

The Apostle

The Monthly Magazine of St Aidan's Orthodox Church,
Henderson Street, Levenshulme, Manchester M19 2JX

Not Jesus's Birthday!



I had a friend once with whom I lost touch many years ago. He was an Anglican priest who left the Church of England about the same time I did – but he never became Orthodox. Like myself he was raised in a non-Christian household. As a young child he was puzzled concerning the fuss over Christmas as Jesus's birthday. "Why is his birthday so special then? The world doesn't celebrate my birthday like this."

This is wrong on so many levels it's difficult to know where to start – so the New Testament might be a good place. For sure, we celebrate Christ's birth at Christmas, but 25th December

(New Calendar), 7th January (which is 25th December by reckoning on the Old Calendar) was almost certainly not the actual day of his birth. Calculations based on the conception of St John the Baptist (June) would place the conception of Christ in January and his birth in September – the most likely month. Shepherds are not with their flocks in the open in midwinter after all! But really, who cares exactly when Christ was born?! What difference

does it make to our salvation?
Precisely none.

In fact, this was always the Church's view. She always celebrated on the most opportune day, not necessarily the actual day. The only exception being the saints who are always celebrated on the actual day of their death. Liturgical time, however, is not usually based on mere historical timelines.

There was in fact a reason why the Church chose to celebrate Christ's birth on 25th December and that was about the need to replace the Roman pagan festival of the "Sol Invictus" (the "Invincible Sun") with the Unconquered Risen SON, Jesus Christ. Those great (albeit often bawdy) Roman festivals and banquets were not to be banned; (please note Mr Cromwell – he tried to ban Christmas in the 17th century) they were to be redirected more soberly to celebrate Christ.

However, my friend's question has still not been answered: "why the fuss?"

Celebrating a birthday is just fine but that alone does not explain the significance of the feast of the Nativity, the "necessary fuss." Of

course, most folk don't care any more that they don't get the fuss – the fuss exists for its own sake, a midwinter cheer-up! There is a fuss though to be made from a Christian point of view on 25th December, but it's not simply a birthday fuss since every birthday is indeed special. The distinctive difference of this Christian feast is that the babe in the cradle IS GOD. The Word (the Logos) having been joined in his divine nature to our human nature by the cooperation of Our Lady, is now received by humankind, fragile and dependent upon His holy Mother. This is the ultimate paradox of God's intervention in love for our world, that He comes powerless and he will die powerless; and yet in that extreme humiliation He is also victorious, even over death.

This, then, is why we Christians make a fuss on Christmas Day. Christ is born, most certainly, but the true and deeper meaning that saves is hidden in the fact the "Word is made flesh" (John 1:14), the Incarnation. To save us God becomes a babe.

- Fr Gregory

Nativity Sermon

by St. Isaac the Syrian

This Christmas night bestowed peace on the whole world;
So let no one threaten;

This is the night of the Most Gentle One –
Let no one be cruel;

This is the night of the Humble One –
Let no one be proud.

Now is the day of joy –
Let us not revenge;

Now is the day of Good Will –
Let us not be mean.

In this Day of Peace –
Let us not be conquered by anger.

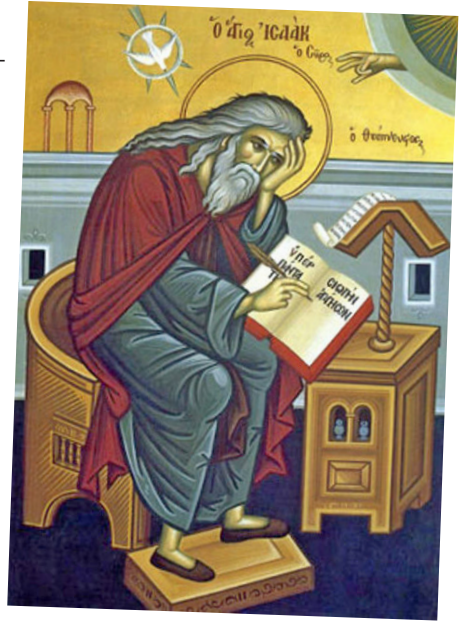
Today the Bountiful impoverished Himself for our sake;
So, rich one, invite the poor to your table.

Today we receive a Gift for which we did not ask;
So let us give alms to those who implore and beg us.

This present Day cast open the heavenly doors to our prayers;
Let us open our door to those who ask our forgiveness.

Today the Divine Being took upon Himself the seal of our humanity,
In order for humanity to be decorated by the Seal of Divinity.

