediate the mystery of those *future things*. Yet, furthermore, within the body of the faithful, certain men, and it is men alone in Orthodox tradition, are called out and elected to the sacred ministry, icons on earth of the heavenly bridegroom to his bride the Church. But this sacrament of Ordination, which they alone receive, is not the conveying of some supernatural powers, as if, by themselves, they might bless water, or turn bread into the actual body of Christ. What they receive is authority to lead the congregation. It is especially in worship that the pastors, at their head of the people, pray with and for them, to which the faithful affix the seal of their approval with their own *amen*.

An interesting case in point here is over the controversy between the eastern and western traditions over the moment or form of consecration in the eucharistic prayer or *Anaphora*. In the Western tradition it is when the priest recites the words that Christ used at the what they call the *Last Supper* over the bread and wine that the elements becomes 'transubstantiated' into the very body and blood of Christ. The Eastern tradition on the other hand, rejecting the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, neo-pagan philosophical definition of transubstantiation, has always maintained that such definitions of 'moments of consecration' are vain pursuits. In fact, the words of Christ: *this is my Body; this is my blood* are not words of consecration at all. In fact they are used by Christ just before he delivers the bread and wine to his disciples at what the Orthodox call *The Mystical Supper*. For the Orthodox, what must follow is an invocation or *epiclesis* (calling down) of God, the Holy Spirit to bring about the change, without any attempt to define what happens. This change, into the body and blood of Christ, for the Orthodox comes about because the priest, the icon of Christ at the Liturgy, asks for the descent of the Spirit upon the gifts *on behalf of the whole people*, yet it needs their presence and assent. (It is interesting that the *epiclesis* in the *Anaphora* asks first for the Spirit to come upon the people first and only then on the elements.)

Here, sacramental theology reaches its zenith, for bread and wine are revealed to be what all bread and wine is in potential: nothing less than that same Lamb of God that is on the altar before the Father in heaven. Indeed, here we see that it is not so much that the Spirit has descended for us, but that we have ascended, and our altar on earth is a symbol of the true altar in the heavens where Christ is enthroned. As Alexander Schmemmann remarked, the most important words in the Liturgy are not the words of Christ, nor even the *Epiclesis*, but the invitation by the celebrant to 'lift up your hearts.' And yet those words of Christ are all important, as St. John Chrysostom said in the fourth century: This is my body, my blood...once spoken by Christ, consecrates every eucharist. That is, they are the license by which we do what we do; our eucharist is only valid by extension of what he, the true celebrant, once did on

earth. Poor Thomas Cranmer! His conundrum at the Reformation, - *how can Christ's body be in two places at once, both in heaven and on an earthly altar?* - is shown up for the piece of tortuous medieval rhetoric it always was.

Most of all, however, to appreciate fully the Orthodox conception of the sacraments, we need to understand what is meant by a symbol in the eastern tradition of Christian thought.

A symbol here is not a stand-in for something absent. When we see a national flag we know it represents the nation symbolically, but we know also that it, in itself, is not the nation. The same can be said to a large extent in the western conception of the ordained ministry, where the priest is a representative for Christ; he is *alter Christus*, the stand-in, acting his part on his behalf with his authority through the grace of Orders. But in Orthodox tradition the priest does not represent Christ, he manifests him, in the same way that a painted icon manifests him.

For in Eastern Christianity a symbol is not a stand-in for what is absent, but the physical manifestation and evidence of its presence. The human face, for example, is the 'symbol', in this sense, of this or that particular human person; it is the outward image manifesting the inward reality, yet cannot be separated from it. In the same way, the sacraments are symbols of the grace they convey and in being consecrated from the very stuff of matter *in this world*, the sacramental elements, as symbols, manifest the truth about those elements, be they water and oil in Baptism; bread and wine in Communion; the crowns at marriage; whatever they be, once consecrated they not only bear a sacred power as means of grace, but moreover, point to the sacred nature of all matter, that once redeemed from the fall of creation by the action of the Holy Spirit and of Christ through his Church, begin to manifest the nature they had in the beginning and are to manifest as the *future things*.

By way of illustration – and remembering that all analogies break down when pushed too far – I once read an Anglican explanation of the understanding of the sacramental elements in Holy Communion, and this is a good example of the middle-of-the-road Anglican approach. Here the bread and wine were seen as symbols of Christ's body and blood in the same way that money in our hands represents gold (the real thing of value) held by the Bank of England: an interchangeable token of corresponding value. This neat and easy to understand analogy, representing as it does the western approach to symbolism, will not do, from the Orthodox perspective, as an explanation of the nature of the sacrament and any doctrine of the 'real presence'. For us I should rather use the analogy of when someone switches on a light in a room: the bulb itself manifests light *and indeed uses* the very power that is being generated by the electricity generating station. Here the electric light bulb is an active and dynamic symbol and manifestation of what empowers it. The active bulb is a sacrament of electrical power and in this we can begin to see something of the Orthodox appreciation of the holy mysteries.

For many, if not most, within Protestantism all this must appear very alien. For a religion based on a personal decision to accept Christ into your heart as your personal Saviour; of salvation through grace alone; of justification by faith alone; of authority only from the Bible - belief in which, incidentally, must logically come first, even before belief in God – such a religion must puzzle over the dynamic role afforded to what appears, at first, as mere tradition, custom and esoteric ritual. Yet the problem of proof lies with them, for the Orthodox abide by the sacraments for very clear reasons:

They hold them as coming from Christ and his Apostles

That he taught them to his disciples in his earthly life and between the forty days of his resurrection and his ascension

That they are part of the earliest tradition and we can show clear historic roots, even to this day

That they have been guarded and handed on by the successors to the Apostles, the bishops of the Church

That no one (on their own authority) can just end such a tradition which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, based on their own novel theological understanding, fifteen hundred or more years later

That they are an essential part of the unique Christian revelation and experience of the true religious life

That they manifest the true nature and purpose of matter, showing forth the Kingdom of God

We could go on if space allowed, but suffice it to say that from cradle to grave the Orthodox religious experience is made known in tangible and very sensual form, for in this world we are material creatures and when *the future things* are made manifest this division between the spiritual and the material will be declared of no relevance. When someone goes down into the waters of Baptism their very body, their matter, is spiritualised; their body becomes, in the Pauline phrase, *the temple of the Holy Spirit*. And at the resurrection on the last day, that same Holy Spirit will be materialised in them, and they too will reflect the glory of God, in the body, as Christ did on Mount Tabor.

## **The Fire of Grace**

**by Fr. Michael Harper**

(An address given in St Catherine's College Chapel, Cambridge on February 29<sup>th</sup> 2004)

*"The bush was blazing but it was not consumed" (Genesis 3:2)*

I have chosen as my text one of the best known stories in the Bible about the desert. Moses sees a bush on fire – but not being damaged at all. He hears the voice of God speaking to him; God tells him to remove his sandals, because he is on holy ground. God then tells him what his life work is going to be – to lead the Jewish people from Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey.

