



The Apostle

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Thoughts from a New Boy



by John Ellis

I've got a mental list of dates when something significant happened in my life. As of yesterday, there's a new one: October 19th 2008, when I was received and chrismated into the Orthodox Church at St Aidan's, Levenshulme. I'm writing these first reflections just a day later. First reactions, then! How does it feel, now I'm "in"?

When Metropolitan Philip, the Church of Antioch's archbishop in North America, received the famous group of American free-lance Protestant evangelicals into Orthodoxy, he greeted them with the words "Welcome home". That's a lovely thought, but it naturally triggers the thought: "OK, but does it feel like home?"

The honest answer is both yes and no. In one way, emphatically yes; how could it be otherwise? Sunday and holy day worship, the offering of the Eucharist, the sacraments, the Christian year with its round of festival and fast, altar, font, the scriptures, the divine office – so much that is totally

familiar from my now receding Anglican past.

Yet, in other ways, no. Flashes of total familiarity in the Liturgy, for sure, like the proclamation and reading of the epistle and gospel, and the dialogue and anaphora, verbally different from what I was used to, but still recognizable, part of the common heritage from the Church's earliest days. But, then, solid iconostases, curtains, tinkling censers, eccentric offertory processions, processional "sunbursts" on poles, enough litanies to fill the length of a modern lunch-break, and some music, at any rate, that totally twists the tonsils of the average westerner, who's already baffled by the names - troparia, kontakia, apolytikia and stikhera! ! And what of the mysterious additions to services – the litis, and the "foodie" elements to Orthodox public worship, the artoklasia and the kollyva, delicious, but mysterious to westerners unfamiliar with any non - Eucharistic edibles in worship beyond the annual harvest supper?

And the same with the Kalendar. The great festivals of the year and some of the seasons stand out reassuringly, and the saints days, for the most part, fall in their accustomed places. But, when you look at the Kalendar more closely, you hit the cryptically unfamiliar! Sunday of the Genealogy ... Lazarus Sunday ... Sunday of the Myrrhbearers ... Bright Sunday (mischievously, I wonder when Doleful Sunday might fall?!). And the saints' commemorations: some totally familiar, like St Luke last Saturday, on the date I'm used to; others unknown, but obvious in context, like St Sergius the Obedient of the Kiev Caves and Xenia, deaconess at Rome. But there's yet more, ranging from the curious, like the Unmercenarys Cyrus and John (what didn't they take money for?!) and Demetrius the Myrrh-streamer (irreverent images of some

sort of vapour trail behind him as he walked!), to the totally opaque (at least, without a bit of research), like the Beginning of the Indiction, and Renewal Friday: Theotokos of the Life-giving Font!

And yet: at the age of sixteen, having brought up in a totally secular family who never darkened church doors apart from for hatchings, matchings and despatchings (baptisms, weddings and funerals, for those unfamiliar with Anglican humour!), I can remember struggling in just the same way with Anglicanism. How on earth did "Golden Numbers" help you find the date of Easter? (don't ask, I still haven't quite got that!!) How can you conceivably "church" a woman?! Who was St Athanasius, and how come he had a creed named after him? What was an Ember Day, a collect, a litany, a canticle, a versicle – and how did "versicles" differ from "preces" (they still look pretty much the same to me!)? Why did people bow in the middle of the church, and the priest and choir turn their backs to the congregation to sing the creed? And how could you ever learn to sing Anglican chant?

In all honesty, back then, very little of Anglicanism felt like home, simply because I was a total novice in Christian worship, life and discipleship. Now, forty-seven years later, with a theology degree, post-graduate licenciate, and twenty-five years as a priest in Anglicanism behind me, I'm surely never going to be quite as baffled in Orthodoxy as I was in those early teenage days of feeling my way around in Anglicanism. I learned, and grew, and I can do that again. After all, to grow is to change, and to keep growing is to have changed often.

I think that there are two extreme and opposite ways, neither desirable, that a convert into any new Christian community can take. He can come into the new community looking

backwards, and, without perhaps altogether realizing it, try to make his new spiritual home as much like the old one as possible - shorn, of course, of the defects which caused him to leave! If he can't break out of this, he probably won't last the course. Whether or not he does, it's hardly fair on his new brothers and sisters in faith, who haven't got his history and experience, and won't necessarily gain spiritual blessing from any success his efforts may have. At the very least, they may not understand why what he wants to bring them is an improvement on what they've previously known. And looking backwards isn't a model for Christian living.

