

THE NARTHEX

The disciples were first called Christian in Antioch (Acts.11:26)

The Newsletter of St Dunstan's Antiochian Orthodox Church, Poole BH14 9JG.

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JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2024

PERSONALISED RELIGION

Around the time that I was finishing my theological degree at Bristol University, the Church of England's Doctrine Commission published a report. As I was coming up to my twenty-second birthday in 1976 a considerable controversy was taking place amongst clergy and laity in the Established Church. There had been such reports before and in many ways, they reflected the doctrinal changes and occasional turmoil within Anglicanism, evident since the break with the Roman church in the sixteenth century.

In many ways the Church of England has acted as a barometer of religious changes in western Europe, subject to the secularism of which I wrote in the last edition of the Narthex. The 1906 Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline, for example, had reported that the law of public worship was too narrowly drawn for the needs of the time and called for the initiation of liturgical reform. The result was the 1928 Prayer Book that failed to get through Parliament.

Although, at the time, governed by Convocation (the assembly of its bishops) Parliament still controlled much of what the national church could do, as in certain other Protestant countries. By 1976, however, with the creation of the General Synod in three 'houses' (bishops, clergy and laity) to govern the church, the situation had moved on.



As Orthodox Christians, of course, we place our spiritual lives under the direction of our bishops alone in local jurisdictional synods. Under the dogmas established by the seven Ecumenical Councils, guided by the Holy Canons, Holy Tradition has bequeathed us forms of Church governance that developed from the days of the apostles. By contrast, of course, the western churches have absorbed the political values that, since the nineteenth century, have fostered popular democracy. Certainly, the triumph of democracy has been entirely appropriate and positive in the nation's political life, but in the mystery of faith it tends towards disruption: as one Anglican clergyman once wryly remarked to me, you can't have democracy with God.

The underlying assumption within current Anglicanism is that everyone's experience and perspective is to be taken into account. As outside observers, we can only remark that we have watched a once all-embracing ecclesial institution shrink, both in numbers and importance, and have seen it drift further and further away from apostolic orthodoxy. The historical causes of this drifting away have ancient roots, and were certainly put in place by the English reformers in Tudor times. The doors were then opened to what has become modern secularism, and for the Church of England herself it produced that Doctrine Commission Report of 1976.

The essential idea of that report was the victory of subjective spirituality over objective revelation. Orthodox Christianity posits a belief in what has been revealed in the incarnation of Christ; Holy Tradition, as inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in the mind of the Church. It is essentially in the Church and in her liturgical life, that we experience the mystery of faith and acquire, and are conformed to the same mind. By contrast, heterodoxy has latched onto the idea of consensus in establishing a rule of faith. From time immemorial, Church tradition has followed the old Latin tag, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. That is, the Church's prayer and her doctrine are integral and cannot contradict one another. Although this was an idea that, in

theory, was supposedly held within the Church of England, in actual practice, however, there have been great differences of belief, practice and varieties of churchmanship existing side by side. One might, of course, site differences between the sixteen Orthodox jurisdictions in all sorts of areas, but not in areas of doctrine, or Orthodoxy itself. Otherwise, communion in the Holy Gifts would be severed.

What is clear from the compilers of the Doctrine Commission Report of 1976 is that it is founded upon a fundamentally false concept that had become embedded in the minds of western academic theologians, that is, the unorthodox notion that our faith must evolve through time; that it had to be 'meaningful and relevant' to the current age. And that naturally meant according to the mores of a secular age. Take, for example, this quotation from page 10 of the report:

'The shattering changes in the understanding of reality that have marked the modern world have forced us to face the fact that man is an historical being, that he exists in a continuum of change, and that he cannot therefore take for granted that all ages and cultures shared his own principles and forms of thought. If, then, we cannot with integrity treat the words of the past as though they were our own; and if at the same time, the exercise of entering sympathetically into an understanding of the past is both problematic and productive of little that is of general value, what is our attitude to the past to be?'

Nothing could be further from our Orthodox understanding of Mankind and of human nature as created in the image (icon) of God. Though the modes of human existence might change, there is no change in essence (Gr: *ousia*, nature) even after the Fall. We beg to disagree and hold that we can, indeed, *treat the words of the past as our own*. In other words, our understanding is that the *economy of salvation*, as we call it, is universally applicable, for it is addressed to an unchanging human condition. If our understanding is at odds with that, then it is our understanding that needs to change, not the Faith.