– St. Isaac the Syrian (7th century)



Calling All Enquirers Wanting to be Enrolled as Catechumens

At the moment all our preparation for baptism and chrismation happens one-to-one with the catechist (instructor). This method will continue. However, the numbers keep increasing, so we need to provide a course of preparation for a GROUP of people, online of course. The standard length of this Course is 6 months. Attendance is weekly on Tuesday evenings in the New Year for one hour at 7.30 pm. If you unavoidably miss a meeting you will have to attend a catch-up session so, please prioritise your attendance so as not to take up too much clergy time. If Tuesday evening is not possible for you, please still register; you will then be allocated a catechist for ongoing one-to-one sessions at a mutually convenient time.

The first group (cohort) will meet weekly online as from Tuesday 6th January, (Theophany) 7.30 pm to 8.30 pm. Enrolment to the catechumenate for the people in this first group will take place before the Liturgy on either Sunday 4th January or before the Vespers Liturgy for the Theophany on

Monday 5th January.

The minimum age for this group is 16 (with written parental consent). Attendance at Sunday Divine Liturgy (at least) is required subject to illness or other unavoidable absence.

All those seeking to be received into the Orthodox Church by baptism or chrismation need already to be attending church regularly.

If you can commit to this process, please contact Fr Gregory at

frgregory@hotmail.co.uk



Authentic Evangelism

My own understanding of evangelism has been shaped by many different experiences. As St Seraphim of Sarov taught, if I acquire the Spirit of peace, thousands around me will be saved, a truth I have seen play out in my own life. Our Lord's first command was to follow Him, and His final command on earth was the Great Commission. I've come to realise how deeply connected these are: before I can proclaim Christ to

I believe that's true for anyone who wants to share the Gospel effectively. In my own life, I go through seasons, sometimes I feel full of zeal, and other times I struggle to find the right words or opportunities. I've also met people whose hearts seem closed to the Gospel, unmoved by clever arguments or the things I've carefully prepared to say. In those moments, I've learned that my example, my patience, and



especially my prayer matter far more than my words. Only by the grace of God can a heart be softened enough to truly listen, and sometimes my role is simply to remain faithful and to pray.

One point that has really stayed with

others, I must first be faithful and authentic in following Him myself. I've often heard it said that a theologian is one who prays, and

me from what I have learned is the call to be prepared, not by memorising perfect answers, but by knowing why I believe. My personal

understanding of faith, why it matters to me, what Christ has done for me, is just as important as philosophy or apologetics. I've realised that people often ignore truths that feel abstract or irrelevant; they respond instead to what is lived and real. For instance, I couldn't tell you the land size of England off the top of my head, because it holds no personal value for me. In the same way, if my faith doesn't touch the heart or have meaning in the life I live, then others won't see its worth either. And in this culture that so often feels self-centred and nihilistic, I know that my faith has to show something living, something that actually brings light and hope. I've come to see that evangelism is the Great Commission, but it's not the only command. It stands alongside the call to love God, to repent, to forgive, and to carry my cross daily. Evangelism can't be passive, it's something I have to do, a living act of obedience and gratitude to Christ. But it also can't become the measure of my worth as a believer. My value isn't found in how visibly active I am or how

many people I can reach, but in how deeply I remain united to Christ. From that union, evangelism flows naturally. When I live faithfully in Him, my words and actions can bear witness in ways that no effort or strategy of my own ever could. Extra Thoughts!

One of the most striking moments of my life took place in Morocco during a family holiday when I was around fourteen. We visited an ancient mosque, a beautiful and peaceful place filled with tourists taking photos and locals moving quietly about. An older American man approached me and began a simple conversation about my Portugal football shirt. We talked about the team, about travel, and eventually about his work in Morocco. He told me that he was a missionary, working among the communities in the Atlas Mountains. But it wasn't his words that struck me most, it was him. Even as a teenager, I could sense something profoundly different about this man. The only word that truly describes it is HOLY. His presence radiated peace and quiet strength. He wasn't loud or forceful about his

faith; he spoke about his mission as naturally as someone might speak about their everyday work. Yet he left a deep and lasting impression on me. I've long since forgotten his name, but never his presence. He seemed like a man who had wrestled with God in prayer and

sinfulness, and backsliding, He still loved and cared for me as a parent loves a child. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord spoke about loving those who do not love us, and this extends to the people I try to evangelise. Do I love them as people, as children of God, or do I



love them only so that I can evangelise them and bring them to Christ? I don't think this is simply a matter of good or bad; rather, it's a question of what is good

been transformed by that struggle. I think that's one of the keys to the Great Commission, for every believer to live in such a way that even a brief encounter with us leaves others sensing something of God's holiness.

