

# The Apostle

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My Journey to and in Christ – Key moments in 50 years 1975-2025

Perhaps a little seed for God was planted unknowingly by my mother, a woman generally dismissive of any type of religion, when she hung a sentimental picture of a little boy in prayer in a meadow in my bedroom.

My persistent curiosity in life, still retained is evidenced by my first teacher, a very patient, skilled and lovely woman who laid the foundation for my education. However, one day I think even she was exasperated. "Graham" she said, "please stop asking why!"

That's one request I have always ignored. (Graham was my name before becoming Orthodox).

I remember asking my mother (I must have been about 9) if God existed and, if He did, how she knew this for sure. "Oh He just does!" she said. This coming from a woman who had never darkened the door of any place of worship, I found the response singularly unconvincing.

I think I have always believed in a Creator God. In the cloudless skies of north Derbyshire, long before the light pollution of our cities made the observation of the heavens difficult, I stood in awe of all the galaxies and stars I could see. Not as yet knowing Jesus, I certainly believed in the Creator.

One day walking to the rail station for school I mused that I had two choices in life ... be good or be bad. I concluded that being good minimised harm and was the more rational choice.

I must have been about 12 when a school friend of mine, a Pentecostal Christian, Michael Hughes, (we

are still in touch), witnessed to me about Christ. I replied that unless he could show proof of what he was claiming, I wasn't interested. I spent my teens wholly consumed in my studies and excelling at school, especially in maths and the sciences. I grew more and more distant though from the idea of God ... because by now it / He was only an idea.

I could have gone to university at 18 (6 A levels – all with good grades) but my mother had other ideas. I was to become (eventually) a bank manager .. just like my illustrious father. I had little knowledge of this until I discovered that she had convinced my headteacher that I was mentally unbalanced and that I should not go. This would not be the first time that my mother used this lie to manipulate events. It took me a long time to forgive her for this and subsequent episodes.

After indeed starting to work in a bank, acquiring all my banking qualifications, including that of a company secretary, I was still living at home but with a semi independent life. In August 1975 I spent two weeks residentially in a YMCA facility in south Manchester. This proved to be the turning point of my whole subsequent life. I met there a group of Christians who invited me into their ecumenical fellowship. Here I discovered to my

astonishment that these Christians had a personal relationship with a living Person, Jesus Christ. I discovered this in their prayer, study and work. I was made most welcome but without any kind of pressure. Just before I ended my stay I asked one of the members (Peter Marriott) what this was all about. A simple rendition of the gospel convinced me. I had to become a Christian. Within a further two weeks the bank had moved me away from home to a post in Shrewsbury where I started attending St Chad's Anglican Church.

In the years that followed I offered myself for ministry in the Anglican Church, became a priest, met and married Helen, made a family, served and trained under two wonderful and holy priests (Fr Peris Williams in Northwich and Fr Alan Poulter in Birkenhead) and finally ended up as Vicar of St Matthew's Edgeley in Stockport. This was a bumpy ride in many ways as my mother fought long and hard against my ordination and marriage (to no avail of course) and eventually we had to leave Anglicanism because of my theological convictions ... but that's another story, maybe for the April magazine when I will have been an Orthodox priest for 30 years. Glory be to God in all things!

**- Father Gregory**

# *The Feast Of Presentation*

## A BRIDGE BETWEEN WINTER & SPRING OF ALL KINDS

I was a new priest, and on February 15th Clean Monday, by the Gregorian calendar (the Church of Greece observes since 1924), coincided with the Feast of Presentation by the Julian calendar. The 4% of the Orthodox population of the town where I was serving were followers of the latter calendar, and their church was named after the feast (Hypapante). One of them asked me on the day "What for us today, father? Should we fast like you, once it is Clean Monday for us too, or should we eat olive oil and drink wine, according to the 19th century Typikon, before the old/new calendar issue?"

Obviously, above and beyond of the must-follow-diet of the day, stood and stands the perplexity the confluence of two great and once-in-a-year days of the Orthodox calendar produces. "What to do?" "Where to focus?" "How to celebrate/honour both?" Plausible questions for priests and laypeople alike. February itself gives the answer, so let us see how.

February receives its name from either februa (purifications, expiatory rites) or febris (fever),

both Latin. Seemingly irrelevant, they go "hand to glove". February is the heart of the winter, along which come sicknesses with high and persistent fevers, which jeopardise personal health and family incomes, shatter communities, and occasionally end in tragedy. No wonder, then, that pagan Romans observed two relevant festivals in this month: Lupercalia, a purification and fertility one; and Feralia, to honour the souls of the departed. The former to cast bad fate out; the latter to honour those succumbed to it along with others having departed in previous times either in February or not, either from fevers or not.

Physical death is inevitable, but its management differs according to what one believes lies beyond. Christian faith (with its core principle of the general rising of the dead - irrespective of religion or bond with the One who is the reason for this and will also terminate Time) comes to the assistance of the timorous to "disperse the dark clouds of fear" and "shed the light of Life" upon souls of both the alive and the departed. And in that sense,

it coats with a mantle of optimism everyday life with its few pros and many cons. Let us see how it does it as per February.