This story, set as it is in the desert, always figures prominently in the Spirituality of the Church of the East. For instance, in the Canon of St Andrew of Crete, read in Churches during the first week of Lent, there are the words, "Moses the great went to dwell in the desert. Come seek to follow his way of life, my soul, that in contemplation thou mayest attain the vision of God in the bush."

The desert has again and again been the setting for divine revelation. Moses met with God and received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, which is in a huge desert. He was there for forty days. The Israelites spent forty years in the desert being prepared for their entry to the Promised Land. The prophet Elijah spent much of his time in the desert. John the Baptist, who was linked closely with Elijah, lived and ministered in the desert, and Jesus Christ, after his baptism and before commencing his public ministry, was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Also like Moses, St Paul's ministry was revealed to him in the desert. In Galatians he writes, "I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia." It was in the desert that his unique calling was made clear to him by God. So if we want to hear God, the desert is a good place to do so.

In the following century, we see that the origins of monasticism can be traced to the deserts of Egypt – as men and women left the cities to wait upon God in the surrounding desert. Their pioneers were to be called "the Desert Fathers".

The desert experience is closely linked to Lent, with the forty-day fasting period. Actually it was a late starter, and was first noticed in the Council of Nicaea, 325 AD. The great Lenten fast started this week. Unusually it begins in both the Eastern and the Western Churches at more or less the same time. In the East it began on Monday, in the West on Wednesday. We can see in the desert experiences of God's people the true origins of the Lenten Fast; like Moses on Mount Sinai and Christ's battle with the Tempter, it lasts for forty days. It too is intended to be a desert experience; a kind of monastic interlude in the midst of an otherwise busy and full life. Like monastics we fast; like monastics we pray; like monastics we live a life of simplicity, cutting ourselves off as best we can from the outside world. Yes, we can create a kind of desert in our own lives, without having to go literally to the desert.

What is it that grabs one about the desert? I am going to suggest three reasons why we should be drawn to the desert:

### **Its Simplicity**

The desert is a simple place to live in.

We live today unceasingly complex lives. The stress factors are heavy burdens. The quest for knowledge never abates. I always dread having to buy a new computer – having mastered the last one the new one will be very different – and the learning curve seems to get steeper and steeper.

Lent is about living, at least for six weeks, as far as we can, a simpler lifestyle. The story is told about a person walking through the woods and seeing someone sawing down a tree. "You look exhausted", he said to his perspiring friend, "how long have you been at it?" "Over five hours" he replies "and I'm exhausted! This is hard work". "Well, why not take a break for a short time and sharpen that saw, I am sure it would go a lot faster?" "I don't have time to sharpen the saw", the man replied, "I'm too busy sawing". So in Lent we should take time off to do some sharpening of our minds, hearts and lives, and not make the excuse we are too busy.

The desert has many features. The landscape is often dull and monotonous. That's fine – then nothing to distract us from meeting and hearing God!

The second reason why the desert attracts us is:

### **It's Silence**

We have all had the experience, of moving from the tension and feverish activity of the town or city, to the comparative quietness of the countryside. In the city there is the constant noise of traffic and the crowds of people. In the desert there is stillness, silence and loneliness; an excellent environment to listen to God. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, in his book *Silence and Honey Cakes* has written "authentic silence is difficult, yet it indicates an affirmation, a great Yes to life in freedom" (Lion p 108.) When I visit the country, I can hear the birdsong in the daytime and see the stars at night, often inaudible and unseen in the noise and glare of the town or city.

It is a constant criticism these days of politicians that they do a lot of talking, but little listening. Such censure can just as much be applied to our general society.

There was an incident many years ago in the *Goon Show*, starring Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and others. The telephone rings, and one of them picks it up. "Hello" he exclaims, "hello, hello". His voice becomes more strident, "who is speaking? I can't hear you. Hello – who is speaking?" A voice at the other end says, "you are speaking" "Ah" he replies, "I thought the voice sounded familiar", and he puts the receiver down.

One way conversations like that are all too common in Christian living. We may pray a lot to God, but how much listening do we do? It is interesting that *listening* is the literal meaning of the word *obey* in

both Greek and Latin. To listen we need to try to detach ourselves from the noises and complexities of modern living. To listen is an essential pre-requisite to obedience. We obviously need to know what to obey.

There is a story about the present Bishop of London that when he was preaching recently in St Paul's Cathedral, he asked the rhetorical question (which can sometimes be dangerous) "and what is God saying to you?" At that exact moment someone's mobile phone rang.

I'd like to quote (with permission) from an essay by Tamar Gogvadze, who comes from Georgia, formerly part of the Soviet Union. She is now a student at Cambridge University. She writes, "inner silence is the only soil in which God can sow his word. It is a permanent willingness for acceptance and to discover the truth...inner silence makes a person free from his ego; it frees a person from imagining that he holds the central position in the universe." Later she quotes from the famous Russian mystic, St Seraphim of Sarov, whose desert for most of his life was the thick forests of his homeland, "acquire the spirit of peace, and a thousand souls around you shall be saved".

Next Sunday the Orthodox Church commemorates the monk St Gregory Palamas. This great 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian, is referred to in Vespers on that Sunday as "the herald of the fire of grace." My title for this teaching is "the fire of grace". The two words "fire" and "grace" are not naturally compatible. But the phrase does remind us of the burning bush in the desert. For the Orthodox this man is as important as St Thomas Aquinas, and his work was a defining moment. His greatest ministry was to help people to learn how to be inwardly silent, and thus to hear God. The movement called Hesychasm owes much to St Gregory Palamas. Its emphasis has always been that in order to know that God is God one has to be still.

The third reason why the desert attracts us is:

### **Its surprises**

Clearly Moses was taken by surprise when he saw the remarkable sight of a bush burning without being consumed. It grabbed his attention immediately. Both the Old and New Testament testify that the desert is a place for the surprises of the Holy Spirit. Dr Rowan Williams has written, "very, very occasionally, around an unexpected corner or with an unexpected person, we catch a glimpse of the fire, the desert filled with flame." Thus we are told that when we welcome people, we can be "entertaining angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2)

It is interesting that the first Gospel reading in Lent in the Eastern tradition is an Easter or Pascha reading. Lent must never distract us from the central message of the Resurrection. Thus in the same tradition, prostrations are forbidden on Sundays, and the otherwise strict fasting rules are relaxed at weekends.

Many years ago I had quite a lot to do with the Mary Sisters of Darmstadt. Their vision arose this time in a man created "desert", the destruction of their city by the Royal Air Force in 1944. When they left their air raid shelters – not a single one of them had been killed or hurt – but their city lay in ruins. It was at that moment that the note of "repentance" came into focus for them, a note they have sounded ever since. Some years later, one of the founders, Mother Basilea Schlink, wrote a book with the intriguing title, "the joy of repentance". I myself witnessed a Lutheran community with a strong emphasis on "repentance", yet being the happiest of places to visit.