It's also key, I think, to remember in the Great Commission that Christ loved me before I ever loved Him. Even during my rebellion,

and what is perfect. Is it good to love people so that I might bring them to Christ? Perhaps, it's not the worst starting point. But is it better, more perfect, to love them as Christ loved us? Yes. That is the kind of love that truly reflects the heart of the Gospel.

- A Catechumen in the Archdiocese

Kate

The story began in the Summer of 1992 in Kyiv, Ukraine, an ancient city with more than 100 Orthodox churches. Is that number significant for the story? Oh, yes, it definitely is!

I was a 17-year-old atheist, studying at the Physics Faculty to learn the Truth. Massive corruption brought many citizens, among them my family, to the brink of starvation: the salary had not been paid for months. My mom, a professional Biology and Chemistry teacher, decided to sell some family members, namely herself and her mother (my granny), an English teacher, as private tutors. Boys and girls of different ages began visiting our home for individual lessons, which helped us buy some food.

Once, when both my mom and granny were tutoring, a doorbell rang: visitors - my granny had mistakenly booked a new client for the time already occupied. I was the only free person, so my mother asked me to substitute for that one lesson. 'But, Mom,' I told, 'You know that I am completely inexperienced.

It is going to be the first lesson in my life, and I wasn't even warned!' But what else could be done? That is how I met Kate, a beautiful and shy twelve-year-old, my first private student. After the lesson, her mother said that if we didn't mind, Kate would rather continue with me rather than with my granny. I officially became a private tutor.

In half a year, in winter 1993, Alexandra, Kate's mother, informed us that Kate had cancer. It was a sarcoma of her left-hand bone. Alexandra said that Kate still wanted to attend the lessons, but it would be difficult for her to come to us, so the lessons should be at her place. I agreed, of course. A couple of months ago, Kate had surgery. Then the chemotherapy started. In 1994, she lost all her hair and started wearing a wig. Very often she could not go to school, thus missing lessons, so I started helping her with math, physics, chemistry and other subjects.

My life went on. In 1993, I became Orthodox. In 1996, I married. I had a significant number of private

students, who accounted for most of my income at that time. Most of my students saw me as their friend as well. Kate was one of them. She was studying fiercely. Good news was sometimes changed with bad news. In 1996, she sadly told me that the doctors informed her that, because of the chemotherapy, she would hardly have children. However, I cannot recall her ever being desperate. I remember, in 1997, I saw a beautiful picture hanging on the wall of Kate's room. She drew it herself. It was a standing girl with long brown hair. The signature under the image stated, 'It's me. Maybe...'. Kate was still completely bald at that time. Only in 1999 did Kate happily show me her new hair, which had just begun to cover her head. We stopped our meetings in 2001.

She was studying at the University and no longer needed me as a teacher.

Four years passed. I finished a University, a Seminary, and was working on my PhD thesis. In February

2005, I was ordained as a Deacon to one of Kyiv's parishes. In March, one of the Sundays before Great Lent, I was sitting in the Altar having some rest after the Liturgy. A priest came to the Altar, telling me, 'Look, deacon, why wouldn't you help me at a wedding service in a couple of minutes?'. 'C'mon, Father,' I replied, 'I am totally inexperienced, you know that! It would be the first wedding to serve as a deacon! And I was not even warned!' 'Ah! You cannot become experienced without practice. Let's go!' Well, what could I do? I collected myself from my comfortable chair, exited the Altar through the North door, and saw the bride. It was Kate.

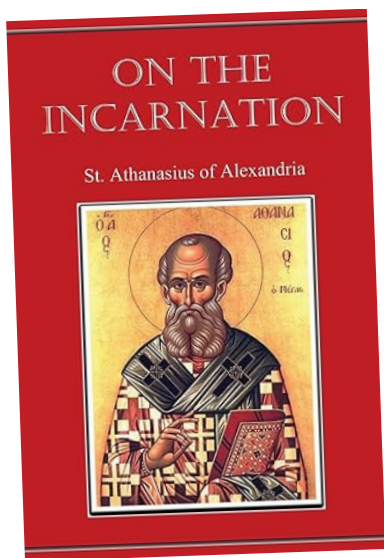
A year later, her mother called me. Kate gave birth to a girl.