Ironically, having paid too much *uncritical* attention to contemporary western biblical criticism (mainly from Germany and America) the Report opined that there could be little connection between a first century Palestinian carpenter and modern man. As the Report said, *'Jesus himself lives in the world of today not so much in his recorded words as through the community which he founded but which may both in its teaching and manner of life have changed radically from anything he envisaged.'*

This idea, of course, is to suggest that there is little by way of direct contact or continuity between Christ Himself and subsequent life of the Church. And we, of course, reject such a suggestion: in Orthodox Christianity, Holy Tradition is that very continuity and connection.

The result for modern liberal Protestantism, pursuing this path, has clearly worked itself out in the last fifty or so years. It has facilitated an attitude towards religion that says 'my' religion is whatever I think or feel it is. The idea of any objectivity in matters of faith gives way to subjectivity; the grace and charism of authority is abandoned for self-authentication. It is interesting to note how the same notion has affected political and social life in the West, where one need only listen to one's own *truth*, and it is possible to choose one's own *facts*, with no need to engage in debate with others. (There is an engaging doctoral thesis to be explored, here, academically, for someone investigating whether liberal Protestant ideas have affected society at large, or if it is the other way round.

This approach to the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 1:3) envisages that we are mere victims of the march of time, drifting further and further from the foundations of Christianity. This undermines the evident teaching of the New Testament, where Paul tells the Colossians that they have been received, *'The mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.'*

Where the 1976 Report claims that our Christian life is a 'voyage of discovery,' that can certainly be true of individuals, it is certainly true of people discovering and entering into the Orthodox Church; it can also be true of those brought up in Orthodoxy who might even have imbibed the faith with their mother's milk. But it is not true of the Church herself. Our Orthodoxy is always a matter of repentance and growth and acquiring the Holy Spirit. But one has to be sure that you are on the right road in making that journey, the voyage. In matters of truth, dogma, and doctrine, of practice and worship, of fellowship and communion, spiritual life and ascetic struggle, Orthodox Christianity is not personalised religion, subjectivity, or an individual pursuit: it is The Church, the community of Faith, the Rock, unworn by time.

Fr Chrysostom

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RECENT EVENTS

Many of you will be aware of recent disturbances within the archdiocese, and not least within our own parish community, This has resulted, sadly, in the deposition of Matei Vulcanescu from the priesthood after he published online articles that insulted our metropolitan and, in effect, accused him of heresy. Mr Vulcanescu (as he now is) served a small community in Liverpool and began a controversy over the issue of the reception

of heterodox Christians into the Orthodox Church. He appears to have become the leader of a group of what we might call *hyperdox* (rather than Orthodox) fundamentalists, who have selectively raided the Holy Canons in order to prove that all ‘converts’ must be received by baptism. In fact, practice on this has varied historically, but it is generally accepted by the communion of Orthodox churches that those who have been baptised (at least, by effusion, if not immersion) in the name of the Holy Trinity, are received by *economia*, through Chrismation alone, following confession; the Holy Spirit making up for all that might be lacking. Mr Vulcanescu has refused to repent (as invited to do by Sayedna) and continues to publish selective canons out of their historical context, forgetting that canons (unlike theological dogmas) can be altered, for the canons are there to guide the daily praxis of the Church; they are not matters of the Faith. Furthermore, he still claims to be a priest of the Antiochian Orthodox Church (which he definitely is not) and still intends, he says, to

serve the Divine Liturgy. This, of course, is illogical, for he no longer has a bishop. A priest only serves the Liturgy *in loco episcopi*; he is a stand-in for the local bishop, which is why he consecrates the Holy Gifts on the Antimension cloth, granted by the bishop. In other words, Mr Vulcanescu has now fallen into presbyterianism, a form of Protestantism that denies the need for bishops, contrary to Holy Tradition.