So let us enter the desert of Lent, and let's make it a time of joy. Let our repentance be joyful. Let us anticipate the gifts of Lent with faith, and so with joy. And let us find time to listen to God and hear his words to us.

# Where are We Going? A Synergistic View of Evolution

## Part 1

I doubt whether biologists at the universities of Athens and Thessaloniki teach anything different from what is taught anywhere else in the world. They certainly don't teach "Creationism", a "scientific" theory based on the early chapters. (Though I have come across an otherwise quite erudite textbook of biology written from this point of view, published in South Africa).

In this country in mid to late Victorian times people who wanted to be considered *avant garde* combined the biological theories of Darwin's "*On the Origin of Species*" with the sociological theories of Herbert Spencer's numerous works (he first thought up the phrase "survival of the fittest", for a theory of human social evolution more brutal than anything Darwin ever thought of).

Bible fundamentalists and neo-Darwinians are both wrong, though. The Old Testament story of the Creation is an allegory; obviously an allegory I would say. Yet there is no doubt that God created the universe, and everything within it, including ourselves! Christians know this by revelation, but even without it seems to me easier to believe than any alternative explanation for the existence of the world.

As for evolution, it all depends on what you mean by "evolution" (as C.E.M. Joad would have said; for those of you who remember the *Brains Trust*). There is no doubt that everything - matter, living organisms, human societies evolves (develops, changes). But the Victorian rationalists and their successors assert that the processes of evolution are entirely autonomous and the result of chance. That is as absurd a belief as Creationism. How many random changes would be needed to produce anything so small and yet so complex and structured as the body of an ant?

I am an economist and theologian, and not a biologist. I would not presume to tell Greek biologists what theories they ought to hold as Orthodox Christians. I am sure it is better for scientific inquiry to follow its own rules (of inquiry, that is). And yet I think a scientist who is an active Christian (and many are) is likely to find many current theories unsatisfying even as temporary stopgaps.

There is no doubt about Creation; and there is no doubt about evolution, because creation is a continuing process (it is still going on. But of course it doesn't happen "by chance". I am sure chance is involved, though. The Roman Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Jesuit priest and eminent geologist, who was forbidden by his order to accept the chair of geology at the Sorbonne) coined a phrase that perhaps better describes creation-evolution as viewed by the Christian. He called it "directed chance."

## Part 2

One could hardly question that there are a great number of random changes during the course of chemical, biological and social evolution. But the whole is clearly directed along a preordained path (by divine agency - how else?). Some contemporary biologists seem to be moving tentatively in this direction. Natural selection accounts for the refinement of species (which seems reasonable). The emergence of new species occurs in leaps, as the result of "mutations" in the genetic structure. But then they spoil it all by insisting the mutations also occur "by chance"

However, I think as Orthodox Christians we can improve on the concept of "directed chance". The process of Creation (evolution is one of its characteristics; the two should not really be

considered apart) is the result of divine-earthly synergy. We are familiar with the idea of synergy as the co-operation between the grade of God and human freewill, in which divine grace plays the dominant part and which will lead to our deification.

I suggest, however, that the concept of synergy has a wider meaning than that; a meaning as wide as the Orthodox understanding of grace. In Roman Catholic theology, especially that of Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century, but still very influential), applies only to human beings. It is a special divine gift offered to Christians, a sort of addition to the human personality distorted by sin, and so unable to respond to God's offer of salvation. By grace alone we are saved.

The eastern idea of grace is much wider. Grace is not something handed over. It is the effect of God's activities (his "energies" - wisdom, power, love, etc) on all he creates. Creation itself is an act of grace.

God's purpose from the beginning was to create men and women as beings in his own image and likeness (that is, able to think and act for themselves. But beings with free will would be inconsistent with a world in which God directly controls everything that happens. So with each stage of development God stands further back. Before the appearance of life forms it was a combination of God's direction and chance. But as life develops, each stage in the evolutionary chain is provided with more independence of action. The behaviour of an ant colony is almost completely controlled by instinct; but higher animals have considerable freedom of action - hunting prey, choosing a mate etc. Human beings were allowed complete freedom of choice. God took a terrific risk there, of course' Humanity was free to disobey, and did; and the result is the word as we know it.

Chemical evolution and biological evolution, with steadily less chance and more synergy - though the co-operation with God is unconscious until we reach humanity. Men and women are the culmination of this process; no higher life form is possible (sci-fi writers take note). The next stage should have been our deification, which I think should have included social evolution on earth. But the Fall spoilt everything and we have to consider what has happened and is still happening instead. It's nice to have something in hand for the next article.

### Part 3

Material evolution, biological evolution, and then human social evolution. The concept of social evolution was very popular in the 19th century. Since then it has gone out of fashion. Modern anthropologists (who study early human societies) and sociologists who study later ones don't like the term at all. In fact they prefer not to speak of "progress".

This may be mainly the fault of two enthusiastic 19th century scholars, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They not only believed in social evolution but claimed to have discovered how it works to the extent of being able to predict the inevitable course of history. They started a world movement to help the process along, and we all know that the final result was not the perfect human society they dreamt of but some of the worst horror stories of the 20th century.

An Orthodox Christian surely cannot believe in social evolution as an inevitable process leading to a human utopia, whether the utopia be Socialism or a perfectly functioning Enterprise Economy. That kind of theory leaves out God (Marx and Engels were of course atheists), and God's ultimate plan for human beings. Nor does it take account of the fact that human history is not going according to plan (it leaves out the Devil and the human Fall into sin). So let us remind ourselves of what God intends for us. He wants us to become like himself - so like that we can be called "gods by grace and status" (what the early Church Fathers call theosis, or deification).

This process (and according to my thesis the whole process of creation-evolution) involves “synergy” - co-operation between the Creator and what he has created. In human beings the co-operation becomes conscious, active co-operation. We are to seek to do the will of God’ So God placed the first human beings in the world with the ability to seek his guidance (or he walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, in the figurative language of the book of Genesis).

What were these first human beings like? Very primitive is the way we would put it, although they walked with God. Stone age people who lived in caves, is all that archaeology has revealed. (Genesis seems to suggest that they were vegetarians, but make of that what you will). I cannot believe that God intended them to remain just as they were. Some of the Fathers insist that God did not create human beings “perfect”. Read, for instance, the book *Against Heresies*, by the second century writer Irenaeus. I think of him as a Western Father, although he was Greek and wrote in Greek. He was, after all, Bishop of Lyons, which is now in France. Interestingly, his works have survived only in Latin translation (you can download an English version of *Against Heresies* from the Internet).

Irenaeus insisted that God created “infants”, intended to “grow to maturity”, by living in fellowship with God and accepting his guidance (or in “synergy”, as later writers said). He says nothing about social evolution in this connection. Hardly! There hadn’t been enough of it for anyone to have thought of the concept. But human beings could grow in fellowship with God only in fellowship with one another - and that would lead to the development of technology and increasingly complex human societies. Social evolution! (To be continued).

