

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

A sermon preached by Father Michael Harper in St Botolph's Orthodox Church in London on 20th March 2005

In the Gospel reading the story is told of Nathanael's encounter with Christ through the intervention of Andrew. Nathanael says to Andrew, "can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" The straight answer is "come and see". There could be no better passage than this one to explain the Triumph of Orthodoxy. The controversy over the icons, which is the background to this Feast, was essentially about the Incarnation – the fact that the coming of Christ means that we can now see God. When Nathanael went to meet Christ – he saw God, not a spirit but a bodily presence. The Word had been made flesh.

The importance of Saturday

When I was a young boy Saturday and Sunday were very distinctive. On Saturday one did one's shopping and went to football matches, and Sunday was a day of rest – the shops were closed and there was no sport. Now there are no such distinctives.

But in the Orthodox Church the distinctives are very important. Saturday is a day of rest for two reasons. First, because on Holy Saturday Christ rested in the tomb before breaking out of it the following day. And secondly, because God rested on the seventh day after He had created the universe. So the Orthodox remember the dead in Christ on Saturday, knowing that Sunday is the day of resurrection. But we can also see here the link between Creation and the New Creation in Christ which reaches its climax on the day of resurrection.

The Iconoclasm controversy

The background to the Triumph of Orthodoxy is the so called Iconoclasm controversy, which spanned about 120 years. In 726 the Emperor Leo III began the attack on icons, which led to the destruction of many of them across the Empire. It was the Empress Irene who halted it in 780. Seven years later the 7th and last Ecumenical Council met in Nicaea and declared icons were acceptable as a means of worship.

However the Iconoclasts did not accept the Council and further attacks were made from 815 during the reign of Leo V, who was an Armenian Emperor. The Triumph of Orthodoxy commemorates the action of the Empress Theodora in 843 who ordered the Council decision to be followed.

It is interesting that the two Champions in this battle were both women.

The Theological battle

The two most prominent theological champions were St John of Damascus, an Antiochian, and St Theodore of Studios. It was ironic that St John benefited from the protection of the Muslims in Damascus; the Byzantine Emperors could not touch him.

The heart of the controversy was not about icons, but about the Incarnation. There is no doubt that the Iconoclasts were encouraged by both Muslims and Jews, who did not believe that God could ever be depicted in human form. But when we look closely we become aware that it is the Incarnation that most fundamentally divides Christians from Judaism and Islam. Christians believe that Christ was God in human flesh; Islam and Judaism deny this.

St John of Damascus wrote about this:

Of old God the incorporeal and uncircumscribed was not depicted at all. But now that God has appeared in the flesh and lived among humans, I make an image of the God who can be seen. I do not worship matter, but I worship the Creator of matter, who for my sake became material and deigned to dwell in matter, who through matter effected my salvation. I will not cease from worshipping the matter through which my salvation has been effected.

The heresy of Gnosticism

Gnosticism is arguably the most damaging heresy of all. St Irenaeus wrote his famous book *Against the Gnostics*, but the same heresy is as prevalent today as it has ever been. A Canadian Presbyterian has recently written a book entitled *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, which shows how widespread it is in much Protestant thinking and practice.

Gnosticism basically teaches that matter is evil, so one can see how this comes into direct conflict with both the doctrine of Creation and the Incarnation and the practice of the sacraments.

The defenders of Orthodoxy were at pains to point out that the reverence for icons is not a form of idolatry. For instance Leontius of Neapolis in the 7th century wrote:

We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross. . . . When the two beams of the Cross are joined together, I adore the figure because of Christ, who was crucified on the Cross, but if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them.

One of the great teachers of that period was St Theodore Studios who wrote about this matter in the same vein. He was the foremost defender of icons among the monks of his time – and suffered for it. He was a man of austere sanctity and iron will.

Christ is the God who can be seen, and people like Nathanael can “come and see” Him.

When I was an Anglican Priest in London in the 60s, a Jewish man called Mr. Mittler came to see me, and said that he wanted to be baptised and become a Christian. When I asked him what had brought him to this decision, he told me that his hobby was art, and he had visited most of the major museums in Europe. Through the years he had become haunted by the face of Christ depicted on icons, paintings and murals. It was that face of Christ which drew him to want to become one of His followers.

These words from Mattins stress the importance of this day: the Sunday of Orthodoxy.

The icon is a song of triumph and a revelation – an enduring monument to the victory of the saints and the disgrace of the demons.