

Icons and the incarnation, and our salvation.

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SYNOPSIS: Exegesis of two hymns from the Vespers service for the Triumph of Orthodoxy, which teach the core dogmas of icons, and the incarnation, and how we are saved.
Triumph of Orthodoxy, 2018-02-24

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

This is the first Sunday of great Lent; we call it the “Sunday of Orthodoxy”, or the “Commemoration of the Restoration of the Icons”.

Anytime we talk about icons, we speak about the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the unknowable God Who became knowable.

Before His incarnation Jesus Christ was completely invisible and only spiritual, but although He was equal to the Father, He chose to become man and now is a human being like us, as well as being God. This is the greatest thing that ever happened in the universe, and it was necessary for our salvation.

This Sunday speaks about the Incarnation and especially about the two natures of Jesus Christ - that He is God and man, and what it means. Why is it important that He is God and man? If He is only God then we are not saved, and if He is only man -- then He’s just a man.

I’m going to read you two of the hymns from tonight and talk about them a little bit. Truly they are wonderfully poetic, but they are also deeply theological. Everyone should have a “Lenten Triodion”¹ and they should read it, because it is an incredible book. I probably have read the Lenten Triodion from cover to cover perhaps 20 times. I think you should read it too.

This is from the Vespers service:

“Thou who art uncircumscribed, O Master, in Thy divine nature, / wast pleased in the last times to take flesh and be circumscribed; / and in assuming flesh, / Thou hast also taken on Thyself all its distinctive properties. / Therefore we depict the likeness of Thine outward form, / venerating it with an honor that is relative. / So, we are exalted to the love of Thee, / and following the holy traditions handed down by the apostles // from Thine icon we receive the grace of healing.”

“Uncircumscribed” is a fancy word that basically means limitless. God is the only uncircumscribed being. Everything else, being created by God, has limits. Jesus Christ was and is uncircumscribed in His divinity, but He chose to be circumscribed, that is limited, by being a man.

How is man limited? We cannot immediately go to Georgia for instance, we have to get in a car or plane. We can’t be in two places at once, we don’t know all things, etc. And we also die.

¹ The “Lenten Triodion” the service book used in great Lent for the variable parts of Vespers, matins, compline and other services. It is so named because it has many canons that have three odes – “Tri-Odion”. Usually canons have eight odes.

What did Jesus do when He became circumscribed? In assuming our flesh, He took on *all of its distinctive properties*. Not only did He have five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot, two eyes, and nose and two ears – all the things that humans have, He also had the property that human flesh dies.

He chose to die. He could've continued to keep living if He wanted, but He chose to allow His human flesh to die, because that's naturally what human flesh did after the fall. The difference between His flesh dying and our flesh, is that our flesh dies because of sin. Of course, He has no sin. He died, and the devil thought he won, but He went down to Hades as a sinless man, as Scripture says "free among the dead"², because he was free. He was dead, but He was free to be not dead anytime He wanted to be. In Hades, He broke the bars, and made it possible for us to have eternal life.

This is a critical core dogma of our faith – that Jesus Christ, being uncircumscribed, became circumscribed, and in so doing took on all of our attributes, with one exception. Of course, St. Paul says that there is one He didn't do – that is He did not sin. He was tempted like we are, but He never sinned. And He died the death that human flesh dies and went down to Hades, and now makes human flesh able to be alive.

The reason why we depict Him in icons is because we can, because He became a man.

You can make a picture of a man. You can draw a man and nowadays we can take photos of men. It is not possible to take a photo, or draw a picture, or even imagine what God the Father or the Holy Spirit looks like – there is no representation for them, it cannot exist. But Jesus Christ, choosing to become man, can be pictured, so every time you look at icon, even if it's not an icon of Christ, it is proclaiming the core dogma that Jesus Christ became man, taking all not all of our attributes except sin.

Now why do I say this even if an icon is not of Christ?

When you see icons, you see the Nimbus or the Halo. The Halo is always attached to the body. In the West it's not; they have this little doughnut floating over the head. That's actually heretical. Man can become deified, by believing in God and struggling to follow His commandments, with God's grace helping him. If we are deified - that is if we become like God - then the uncreated light of God suffuses throughout us, and flows through us, and the Nimbus is the uncreated light of God. It is not hanging up on the air; it is not shining upon us – it is shining through us and originating in us. This is not of our own abilities, but because we are the temples of the Holy Spirit, God abides within us and the light of God suffuses all of our flesh, and purifies all of our flesh, and shines out.