**Reader Peter Sizer**

## **Part 4**

We must, however, take into account the second major factor left out of account by social evolution theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Things are not going according to plan. Humanity rejected synergy. People, especially people who have found themselves in positions of power, preferred to act entirely on their own, ignoring God and sometimes (but not always) even denying his existence. In fact there I really only one alternative to following God’s plan, and that is to follow the devil’s counter-plan. Yet there is really no such thing! Creation is a single whole moving along paths and towards a goal that exist only in the mind of God, to which, of course, Satan does not have access. So in practice he will tempt us to do anything that he can make appealing to us, so long as it is opposed to God’s will, making it appear that we are acting independently. In the Genesis story he convinces Adam and Eve that they can become God.

Fortunately, though, things have not turned out as bad as perhaps they might have done. The world has not disintegrated, relapsing into chaos. Human beings, made in the image of God, are naturally good and many have remained basically good, despite everything. There have even been good as well as bad kings and emperors - and politicians! People, I would say, have obeyed God, even unconsciously. So God is still working his purpose out.

Then we must take into account the most important factor of all from the point of view of the Orthodox Christian. God decided to intervene in human history in the most spectacular way of all by himself becoming a human being. The incarnation of the Word of God, the third person of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - changed everything for the better. We can now consciously co-operate with God as followers of his Son, by becoming members of the single body of his followers, which we call the Church. Synergy - co-operation with the grace of God - involves obeying God as Spirit, and as members of the Church we are given the potential to do this consciously and consistently. As some writers have put it, the Holy Spirit now acts on Christians “from within”, whereas before he acted only on specially chosen people (like prophets) “from outside”.

However, I prefer to put this a little differently. God has always been active in human social evolution, and is responsible for all the good in it. Where else can anything good have come from? If a human being isn’t actually obeying God, he or she is imitating him (being made in his image). The only other

source for motivating our actions is the devil, who is capable only of evil. Moreover, God has always acted on human motivation by, as Spirit, prompting from within; but human response has mostly been unconscious. What the Incarnation made possible was conscious co-operation with the wholly Spirit.

So what's wrong, then? The world is not progressing towards greater and greater good. All progress consists of both good and bad, and even active Christians cannot agree among themselves about which parts are good and which bad. Surely everyone knows this nowadays. Nobody believes in utopia any more. The trouble is that even the best of us are not very good at consistently obeying the Holy Spirit. Like Adam and Eve, we develop ambitions of our own; and we even completely misunderstand what the Spirit is trying to prompt us to do, because we interpret it according to our own ambitions.

**Reader Peter Sizer**

## **Great Lent Meditation**

### **Gulliver's View - A Meditation on the Coincidence of the Start of the Triodion with the Eve of the Meeting**

I suppose *Gulliver's Travels*, by Dean Swift, must be one of the best (certainly one of the best known) satirical works in English. Some of you may have read it - at least the first part of it - as children. The story of Gulliver's visit to the kingdom of Lilliput makes a good children's story when somewhat watered down. But the book, which includes accounts of visits to several other imaginary countries, was written for adults, and its purpose was to satirise life in England in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

But the story about the visit to Lilliput, or rather Lilliput and Blefuscu, two nations of people only six inches tall that were at war with each other, is what I want to talk about. To reduce the people you are criticising to creatures only six inches high, being observed by a person around six feet tall, is a particularly effective way of satirising them.

The posturing of politicians and military people simply looks ridiculous if you think of them as only six inches tall, being looked down on by an observer (representing yourself) who is getting on for six feet tall. We have experienced a lot of strutting and ranting by politicians and media people over the last few days. If we can think of them as little creatures only six inches high, we shall view recent events very differently!

Politicians, generals and even scientists are very fond of boasting; but it just sounds ridiculous if you think of them as midgets. You can make the ridicule still more effective by making the gap wider. Think of the great public figures as the size of the little lead toy soldiers you used to be able to buy at Woolworth's. Then think of the observer as a giant looking down from the sky. Of think how insignificant anything on earth would look to a superhuman observer in outer space!

Now go a stage further, and think how we, his tiny, insignificant creatures must look in the sight of God! We are insignificant creatures occupying a tiny part of the vast universe God has created. There can surely be nothing more ridiculous than boasting to God. Yet people do it.

It was what the Pharisee did in today's Gospel story. He liked showing off (don't we all, at least to some extent?). But you can't show off to the Creator of the whole universe. The proper approach to God is to do what the Publican did. He crept into a corner and said: "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner"

We are reminded of that frequently throughout Lent; and beginning today, because this is the first of the four Sundays of preparation for Great Lent - the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, the Sunday of Meat Fare and the Sunday of Cheese Fare.

I am not, however, going to talk about what you should do during Great Lent. Because if you don't know how to observe Great Lent, after some eight years, then you never will! Anyway, the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee this year is rather special. It is the beginning of the Triodion as usual, but this year that is not the main celebration. The principal feast today is the eve of the Meeting of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the Temple.

The feast of the Meeting represents first of all a traditional Jewish custom. Mary and Joseph take Jesus into the Temple at Jerusalem to offer him to God, and to offer a sacrifice on his behalf, as their first-born son. But for Christians the event stands for much more than that, for Jesus is God incarnate - become flesh. The Mother of

God, the virgin Mary, immaculate, offers Jesus, the Son of God, as man to his Father. So that he can be offered back to us as God.

We are reminded that in Jesus God became what we are to enable us to become what he is. We are tiny, insignificant creatures, occupying a tiny, insignificant part of God's universe. Yet we are assured that God made us in his own image and likeness. Tiny, insignificant copies we may be, but we have the potential to become like Jesus; that is, really like God. Now that *is* something to boast about.

**Reader Peter Sizer**

## Food

**by Fr. Chrysostom MacDonnell**

In his work of comic science-fiction, *The Hitch-Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*, the late Douglas Adams outlines the three stages of civilization based around three questions that intelligent beings have progressively asked about food. Firstly, the desperate, primitive stage: *What* shall we eat? Secondly, the inquiring, philosophical stage: *Why* do we eat? Finally comes the affluent, decadent phase of our development with the question: *Where* shall we eat? Laying on one side the act of eating itself, I want to explore in this article the very stuff itself and consider food within the context of the Orthodox Christian life, its meaning and purpose.

It is no surprise that the Orthodox understanding of what Christianity is, in essence, comes not, primarily, from formal instruction in matters of doctrine but from participation and experience; not so much instruction as incorporation. As the word incorporation itself implies, we become members of the corpus, the body. If therefore, one were to ask what is the aim of the Christian life, what is its goal, we should reply that it is eternal communion with God, the source of our being.