Or he can embrace the new framework of faith exuberantly, uncritically and vehemently, and become, as the saying goes, "more Catholic than the Pope" – what people sometime unkindly call "convertitis"! W.G. Ward, a former Anglican academic who converted to Roman Catholicism in the 19th century, was a perfect example. After the first Vatican Council defined papal infallibility in 1870, the elderly Dr Ward rumbled that he "wanted a new Papal Bull on the breakfast table every morning" along with his copy of "the Times". Orthodoxy, I believe, has some such!

But no Christian communion is perfect. Sin clings closely among us all, within Orthodoxy as well as without. Lest I'd constructed any illusions that Orthodoxy was an exception to this general rule, an elderly Greek layman in a little Lancashire Orthodox community put me right: "Orthodoxy is the True Church; but, if you have troubles in your own churches, don't think that in Orthodoxy is free from these. In fact, we Orthodox are sometimes TERRIBLE to each other!" And that's before they start on anyone else ...! And, when I look at some of the stuff posted on the internet, I see that he's right. I thought Anglicans could be bad enough, but someone's put a video on "Youtube" identifying Patriarch Bartholomew with the Book of Revelation's Mark of the Beast: 666!! I don't think any Anglicans have gone quite that far with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

So I come into Orthodoxy without illusions, but, nevertheless, with the belief that, here, the true church can be found and experienced; with a beauty and an authenticity in its worship; in some ways immemorially ancient, even arcane, and yet with openness and modernity too, at least in the Antiochene community that I've experienced. And with love and friendliness, those fundamental, ordinary, and yet precious marks of Christian fellowship, without which no church is true to its vocation. I think that, for the rest of my pilgrimage in this life, it'll do for me. More importantly, I hope it can put up with me!!

John Ellis

Dear Father,

Do angels have an audible voice?

Today I have heard a new expression – "Retail therapy". Needless to say it took me several seconds to understand that this is the name for a new type of shopping. In order to participate in this new therapy one must enter a cathedral like shopping mall with many avenues to explore, cafés, restaurants, crowds of people and, of course, money to spend or preferably a credit card. But beware, a danger lurks here of demons who whisper in your ear that you simply **MUST HAVE** this or that which could result in your spending money which you have not got. In fairness one can say that this so called 'retail therapy' is a reality experience which is more than can be said of internet shopping which requires no verbal interaction.

So what has this to do with angels? Well I find reading the Bible therapeutic but I am having difficulty with the angel voices as a type of the voice of God. The Old Testament Study Bible tells me that God has no voice so He used Jesus as a type of angel to speak to the prophets.

One example from the Study Bible notes on Genesis 24:7 –

"The Lord's Angel is the Son of God. The Son of God is both Angel and Word, for He alone reveals the

Father.... Both names emphasise that the Son is the Will of God the Father. Thus God spoke to Abraham through His Will."

There are many similar examples in Exodus and Leviticus in particular, but Jesus as a type of messenger giving voice to the messages from God requires a new understanding of the hierarchy and role of Angels or perhaps I have to develop an improved imaginative thought process? I am confused hence the question. Sometimes nowadays I have to remind myself that I am actually reading the OT and have not inadvertently slipped into the NT. I could almost be excused for imagining that Jesus was the messenger who proclaimed His birth to Mary except that I know the Bible was specific in this instance in naming the Angel as Gabriel. I understand the concept of our noetic ears being open to the messages of our Guardian Angel but typology and its relative association with angels throws me into confusion particularly with respect to their possession of audible voices. Am I not listening? Please help!

Yours in the love of Christ

Dwynwen 20.10.2008

Dear Dwynwen

There are two issues here ... How are angels heard and are angelic voices in the Old Testament sometimes the voice of the Word (Logos—Christ)?

As to the first question we may only speculate but I suspect that that the answer may be the same as "How do we hear God or his saints speaking to us?" I wouldn't rule out ordinary audible sound but who can say?

The other question concerns typology ... which is a legitimate form of interpretation to be found in the Scriptures themselves (see 1 Corinthians 10:1-5). St. Athanasius' comment on the angelic voice is one way of interpreting it but not the only one. The Antiochian tradition would I think be more inclined to take a literal, plain speaking view on the matter.

Fr. Gregory