- Fr. Deacon Alexey



St. Athanasius: "On the Incarnation:"

A Modern Translation



In the introduction, the book's editor and translator, Peter Northcutt writes that this book "reminds us that the Christian faith is rooted in an astounding truth: the Son of God became a man to enables men [and women] to become sons [and daughters] of God" [p. iv]. Reading this short and reasonably priced book during December at the rate of only three pages a day enables us to have a deeper understanding of what we celebrate at Christmas. This short reflection for "The Apostle" magazine notes only a few of the profound ideas set forth in some

of the chapters of this book by St Athanasius.

Chapter 1, "Creation and the Fall," sets out "the divine truth that the Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things exist by His will and power, and that through Him, the Father orders creation, moves all things and gives them life" [p.1]. If God merely shaped what was already there and did not bring matter into existence Himself, He would not be the true Creator but merely a craftsman...." As the Gospel of John states in chapter 1, verse 3: "Through Him all things were made, without Him nothing was made" [p. 3; cf. Hebrews 11:3]. According to our faith, the universe did not create itself; there is a Mind behind its origin.... Not only did [God the Father] freely grant existence to all things, but He brought them into being from nothing through His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ" [p.4]. "However, because the human will is free to choose, God made His grace conditional... that if humans in His paradise ... strayed and lost their birthright of beauty, they would fall under the natural law of death....

Yet our wrongdoing stirred His love and moved Him to come to our aid. It was out of love for us that He took human form, becoming one of us for our salvation" [pp. 4-5].

Chapter 2, "The Divine Dilemma and Its Solution in the Incarnation," explains that "it was unthinkable that God would abandon humanity to corruption; doing so would be unworthy of His very nature.... But once humanity transgressed, they fell under the sway of corruption intrinsic to their nature and forfeited the grace of being made in God's image. Repentance alone then, could not resolve the crisis. So, what—or rather, who—was required to bring about the grace and restoration needed? Who else but [Christ] the Word of God Himself, who had originally created everything from nothing? [p. 9].

Chapter 4, "The Death of Christ," states firmly that: "Nature itself cried out in response to Him, proclaiming with one voice at the foot of the cross that the One suffering there was not just a man but the Son of God and the Savior of all. The sun darkened, the earth quaked, mountains split apart, and the people were awestruck. All of this revealed that Christ, suffering on the cross, was indeed God, and

that creation itself was His servant, trembling in the presence of its master" [p. 26]. "We now leave our earthly bodies in God's good timing, each in our own appointed moment, to receive a better resurrection" [p. 28].

Chapter 5, "The Resurrection" points out that "while Christ certainly had the power to raise His body immediately after death, the all-wise Savior chose to wait, ensuring that no one could doubt the reality of His death.... By waiting until the third day, He allowed sufficient time for His death to be certain" [p. 35].

Chapter 9, "Conclusion," contrasts the first and second comings of Christ: "Unlike His first coming in humility, He will return in majesty, not to suffer again but to grant us the gifts of the cross—resurrection and incorruptibility. This time, He will come not to be judged but to judge, evaluating each of us for our deeds, whether good or evil. For those who have lived righteously, a place awaits in the heavenly kingdom; for those who have chosen evil, there lies outer darkness and eternal fire."

- Father Emmanuel

Testimonies from the Faithfull

It's been just over 2 years since my baptism and there are things I'm only just beginning to understand. When I say understand, that's mostly an exaggeration.

The day I was baptised I was so happy to belong to Our Lord and His Church. The overwhelming feeling was relief, because as a child of the 60's and 70's, my psychological and spiritual development was in the shadow of the many idols of self-determination. Our well being and the well-being of the world was in our own hands.

The responsibility was entirely ours; to fight for justice, call out injustice and arrogantly demand repentance and recompense from others.

As with all effective lies, it is just close enough to Truth to fool us. Surrounded by the evil propaganda that Christianity was responsible for the most egregious atrocities personally and globally, I rejected God and His Salvation and mostly felt self-righteous doing so. Not entirely though, because there was always a spiritual hunger that was never satisfied by the New Age versions of faith and love, and

whilst I was fighting and living in sin He was dying for my salvation.

The exquisite irony is His Salvation leads me to walk back down the path I 'stomped' along all those years. Every adversity, every person I struggle to be patient with and love is the precious gift of His Love. My only job is to trust His love in every circumstance and not fight His Will.

This turns out to be the most intense struggle of my life; to keep my eyes on Our Lord no matter what. This is the only way the world is changed, one small submission to His Will at a time.

What a relief! The relief I was blessed with at my baptism and the relief I catch glimpses of when I trust everything is sent by Him for the Glory of God the Father.

- A Sister In Christ