This idea of communion [Koinwnia] is much more than mere fellowship, as is sometimes implied. Not only is it a free access to the divine (Jn.10:9), it is also an eternal participation in the life of the Trinity. In the end, this is what we understand salvation to be: the discovery and recovery of that life hidden in God, which is so much more than just its biological expression. We are talking here of a life not rooted in biological function but grafted into the real source of life. (See: St. John chapter 15).

In this fallen world, mankind has forgotten this life and vests its whole interest in the sustaining of an existence here and now. With existential anxiety, what is valued is survival as a law of nature. The whole tenor of what the world values is made very clear in its response to those four horseman of the Apocalypse: disease, famine, war and death. Knowing its time is not long, mankind, like Satan in that last book of the Bible, paces up and down the seashore in anger, knowing the time is short, like Shakespeare's actor, strutting his part upon the stage of life. It is ironic that one of the ideologies, born in the 19th Century, could sideline religion as an anodyne to ease the pain of life but had no answer to Death, the ultimate enemy of mankind. The truth is, so much of what most would consider the blessings of this life, are themselves those very opiates that dull the mind to reality. Yet, even religion itself can be appreciated by this world – when it considers it useful: when it comforts, enforces social cohesion, endorses politics or blesses the achievements of human endeavour. Woe betide religion, however, when it would 'get in the way' or dare distract the world from its pursuit of survival, pointing out with disturbing prophecy, the realities of our existence. (Matt.23:37-39; 24:9-14)

Our life - the life in God which is eternal communion with the Trinity, comes from God himself. In the story of the Fall of mankind in the book of Genesis, death enters creation not through the will of God but by the choice of Adam and Eve. This story, looking at the human condition through God's eyes, is a true diagnosis, describing with shaming accuracy, how each one of us is inclined to act in this world.

Instead of casting ourselves upon God and his nurturing love to sustain his life within us, we take what is 'forbidden'; what has not been granted for our peace and well-being, and, thus tasting, we die.

This mystery is borne out, manifested - symbolised we might say - by our own craving and eating in this life now. How much of our life can be dominated by concupiscence - that pursuit of things; an unsatisfied search for something to comfort an inner emptiness? Even the very food we need requires that we kill to eat. We sustain our bodies, knowing they are subject to decay and eventual death themselves. There may be a certain comfort but it is only a temporal one, in knowing that even we are part of a food-chain - like Simba, in Disney's *The Lion King*, who is told by his father that, although they eat the antelope, when the lion dies, they become the grass, which the Antelope eat in turn. But Disney-morality is strictly Universalist and therefore non-Christian.

If, on the other hand, we inquire into salvation-history, God first chose a people for himself, the ancient Hebrews, through the covenant with Abraham, to re-establish in human hearts the desire for this real life. In the Mosaic Law (Torah) of the Old Testament, the 613 commandments form a particular path for this chosen people. The fundamental questions of the old dispensation are whether this people would fulfil their vocation (Hosea 11:1-6); whether they would seek life from this world or from God, (Deut.32:45-47) and of how the Law should be practiced (Hosea 6:6).

It is no wonder that even food, our present subject, is of particular interest in the Torah. Whittled down to the very basics, the fundamental needs of mankind - merely to survive - are a benign environment and food. Given agreeable and safe surroundings, it is food that sustains us till organic breakdown leads us to the point of death. Food, in other words, sustains us till we die and, driven by that existential anxiety and the desire to survive, we eat, as it were, to put off the evil day as long as possible. It is intriguing that, in the Jewish food laws (Kashrut), we find that Meat foods (which are killed) are thought of as death-giving and that dairy foods as life-giving: the two are never mixed in Kosher recipes. So, even in The Law, the ambiguity of our survival through food is noted. But Law can only take us so far; the mere moral redirection of man cannot, of itself, bring eternal life and communion in God. This was the momentous revelation given to St. Paul as he considered who Christ was and the real significance of what he had done. (Rom.3:19-20; 6:20-23)

So, what is required is not just the moral redirection of human beings but the utter transfiguration of mankind, his theosis or deification (II Pet.1:4). This is the revelation that man is made not just in the image of God (Gen.1:26) but in his likeness also. The Orthodox understanding and interpretation here, is that we cannot lose the image of God within us, for that is part of our human essence (nature) but that we have lost the likeness of God. This is why we are baptised: to begin the recovery of that likeness, which is the whole Christian endeavour. This understanding fundamentally challenges our whole outlook on life and what we mean by life. Everything we have been brought up to value; everything we think of as significant or important is revealed in a new light, perhaps in a quite disturbing way. (Matt.6:25-34) Even the food we eat must itself be changed from being the mere sustainer of a life that leads to death, into a symbol of blessings to come. [Remember that in Orthodox theology a symbol is not a representative or stand-in for something that is absent but rather, the manifestation of something really present.] No wonder that we bless the Creator and the food he gives us before we eat; no wonder that bread and wine - the very representations of human toil, struggle, work, joy, spirit and pleasure - are offered that they too may partake of God and become the very sacrament of God within us. With this understanding and attitude, how we behave in respect of food - as with anything in all creation - must be charged with a very specific reverence. For if the Holy Spirit in response to our prayer, changes wheaten bread into the body of the risen Christ and fermented grape juice into his holy blood, then all bread and all wine share, in potential, that same honour, even vocation, we might say. So, from this perspective, the sin of gluttony must be eschewed not merely in respect of some moral law; not just as an abuse of our own digestions or as an affront to social niceties. Gluttony is also, from our understanding, a kind of sacrilege; a lack of respect for holy things. We might, logically, expand this to the whole material world and see in any misuse or spoiling of creation, an affront to the milieu wherein takes place the divine ascent of man. For this creation, this mere dust, forms the living crucible wherein are forged the saints of God.

Furthermore, how ironic it is, that whilst some consume to obesity in affluent economies, others starve. Daily, we are told, that our modern diet is either poisoning us or storing up illness to come. Once again, the very food we eat turns out to be an unmasked villain. What should sustain us, we thought, has become an enemy within; whether from the modern industrialisation of food processes in super-abundance, or from post-modern irrationality and the retreat into New-Age fads and diets: food has become a source of anxiety. From the modern phenomena of food as a life-style statement with its own masters of cuisine-fashion, to the dysfunctions of bulimia and anorexia, food is seen as a problem. One supermarket that I frequent even has a range of foods called Meal Solutions – I rest my case! How should Christians see food? Two fundamental points must be accepted. Firstly, food is essential and secondly, it is enjoyable. If these two points are not accepted, our theologising of food will go astray.