February, by the Orthodox calendar, begins with the celebration of St martyr Tryphon, a NW Asia Minor by descent, protector of agriculture, and patron saint of the winegrowers. A day after, 40 days after Christmas and in the precise midst of the astronomical winter, comes the feast of the Presentation. By the end of the month, Feb 24th, and, astronomically, one month before the spring equinox, it is the feast of the 1st and the 2nd finding of the head of the Forerunner and Baptist John (the “oil lamp” that stands



before the “Light”). And, in 80% of the cases, one of the month's Saturdays is the All Souls one, a day before the Sunday of the Final Judgement (Meatfare Sunday).

The cycle of Orthodox Christian feasts, consolidated in mid-8th to mid 9th centuries AD, reflects the world of the northern hemisphere of December to February winters, within the East Mediterranean, the Balkans, and Asia Minor, in specific. A world of serf peasants and cattle grazers, the backbone of the Eastern Roman Empire as taxpayers, soldiers or army subsidiaries. To all these, the fertility of the land was of outmost important. And February, a month before March, during which the Imperial Army was anew mobilised, was equally important concerning the health, the fertility and the well-being of the people, the land, the cattle. So, pagan traditions like Lupercalia and Feralia, supported by the equally pagan or pantheistic authorities until mid-4th century AD, were gradually replaced by the month's main Christian feasts of similar significance. Something also to reassure the former pagan, massively and half-consciously Christianised populace that the “new” God was empathetic and supportive alike.

Further to this, Easter by the Julian calendar, was, most of the time, falling within the 3rd third of March or early April. So, the feast of the Presentation, much alike with my early 21st Greek town case, fell a bit before or even a bit after the start of Lent. But Lent, despite its austerity, is the harbinger of Easter and spring: the spiritual blossoming of immortal souls and immortalised bodies in the kingdom of Heavens, which is to come in fullness after the end of Time, but, for those who believe, is already, has already been “within us” (Luke, 17, 21)

So, the feast of the Presentation, either a bit before or after the beginning of the Lent, brought for the medieval Christianity four things together: a) a new month full of physical and spiritual challenges and expectations, b) the fresh observation/joy that winter was already giving place to spring, c) the renewal of the bond with the departed, and d) the longing for the fresh experience of the resurrection of Christ and nature.

All these are wisely, wonderfully and perfectly interwoven in the main hymn of the feast, the apolytikion “O Virgin Theotokos, Lady full of grace, rejoice! For Christ our God, the Sun of righteousness has risen from you and He illumined

those in darkness. And you, righteous Elder, be glad in heart, receiving in your embraces the One who liberates our souls and bestows on us the Resurrection”

the Sun of righteousness = a direct implication on the increasing daylight, 44 days after the winter solstice, attributed to the “Non-created Light”, God Himself

you, righteous Elder = a direct statement of the belief that Elder Symeon, who died right after embracing and blessing the baby Jesus at the age of 250, was the first to evangelise the billions of BC souls that their ordeal within the concrete darkness of Hades was soon coming to an end

He illumined those in darkness = a direct statement of Christ’s descent into Hades to commune with the billions of BC souls held there, and “shoulder” them to the kingdom of Heavens by casting and embracing them with His “Non-created Light”

who liberates our souls = a direct statement of the belief of the spiritual cleansing from the “enslaving sin” (John, 8, 34) Lent, either to soon or already begun, contributes to

and bestows on us the Resurrection = a direct statement of the belief

that after physical and spiritual winter will have gone (along with its “feverish” tragic effects), Resurrection, both in Time and beyond, is the ultimate truth, aspiration and hope.

Obviously, the Eastern medieval hymnological and cultural canvas of the feast of the Presentation differs sharply from what a 21st century urbanised western Orthodox looks for to apply its meaning upon their everyday Christian and other routines.

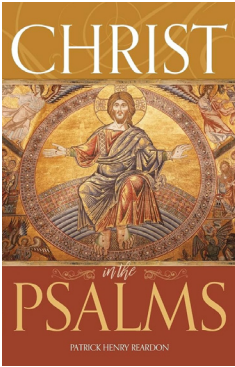
But Presentation as Candlemas may stand as a robust “bridge” between the “then” and the “now”. For the blessing of the candles, to be used for home or church prayers and symbolising the faithful who hold them, showcases the belief to put the “Non-created Light” on top of life: so that it illumines paths (an implication for the increasing daylight), “consumes” sins and passions (the effect of observing Lent), warms up in the coldness of the natural and spiritual “winter” (ask Symeon and the souls of the departed for this), and effuses the aroma of eternity (the longing to relive Pascha for another year)!

God presents Himself to His New nation of the faithful, and the “gentiles”. Let us present ourselves to Him too with an unflinching faith that He is the Light, the Repose, the Resurrection, and the Life, of both alive and departed.