I myself, and indeed, all the clergy who formed the original Antiochian Deanery in the late 1990’s, were received (with their families) by Chrismation, before being ordained. It is not just the implications of what Mr Vulcanescu, and his small band of followers are saying, as regards the validity of our sacraments: it is the way that they have tried to divide the Body of Christ that has fostered schism. The suspicion is that he might have



influenced five individuals who recently left our own congregation. Where they have gone now, I cannot tell, but whilst they search for the ethereally perfect hyperdox congregation (remembering that we, in Antioch, are still in communion with the mainstream Orthodox churches in this country) they would do well to read the Acts of the Apostles, chapter fifteen. They can remind themselves of how the apostolic Church dealt with the case of ‘*Certain men [who] came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*’

Those who recently left us also complained of the fact that we commune Oriental-Orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) Christians with the Holy Gifts. As you know, we have a number of Ethiopian and Eritrean members of the congregation. It is our practice to do this in conformity with what is done in the homeland of Antiochian Orthodoxy. (In Syria and Lebanon, for example, there will inevitably be a large number of mixed-marriages.) It is also done in the Greek Orthodox Church, as I verified, recently, with my own spiritual father who serves in the Archdiocese of Thyateira (Patriarchate of Constantinople). We cannot commune or concelebrate with Oriental-Orthodox clergy, but we can minister to their lay people, who cannot conveniently go to their own church. There are, indeed, differences as concerns the Hypostatic Union, especially regarding confusion over the use of ancient philosophical terms (such as *physis*, *hypostasis* and *ousia*), but again, by *economia*, we can accommodate their laity who, after sixteen hundred years and by accident of birth, were brought up within a certain tradition of understanding. Such intercommunion, in fact, like the Baptism/Chrismation dispute, has a long history. There was, for example, a degree of shared communion in Southern Italy between the Orthodox and Roman Catholics right up to the seventeenth century.

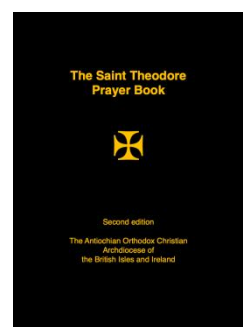
What is clear from such disputes as these, and those who pursue them to their own isolation, is that there is little understanding on their part of ecclesiastical authority; that private judgement and *personal religion* (see above!) take precedence over what is understood and shared in common. Such private judgement is the beginning of the road towards heresy [the Greek root being, αἵρεσις/‘airesis, meaning a ‘thing chosen’].

Fr Chrysostom

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Publication News

With the blessing of Sayedna, we hope soon to publish the second edition of The Saint Theodore Prayer Book. This will be the same pocket book size but with twice the content (138 printed pages). It will have a



harder cover and be ring bound. As yet, we do not know what the cost of each copy will be but, as before, it will not retail with an eye to profit. Funding for this comes from our own parish funds, which are recouped when the books are sold to individuals or to other Antiochian communities around the country.

SERVICES

Vespers is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm (Please enter by the side door). Fr Chrysostom is available for **Confession** afterwards or by appointment. Fr Filip is available for Confession by appointment. Fr Chrysostom and Fr Filip having taken on the care of both Athelhampton and Belfast, **Orthros** can only be served currently at St Dunstan's on the first, third (and fifth) Sundays at 8.45am when both clergy can be present. Please note any announcements for changes to the schedule of services.

JANUARY

Fri 5th Eve of Theophany Vespers Divine Liturgy and Great blessing of Waters
6.00pm

Sun 7th Synaxis of St John the Baptist Orthros 8.45am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 14th 32nd Sunday after Pentecost Leave-taking of Theophany
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 21st 33rd Sunday after Pentecost Sunday of the ten Lepers Orthros 8.45am
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 28th 34th Sunday after Pentecost Sunday of Zacchaeus
Divine Liturgy 10.30am
[Divine Liturgy at Athelhampton 10.30am]

FEBRUARY

Fri 2nd The Meeting of the Lord (Candlemas)

Sun 4th 35th Sunday after Pentecost Afterfeast of the Meeting Orthros 8.45am
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 11th 36th Sunday after Pentecost Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 18th 37th Sunday after Pentecost Sunday of the Canaanite Woman
Orthros 8.45am Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sat 24th [At Athelhampton: Divine Liturgy with Metropolitan Silouan 10.30am

Sun 25th Sunday of the Tax Collector & Pharisee Beginning of the Triodion
Orthros 8.45am Divine Liturgy with Metropolitan Silouan 10.30am

Monday 26th February - Friday 1st March Fast Free Week