Our Lord enjoyed food of all kinds, as is evident in the gospels. Yet, by his very presence, he transformed the dining table into an icon of the Kingdom of God. Traditionally, above the Holy Doors on an Iconostasis in an Orthodox church, we have an icon of the Mystical Supper - a far more appropriate name than 'the last supper', as used in the Western tradition. Here, food and the act of eating, reaches its apogee. How often he is shown eating with disciples, tax collectors and low-lives, even with Pharisees! We need, therefore, as St. Paul says, to be renewed in our minds [Eph.4:23]. We need, in other words, to rethink our attitude to food. Food is so many things. Yes, we need it as a biological necessity and we need to eat healthily and in moderation. We know also that it has such great historical and cultural significance. It is a source of enormous pleasure and social joy. It is likewise, however, a hook for the passion of gluttony and, like all good things, can be corrupted by the demonic: all sin is the corruption of what was created 'good' by God. And yet, within our spiritual understanding, it can be transformed into Agape [Agaph] - the love-feast - a foretaste, whether alone or with our families, with friends or colleagues, but especially with our brothers and sisters in Christ, of that marriage feast of the Lamb, the bridal supper of Christ, when he comes in his kingdom. Food, that once brought death in its wake, is now for us a symbol - a manifestation - of life in the Kingdom of God (which is one reason why we should always dedicate our food through a blessing before we eat).

Two Great feasts during the month of August bring these ideas to mind: The Transfiguration on 6th August and the Dormition of the Theotokos on the 15th. The Dormition is in fact, preceded by a fast from 1st August. This is a chance to step back once again and think more deeply and even reconsider our attitude to food and what sustains us in this life, not in some worthy collective thankfulness for nature's bounty but rather, a by a fundamental shift in our attitude. Interestingly, both feasts have attached to them certain blessings: fruits on the 6th and flowers on the 15th. It is imperative, however, that we make very clear that in blessing, we are blessing the Creator; thanking the God who is the source of our real life, manifested in these fruits of the earth.

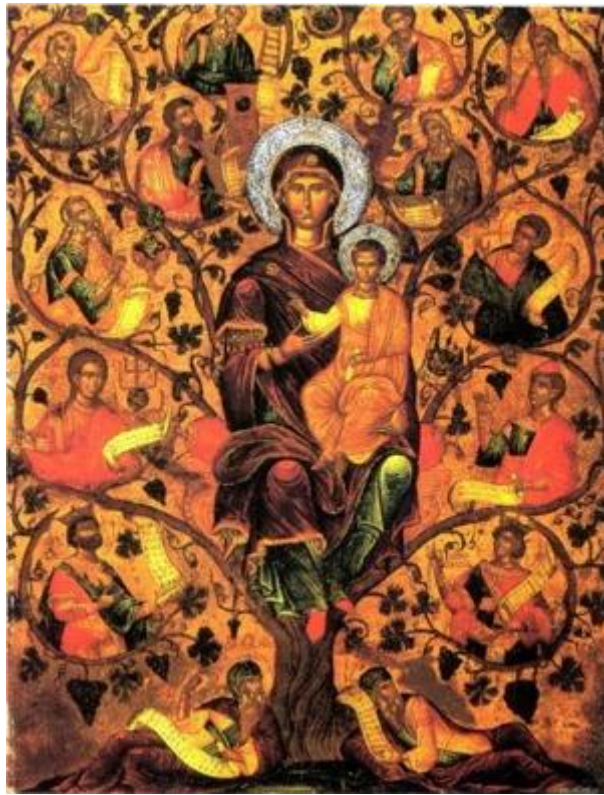
These 'harvest' connections have their Old Testaments precedents, indeed, but it is easy for the older, pagan mind to lie just under the surface. How often, even in Christian societies, has the harvest-home been a celebration of the earth herself and a thanking of Nature – blessing the creation and creature rather than the Creator? There has been a considerable shift back to this way of thinking in the atavistic New-Age movements. Whereas the modern, industrialized and capitalist world might have flaunted its own achievements with unashamed hubris, the old earth goddess still lurks just beneath the surface in the post-modern subconscious with all her chthonic minions waiting in the wings. We, however, who have been baptized into Christ and claim to have put on Christ, have to acquire the mind of Christ. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus... Wherefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil.2:5-12) Further study of this can be made in the New Testament. St. Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is an extended meditation and exhortation on acquiring the mind of Christ and of how it is lived in practice. (See especially. Eph. 4:17-24). Finally, the same is true of the two epistles of St. Peter where II Pet.1:3-11 is of particular interest in its confirmation of what the Fathers taught, that God became man that man might become god; that we might share through adoption and grace in the very divine nature itself. This is communion with God and with one another; this is eternal life with the source of our Life!

If we return to Mr. Adams' three questions about eating and civilization, from the Orthodox Christian perspective we must reply to each: What shall we eat? – The Mystical Supper. Why do we eat? – It is a communion with the body and blood of Christ. Where shall we eat? – in the Church of the Living God. In other words, if our eating begins with the mystery of Holy Communion, all other eating will fit naturally into the Christian context. This is one reason why we fast before communion: to let our first food that day be Christ. From that point we launch out: We break the fast with Antidoron; we share the fellowship of our church community; we go home to share a meal with family and friends. By extension, like ripples in a pool extending outward in concentric circles, centered on Christ, all our eating is consecrated and, if we can but perceive a glimpse, we foretaste the marriage supper of the Lamb, yet to come (Apoc.19:7-9).

## The Dormition

(An Essay In The Understanding Of The "Dawn Mission")

by Gerasimos Letts



### The Theotokos of the Tree of Life

As a person who was brought up with no understanding of the Bible and little understanding of the words preached during the services I rarely attended, I embarked on the road of Greek Orthodoxy with a clear and open mind. However, through my ignorance, I have made a most important mistake. When I heard a new word, I did not question its meaning; I did not ask for guidance from my Spiritual Father; I simply accepted the word for what I believed I had heard.

To say *The Dormition of the Mother of God* meant nothing to me would be totally incorrect. Not only did I accept the word *Dormition* as something very important in Orthodoxy, I also felt its importance, spiritually; a warmth which gladdened my heart and was personal to my own feelings.

However, it was not the word *Dormition* that I had heard!

I was under the impression that The Dawn Mission of the Mother of God was being talked about. How easy it is to misinterpret what someone is saying to you. This belief of The Dawn Mission lived with me

for nearly two years and it was only when I was visiting Keffalinia this year, that I learned how wrong I had been all this time. Or had I?

Let me describe to you what my understanding of The Dawn Mission was all about and perhaps any ridicule may be suppressed. If we take the words as they stand, I understood it to mean the mission of the new dawn, preparing for the events ahead, and can liken it to a tree, in the following way.

The roots of the tree are the many paths, which meander through darkness; oppression, despair, need, the search for light, truth and understanding in everything around us. The darkness is the soil which feeds the roots, which gives the tree its strength to grow, and fed by these roots is the trunk of the tree; dawn.

The trunk of the tree is like the birth of a new day. It sprouts hope, new life and heralds the wonders of what the new day will bring and every passage are the branches of the tree, and from these branches are the many diversions that follow, forming the twigs. As leaves sprout from buds, these are the expectations of success we look for and when they wither and drop from the twigs, like leaves in Autumn, we experience sorrow but look forward to the spring when renewed hope can be brought into our lives. When the fulfilment of everything we work for is evident, the bud bursts into flower and we are in awe of it's beauty, it's richness and we carry the flower in our hearts forever. This is the Tree of Life.