Of course, we cannot see that light right now because of our sins, but that does not mean that it's not happening.

² Psalm 87:3, a "Messianic" Psalm (a psalm that talks about Jesus Christ in some way)



When we look at an icon like, for instance of St. Panteleimon, the nimbus is very visible. The nimbus is there because he was deified. How can he be deified? This is because Jesus Christ became man and made it possible for him to be deified. Every single icon is depicting this deification, that is the good guys in the icon - the bad guys don't have nimbuses. For instance, the icon of the "Monk martyrs of Zographou", shows soldiers are that are killing the monks, and they don't have halos, but the ones who are being killed have them.

I'll tell you one more:

"We venerate Thy holy icon, loving Lord, / asking Thee to pardon our transgressions, Christ our God. / For Thou of Thine own will wast pleased in the flesh to ascend upon the Cross, / so to deliver from the bondage of the enemy those whom Thou hast fashioned. / Therefore in thanksgiving we cry aloud to Thee: // Thou hast filled all things with joy, our Savior, when Thou hast come to save the world."

Father Nicholas and I say this every single time we do our entrance prayers. It has an important core dogma that we should understand. Jesus Christ came to save us from the *bondage of the enemy*. That idea, although it is present, is not emphasized in the West.

In the West, Jesus Christ came so that we would be forgiven. He made a sacrifice for us, that His Father accepted so that we would be forgiven. The East knows of no such thing. Jesus Christ died, because flesh dies, and then He made that flesh able to come alive first – His own flesh – and now our flesh when we into the church through baptism and then struggle. He came to deliver us from bondage. That's what death is. Death is bondage to sin. With sin comes death, and that is the inability to be in the presence of God. It is not because God is busy punishing us, but it is because we are not capable of being in His presence because of our sins.

I think every single one of us has had a situation where we did something bad, and either our parents or another family member or perhaps a friend did know about it, but we knew about it. And then they come into the room and we don't feel that comfortable with them in the room, because we do something bad, and we needed tell them.

I remember when I was a boy, I was very wild as a pitcher. I could throw the ball very hard, but it kind of went – who knows where. I was playing with a friend, and I had been told not to play in the backyard because there was a window that was almost at ground level, and I would probably break if I played in the backyard. I threw the ball and he missed it because it was thrown so wildly, and I broke the window. I didn't tell anybody. Later that day my mother knew. She just knew, because I was skulking around, because I didn't want to be around her. And then of course when I said I had broken the window it's not like I got punished – they just said to stop

playing in the backyard. I felt guilty and ashamed and didn't want to be in her presence. That's what happens to us, except multiply that by a zillion because of the many sins that we have. Jesus came to deliver us from that bondage, and deliver us from that shame, not merely to have us be forgiven.

Perhaps some of you have known drug addicts. Oftentimes families stick with their family member who is a drug addict. They take them back in, and they take them to rehab, they get them out of jail and those sorts of things. A lot of times drug addicts don't come from homes where they have been abandoned. The drug addict feels deeply ashamed – until they lose their shame. And when they are helped by their parents, or someone else, they are forgiven, but they still feel deeply ashamed. Just being forgiven their sin - their drug addiction - the fact that they stole money or crashed up car whatever - is not enough. What we need is to be delivered from that sin, delivered from that bondage – and that is what Jesus Christ came to do, and if you look carefully this kind of thing is all over our services. I will read it again because it's just so spectacular to me, it just jumps out when I read it:

“Of Thine own will wast pleased in the flesh to ascend upon the Cross, / so to deliver from the bondage of the enemy those whom Thou hast fashioned.”

What a beautiful thought. That should inspire us. Jesus Christ came, not just to have us be forgiven, but to be delivered from bondage.

Hopefully, one of you it is going to buy this book – the “Lenten Triodion”. If I thought people would buy it, I would stock it in our bookstore, but probably, if I bought 12, there'd be 11 left after 10 years. This is just a little tiny taste. I didn't even talk to you about the Canon, because after all we have to get on with things.

“The blessing of the Lord be upon you through His grace and love for mankind always now and ever and unto the ages of ages.” Amen.