**- Fr Stavros**



# *Christ in the Psalms.* by Father Patrick Henry Reardon



This reasonably priced book offers you many hours of prayerful reading and a better understanding of both the Christian faith and its Jewish origins.

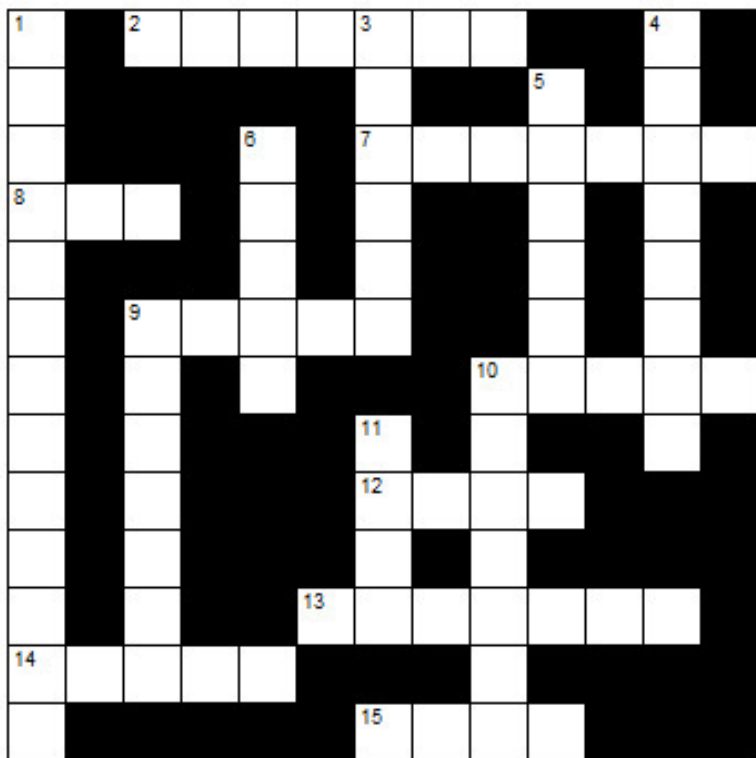
The Orthodox priest Father Patrick Reardon offers two pages of prayer and reflections on each of the 150 psalms. Father Patrick points out that “like the Sermon on the Mount, the Book of Psalms commences with a ‘beatitude,’ a pronouncement of the blessings of God on the just [person].”

Psalm 3 “is the first of those especially useful for particular times of the day—in this case arising from sleep,” while Psalm 4 is linked to “just before retiring for the night.” Psalm 6 “is the first and shortest of what are popularly known as the Seven Penitential Psalms, canticles [that is, hymns and chants] of contrition and lamentation accompanied by pleas for the divine forgiveness.” Psalm 14 (15 in the Hebrew) “poses that most essential ... of questions: ‘Lord, who will abide in your tabernacle, or who shall rest on Your holy mountain?’”

Father Patrick’s hope is that we can each learn to link reading the psalms to our daily lives.

“David’s name appears more often than any other in the psalm inscriptions—73 times. Of these, 14 instances ascribe individual psalms to specific episodes in David’s life.... By assigning these particular psalms ... to the period of David’s persecution and distress, our scribe effectively identifies the suffering just man ... with David, the Anointed One.... The Lord’s Suffering Servant was made identical to the Lord’s Messiah” [pp. 305-306]. Psalm 16 (17 in the Hebrew) “pertains to the hope of Christ in the context of His death and burial. The final line is the key to its interpretation: ‘But I will appear before Your Face in righteousness;... at beholding Your glory will I be satisfied.’ Such was the hope of Jesus. It is the profound Christian persuasion that Christ walks within the Psalms, and this is the reason that the Book of Psalms is the Old Testament book most often quoted in the New Testament” [p. viii]. Father Patrick stresses that “the theological unity of the biblical canon—Old Testament and New—is the radical premise of these comments on the Psalms, and the canonical integrity of the Bible is, in turn, based on the continuity of the Church with ancient Israel. Simply put, Christians pray these ancient Hebrew prayers because they are aware of having been engrafted into the ancient olive stock of Israel!” (cf. Romans 11:17-25, p. viii).

**- Fr Emmanuel**



**Across**

- 2 Wednesday Lenten Service (2/2)
- 7 Saint of Second Sunday (2/2)
- 8 How many weeks in the Fast?
- 9 The usual title for the Fast (1/2)
- 10 What is venerated on the Third Sunday
- 12 The usual title for the Fast (2/2)
- 13 The name for a saint of great self denial
- 14 The home country of a great repentant woman
- 15 Control over eating

**Down**

- 1 Wednesday Lenten Service (1/2)
- 3 Turning to God
- 4 Service honouring the Theotokos
- 5 Climacus mean the \_\_\_\_\_
- 6 The Syrian of a famous Lenten Prayer
- 9 Saint of the Second Sunday (1/2)
- 10 What we should do about our sins.
- 11 Giving financial help to the poor