If we look at the word *Dormition*, we learn from the books that it's meaning is quite clear; it is the taking of Mary, Mother of God, from earth into Heaven, and is celebrated by a Feast. When I look at The Dawn Mission, as understood by me, and at *The Dormition of the Mother of God*, I see similarities in my beliefs that knock aside any ridicule that might have been cast in my direction. To me, Mary is the Tree of Life, who, through her, gave us Jesus Christ, who is the flower living in our hearts forever.

It would be interesting to learn if other people have faced similar misunderstandings in their lives, only to discover that what they believed to be so was incorrect, but actually not so very different from their understanding after all.

**Gerasimos Letts**

**(a sermon preached recently by Fr. Gregory)**

### **St. Paulinus speaks to us ...**



*"This is how the present life of man on Earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us.*

*You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time. The fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging - and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment. What follows or, indeed, what went before, we know not at all."*

## *Saint Paulinus of York, speaking in Northumbria*

*feast: 10 October (664)*

St. Paulinus little knew what would happen when he spoke to King Edwin of Northumbria in this manner, still a pagan but about to take a Christian wife from Kent and, at least, thereby open to the gospel of Christ. It made of this king a saint and fearless defender of Orthodox Christianity. It transformed the life of his kingdom. Under him the law was so respected, that it became, as the Venerable Bede attested, a proverb that "*a woman might travel through the island with a babe at her breast without fear of insult*"

The message that wrought this change in the king's life seems such a strange, melancholy yet poignant meditation on the fragility and fleeting quality of human life, three score years and ten; or if you were lucky in those days, two score years, period! It was, however, for King Edwin at least, the key to his heart. It spoke to the condition of his soul. By this means, a recognition of the tragic beauty of human life, St. Paulinus was able to show the king how the resurrection of Christ had made of the whole cosmos a banqueting hall, safe from the call of a lifeless death.

It is notable that this Orthodox saint of Great Britain in the 7<sup>th</sup> century preached the resurrection in the context of human frailty and fear; the desire for life and conviviality, yet also realistic concerning our mortality and ignorance. Do we need that message now! Actually, human beings always need to hear that message, loud and clear. It's good to enjoy the warmth of the banqueting hall but that little sparrow in from the cold and on his way out through the window again reminds us ever still that we are but visitors in this realm of life. All our enjoyment of life, all our dreams and plans and schemes .... all these come to nought in the end. With the writer of Ecclesiastes in similar vein we see that indeed, "all is vanity."

Yet, accepting this, the Christian gospel declares that there is a way out and through this impasse of death and that is the resurrection of Christ ... a greening of creation, a renewal of human life beyond death, a hope of eternal life.

This is no *automatic* transition, however, to a better life. In the Garden of Eden we found ourselves locked out of the banqueting hall, subject to the inexorable law of corruption and death. To participate in the resurrection of Christ, to regain entrance to Eden, we need to make continuous and crucial decisions day by day. These concern, fundamentally, our call to live by God's indestructible life and to put to death our own corrupting self-will. This is a life long process of conformity to the cross as a life transforming encounter; putting to death our self-will and submitting to God's will and by his power living the life of sacrifice and faithfulness. The way of death-destroying LOVE is our resurrection, they key to all life here and now and the promise of life to come, not subject to death, corruption, hell and judgement but rather life, health and the enjoyment of God's Kingdom with All the Saints.

After hearing St. Paulinus' message, the King, moved by the Holy Spirit turned to Christ, placed his trust in Him and sought baptism. The great change had begun in Northumbria; a change that was to move his successor to work with our own St. Aidan to continue the holy work of the conversion of the pagan north east. Such is the power of one simple imaginative story. Such is its power to change us if we will let God warm our hearts to serve Him.

**Fr. Gregory**

**War and Peace**

*An address given by Father Michael Harper in St Catherine's College Chapel, Cambridge, on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2004*

This Sunday, Remembrance Sunday, we traditionally recall those who died or suffered injuries in recent wars. In a sense, every Sunday is a Remembrance Sunday for Christians, for Christ said to his disciples at the Last Supper – "this do in remembrance of me". Also remembrance plays a pivotal part in all our yesterdays – those connected directly with our Christian Faith, birthdays, wedding anniversaries and other such celebrations, and more immediately at this time to remember those connected with the wars of the last century.

Only those who have taken part in war can possibly understand the horror of it. My father, who served in Flanders in the Great War, like so many others, never spoke about his experiences. Some years ago, when I visited the Christian Community of Lee Abbey in North Devon, I met a delightful man who served on the estate. He had been a soldier in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, and landed in Normandy on D-Day. Friends of his invited him to a D-Day reunion. Shortly after returning to Lee Abbey he committed suicide, and it was thought that the reason why he did was the revival of the hideous memories of the war, which came to him at the reunion.

We should be grateful that Poppy Day still holds such an important place in our society – if anything increasingly so. We can express in a variety of ways our gratitude to those who gave their lives in the wars, and others who have had to live many years with crippling disabilities because of injuries sustained in such wars. It also gives us an opportunity to remember the families of those serving in Iraq, especially those who have suffered the loss of loved ones.

At the end of the First World War, the then Dean of Westminster Abbey conceived the idea of bringing the body of an unknown soldier from Flanders and burying him in the Abbey. A recent Dean, Michael Mayne, has written about the many heads of state, who in his day laid wreaths at the foot of the grave. "It is the grave of a nameless, classless, ageless man, who has become more famed than all the great and the good who lie around him, and who has come to represent the much wider constituency of those who have died in the wars of the last century."

Less well known, and complementing rather than competing with it, is the stone that marks the Memorial to Innocent Victims, which stands close to the grave of the unknown warrior. On the circumference of the stone are inscribed the words, "is it nothing to you all, you who pass by" and in the centre are the words "all innocent victims of oppression, violence and war". As we remember those in the armed forces who died in the wars of the last century, we need also to remember the civilians who died or were injured as a direct result of war, now euphemistically called "collateral damage", as well as the many victims of human genocide.

It has been reckoned that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century civilian casualties numbered about 20% of all those killed or injured in war. By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War the figure had risen to 60%, and by the end of the century to 80%. If the figures are correct – and some do challenge them, then the figure in the current Iraq War will have risen to nearly 99%

The Queen was present when the Memorial to Innocent Victims was consecrated. Also present, standing in a semi-circle around the Memorial, were:

Celestin, a man who lost 23 relatives but who himself survived the genocide in Rwanda, which took the lives of 800,000 people:

Eldin, who lost his sight and both hands during the Bosnian war

Daw Nita, who spent many years in prison in Burma

Lella, a Christian from Jerusalem, representing the Palestinian refugees.

Two women from Northern Ireland, a Catholic and a Protestant. Maura, whose son was shot dead as he left Mass, and Joan, whose daughter was killed when the bomb exploded at the Remembrance Day service at Enniskillen

Irina, a poet, who was sent to a Siberian labour camp

Yervant, who survived the massacre by the Turks of one and half million Armenians in the Great War

Fiona, a teacher at Dunblane School who witnessed the killing of several of her pupils

Anita, who survived both Belsen and Auschwitz because she was a violinist and could play Brahms and Schubert to the camp commandants.

The late Hugh Gryn, who was a Jewish Rabbi, was interned in Auschwitz as a young boy with his father, who died there. He was once asked "where was God in Auschwitz?" He replied, "God was there himself, violated and blasphemed. But the real question is 'where was man in Auschwitz?'" If we could find the answer to that question, the world would be a much better and safer place.

### **Jesus Christ – the wounded healer**

Yes, God was in Auschwitz. And we can see this in a deeply moving way when we look again at the occasion when Christ first appeared to his followers after his resurrection – his first words were "peace be with you all". He then showed them his hands and his side, his wounds. Why did He do that? Clearly to reveal to them his credentials – that He was not a bogus phantom, but the same person who had so recently died on the Cross. But was that all? We need to go deeper to see the full significance of this gesture. These wounds were his credentials to a suffering world. They showed that God cares and shares our sufferings; his wounds are our wounds, and our wounds are his; God always has a place for our pain and sufferings, whether on the battlefield or anywhere else. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it perfectly when he wrote about Christ, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested and tempted as we are, yet without sinning." (4:15)

The Ecumenical Patriarch spoke about this in a recent address to the European Assembly and described Christ as "the wounded healer". He quoted St Gregory of Nyssa who affirmed that the greatness and glory of God are to be seen, not in any act of overwhelming power such as the creation of the universe or the stilling of the storm on the lake, but rather in the *kenosis* – his self-emptying, whereby He has chosen to share in our fragility and brokenness, becoming obedient to death, even death upon the Cross. His total sharing in our humiliation, is the true summit of his divine omnipotence. God is never so strong as when He is most weak. St Paul discovered this secret in his own experience, and testified to it when he wrote the words, "when I am weak, then am I strong". He spoke too of God's power as being "made perfect in weakness".

There are no easy answers to those who have suffered in the two World Wars, as well as those who have endured the atrocities of the Holocaust, and more recently the horrors of the school in Belsan, and the cities of Iraq. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his last days in prison in Germany shortly before his execution wrote, "only a suffering God can help". And help He does. Our part is to remember, to pray, to support and to sympathise.

The sheer numbers can so often lack meaning. A suggestion might be for each of us to take one family who have lost a member through the wars of the past or the current conflict in Iraq – either known to us personally, or perhaps one we have read about in the newspapers, and then to make that family a focus of our prayers.

In the reading of the Old Testament we heard of the contrast between King David, the man of war, and Solomon, the man of peace. The words to David were "a son shall be born to you, he shall be a man of peace". David could not build the Temple in Jerusalem because he had fought so many battles. One of the tragedies of the life of the late Yasser Arafat was that he never seemed to be able altogether to shake off the image he had projected of being a fighter, rather than a healer and reconciler. Maybe now a Solomon can take over and deliver the peace so many long for.

But Christ, though He was the Son of David, was essentially the Prince of Peace. The peace He declared to the Church on that first Easter evening, was not just words, He was peace incarnate, the God of peace and not of war. When He spoke with his followers just before His arrest, He declared "peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives." The world offers wars and rumours of wars. According to a Norwegian survey in 1960 there had been up to then some 14,000 wars covering a 5000 year period. But Christ brings peace. St Paul writes about Christ, "He is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility".

### **3 Jesus Christ – who blesses peacemakers**

The Christ, who is our peace and reconciler, calls us to the ministry of peace and reconciliation. If Christ is peace personified, so his people will be peacemakers, which is exactly what He said in the Sermon of the Mount, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." In the Orthodox hymn or Kontakion sung on Good Friday, the prayer is made that God may give "weapons of peace and a standard of victory".

Many years ago the Churches in Papua New Guinea agreed to do a march right across the island – carrying a wooden cross. Half way across they encountered a tribal war going on with bloodshed on both sides. When the cross arrived they laid down their arms and machetes and carried the cross to the other side of their tribal area. Once the cross had left they picked up their arms and continued their tribal war. That is how NOT to do it!

It is reported that Eisenhower, when he was President of the United States once said, "I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way, and let them have it".

John Donne once wrote, "no man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.. any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee".

Rita Laser's brother was in the twin towers on September 9//11, and died with 3000 others. She wrote about it, echoing the words of John Donne, "my brother is dead, but I am not looking to atone for his death. I'm looking to prevent the deaths of others. The world is larger than just me."

The Greek word for peace in the New Testament is *eirene*. The essence of its meaning is "to join or bind people together." It is a relationship word. It is also a word which is to be understood as having a positive quality. Paul lists it amongst the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is not primarily about the absence of noise, anger, or resentment. I remember I used to smile when we sang the hymn "peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away". But true peace is not a matter of distancing ourselves from one another, but of uniting ourselves in a common bond of love and respect. It is the art of binding people together – even opposites, yes, even enemies. It is a ministry in short supply today, but desperately needed in the Middle East, Kosovo, Iraq, the Sudan and many other places.

There is always a danger that some see war as the solution to all problems. Abraham Maslow has said, "if the only tool you have is a hammer, you will see every problem as a nail". We need to reject the war mentality. It has been well put in a UNESCO statement, "the same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace. The responsibility lies with each one of us."

In 1990 I took part in an Ecumenical Conference in Bern in Switzerland. Part of the programme was a march through the city centre, and we were invited to carry with us our national flags. A problem immediately arose because there were both Israeli and Palestinian Christians at the Conference, and the Israelis objected to the Palestinians carrying their national flag, and threatened to boycott the march if they did. The Swiss chairman of the Conference came up with a wise solution. Both groups were to march together under a banner with the words written in both Hebrew and Arabic, "pray for the peace of Jerusalem." Now that Yasser Arafat is dead, we need to pray as never before for that peace.

I would like to end with a prayer for peace:

Christ of wounds, Christ of tears, Christ

of the wounds of the piercing, hold us in

your hands, scarred with love, through all

our trials and sufferings, and by your wounds,

may we find healing

Circle, O God, those who work for peace,

encircle them with your presence

keep wisdom within, keep folly out

keep strength within keep weariness out

keep hope within, keep despair out

keep light within keep darkness out

in the name of the Sacred Three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Circle, O God, the victims of violence and injustice

Encircle them with your presence

Keep truth within, keep falsehood out

Keep compassion within, keep hardheartedness out

Keep love within, keep hatred out

In the name of the sacred Three, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen