

Sharing the Wilderness

**THE ORTHODOX LENT:
NO CRUCIFIXION WITHOUT RESURRECTION –
NO RESURRECTION WITHOUT CRUCIFIXION**

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**O heavenly King, Comforter and Spirit of truth,
You that are in all places and fill all things,
The Treasury of blessings and the Giver of life:
Come to dwell in us, cleanse us from every stain,
And save our souls, O good One. *Amen.***

My subtitle to this account of the Orthodox approach to Lent attempts to sum it up in two balancing phrases: 'No Crucifixion without Resurrection – No Resurrection without Crucifixion'. In an Orthodox church at any time of the Church's year it would be hard to escape that combination. The backdrop to what I have to say is from the Chora Church in Constantinople [1303-28]: the great fresco of the Anastasis, the Arising, which fills the semi-dome of the apse at the eastern end of the Parekklesion.



This image dominates the worshipper throughout the penitential sequence of Lent. It proclaims what the Orthodox Church has taught in unbroken tradition from the earliest days. (My own branch of Orthodoxy markets car stickers in the United States that read: ‘THE ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: PREACHING JESUS CHRIST SINCE AD 33’.) We announce that the tomb was empty, the body gone, the risen Christ seen, heard and touched physically by his disciples. Hence comes our Paschal refrain, many times repeated:

**Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And upon those in the tombs bestowing life.**

[CUE CHOIR]

This cosmos-transforming fact of Christ’s resurrection governs everything. Not for the Orthodox the suggestion put forward by certain sceptical bishops and academic theologians in my youth, that the resurrection was a psychological experience, a conviction in the minds of bereaved disciples that their Lord had in some sense survived. We hold the same faith as St Paul, who writes around AD 55 about events that had taken place in living memory, less than twenty-five years back – about as far distant as the Falklands War or the Fall of the Berlin Wall are from us. He had interviewed the witnesses.

[1 Corinthians 15.3-7, *NIV*] What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Later in the same chapter Paul spells out the implications [1Corinthians 15.17-22, *NIV*]: **If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.**

The Chora fresco of the Risen Christ proclaims a revolutionary triumph. Hell is harrowed, evil is overthrown; the gates of hell lie smashed at Christ’s feet, the past, present and future are redeemed. Adam and Eve, the mother and father of the race, are yanked out of Hades, rescued from the consequences of sin, corruption and defeat. Their persons, once isolated and separate, are drawn into a triad of which Christ is the head, and through him their marriage-bond is redeemed, their relationship restored and they are returned to the paradise-state they once lost. {Incidentally, the fresco illustrates a different understanding of the marriage sacrament between east and west. In the west ((as I was again and again reminded on the Church of England Liturgical Commission when we were preparing the current modern-language marriage rite)), it is the couple, not the priest, who make the sacrament. In the east, every priest who

performs the marriage-rite deputizes for Christ, presiding over a resurrection-act that restores the married relationship to what God intended it to be at its first institution in Paradise.)

In consequence, we Orthodox take our Lent always in the light of the resurrection – and that gives a different emphasis. Our fasting regulations are very strict (and in my own Antiochian Church in Syria and Lebanon the fasting rules are said to have been so severe as to incline Orthodox from the eighteenth century onwards to move over to the Roman Catholics, who were felt to have it easier). In Lent, we are not permitted meat, fish, or eggs. Dairy products such as milk, butter and cheese are out, as are wine and oil. Yet this severity is punctuated by little Resurrection-reminders. Every Sunday (because it marks the Lord's arising) is a festival, and so wine and oil are back on the menu, as they are on each Saturday, for that is a preparation for the feast. For the feast of the Annunciation, which celebrates the agreement of the Mother of God to the Incarnation that made possible our salvation, we revel in wine, oil and *fish*. I've counted that nineteen of the forty Lenten days this year are days in which wine and oil are permitted (and I ask my host to take particular note that, today being Palm Sunday, wine, oil *and fish* are very acceptable!). Certainly, in the course of the Lenten as in the other fasts of the Church, one becomes very grateful to some relatively unknown martyr or martyrs – such as the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, whose festival fell this year on a Friday, 9 March – grateful for their sacrifice and resurrection-faith that made it possible for us to hit the red wine in celebration!

But I can best illustrate the somewhat different approach to Lent in East and West by contrasting the ways in which each tradition commences the Lenten observances. Of course, we have a great deal in common and we do many of the same things and for the same purposes – it would be very worrying if we did not. The differences show up most in the hymns that accompany Lenten services and in the ceremonies that have grown up over time.

Ash Wednesday in the Western tradition marks the beginning of Lent. Though there is no provision for the rite in *The Book of Common Prayer*, we commonly start with the deeply impressive 'Imposition of Ashes'. As I experienced it as a young man, it was intensely individual and deeply moving. Rising early and burdened with the guilts of developing adolescent sexuality, I pushed my head forward to receive the brand of my sinfulness, the reminder of my 'natural' dedication to death. Only the mark of the cross signed in this ash guaranteed my redemption. I proudly wore my mark of shame and rescue to school each Lent and later to university, as a witness to my unbelieving contemporaries.

In the version put out in *Lent, Holy Week, Easter Services (1984, 1986)* and 'commended by the Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England', a rubric reads:

At the imposition the minister says to each person:

**Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.**

In contrast, what I think of as the beginning of Lent among the Orthodox is the ceremony that concludes Vespers the night before the fast. We begin on Forgiveness

Sunday, not with a rite that recalls our universal condemnation to death but with an initial purging of the Body of Christ, the Christian community – one that restores that Body to what it should be.

We say as a group the Prayer of St Ephrem, with prostrations – and we continue to say it at every weekday office throughout Great Lent:

**O Lord and Master of my life,
take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, the lust for power and idle talk.**
(we prostrate ourselves)
But give to me your servant a spirit of soberness, humility, patience and love.
(we prostrate again)
**O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to condemn my
brother.**
For You are blessed to the ages of ages. Amen.
(and we follow with a third prostration)

Afterwards, the priest stands by the icon, which we first venerate, and we prostrate before the priest, saying ‘Forgive me, a sinner’ – and the priest in turn prostrates himself to us and asks our forgiveness. Then it is common to go the rounds of the congregation, prostrating, begging forgiveness, and receiving from each the kiss of peace and the assurance that ‘God forgives and I forgive’. (At the Singapore church where my eldest son worships, I did about forty prostrations – and crocked myself for a week afterwards!). It may seem a bit factitious to beg forgiveness from strangers one hardly knows – yet the fact is that not even the names of sixty percent of our Cambridge congregation are known to me, and that is already something for which I need to repent.

To sum up very crudely: the beginning of the western Lent seems directed to individuals who need to be converted or *re*-converted by Christ’s sacrifice; whereas the eastern Lent is more directed toward reminding Christians of a glorious restoration that has been made possible by Christ’s death and resurrection but which they are in serious danger of missing out on, through the follies of carelessness, sloth, and sheer forgetfulness.

The differing ways of beginning Lent in east and west seem to me to mark a pervasive difference in approach. My contrast is broad and coarse – and it would be all too easy to say ‘*We* do it right: *you* do it wrong’. But I’ve come to the conclusion that both approaches have their place, for different situations, for differing points in the spiritual progress of a church and in each individual human life.

In the west, we follow what I’ll call a linear approach: beginning with a stark reminder of our original sinfulness and doomed condition and with an intense appeal to the individual conscience. We follow a Lenten regime of penance and deprivation, and are taken through a contemplation of what it cost the Redeemer to redeem us and to pay the price for our sin. We often sing one of the greatest eighteenth century hymns, by Isaac Watts – a hymn that is almost gnostic in the way it reduces us and our worldly concerns, all our qualities whether good or evil, to insignificance:

**When I survey the wondrous Cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.**

**Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his Blood.**

**See from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?**

**His dying crimson like a robe,
Spreads o'er his body on the Tree;
Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.**

**Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.**

The western observance seems much influenced by a twelfth century practice, popularized by the Franciscans, of dwelling on and identifying with Christ in his physical sufferings and his grim progress toward death. Though the volume *Lent, Holy Week, Easter Services and Prayers* that was put out by the Anglican House of Bishops distances itself (I quote) *'from every attempt to reconstruct past events'* and does *'not think of assisting worshippers by mental effort to go back to the first Palm Sunday and Good Friday'* [p.3, Introduction], it nevertheless commends what it calls *'the stark simplicity of Lenten worship'*, which is partly *'to express a spirit of penitence . . . But . . . also to provide striking contrast with the joyful celebration of Easter. This "giving-up" (we are told) traditionally includes the omission of the Gloria in Excelsis at the eucharist, the absence of flowers from the church, the restrained use of the organ to accompany worship, and the careful selection of texts (for instance of hymns) to avoid the use of the word 'Alleluia' and similar expressions of joy which will greet the Resurrection on Easter Day'* (pp.11-12). It is also suggested that removing *'banners and pictures could enhance the atmosphere of Lent'*. (p.12.)

What we Orthodox would think of as resurrection-reminders in Lent get only a grudging admission. I quote again:

The spirit of the season is also expressed by a restraint in the observance of Holy Days that interrupt the Lent ethos. The feast days of St Joseph and the Annunciation are legitimate intrusions [sic] . . . But the lesser commemorations . . . are best observed only by inclusion in the prayers of intercession'. (p.12).

And so we proceed on our grim, dour way, seeing our fast as an imitation of Christ, who went into the desert, underwent privation, batted off temptation, preparing himself for his sufferings on our behalf and his sacrificial ministry and death: another well-known hymn:

**Forty days and forty nights
Thou wast fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights,
Tempted and yet undefiled.**

**Sunbeams scorching all the day;
Chilly dew-drops nightly shed;
Prowling beasts about thy way;
Stones thy pillow, earth thy bed.**

**Shall not we thy watchings share,
And from earthly joys abstain,
Fasting with unceasing prayer,
Glad with thee to suffer pain?**

Thus we move through Lent to Passion Week, perhaps to the Lamentations of Jeremiah, to the service of Tenebrae, to Micah's cry put in the mouth of Christ – 'O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?' [6.3]', followed by the progressive extinguishing of lights to the text of the Fifty First Psalm. On Maundy Thursday we go to the recollection of the Institution of the Lord's Supper before his betrayal and death, or perhaps to the Foot-Washing, whereby the Archbishop or the Pope or the priest mimics Christ's humility in stooping to wash the feet of ordinary human-beings, and we hear the New Commandment given, 'that you love one another as I have loved you'. Then it is the three-hour devotion on Good Friday, with the emphasis on dereliction, suffering, betrayal, humiliation, loss and death, with the church stripped bare and a general atmosphere of mourning. Then, finally, we come to asking on Easter Saturday (to quote the marvellous Collect for Easter Even in the *Book of Common Prayer*)

That as we are baptised into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continually mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection . . .

And so, at last, we come out of the tunnel into the sun-burst of Easter Day.

However, in this imitation of Christ's progress to Calvary, this identification with him, there can be an element of play-acting. However much Rowan is photographed by the press foot-washing, however devoted his service to his people, we know that this action is symbolic, a reminder of only a fraction of the meaning of the Lord's act, not something the Archbishop does regularly, anymore than the Queen's distribution of Maundy money is a continual charitable deed. We follow the Stations of the Cross – but we can never have a real understanding of what it was like to carry the sins of the world or to suffer the cry of dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?' The God/Man's experience is beyond us, a mystery, even if we carry crosses about town or even (as in the Philippines) get ourselves physically crucified as

an act of imitative devotion. In fact, what we are called to is not to an imitation of the appearances of Christ's earthly life but to an inner takeover by the Spirit of Christ which may lead us to do other than he is recorded as doing. Moreover, however much we may try to share the grief of the disciples, their guilt at betrayal and their sense of loss, we cannot wholly enter into that experience, for we know how the story ends, what happens in the final reel – and we can't pretend that we don't.

There's a story from the autobiography of that great Presbyterian, Lesslie Newbigin, that illustrates the point. When he became Bishop of Tinevelley in the United Church of South India, Lesslie visited Ramnad and was met by an obvious display of churchly pomp in the face of the heathen. Before him was: *'an elephant, a brass band, an open landau drawn by two white horses (borrowed from the Raja's palace), a choir and a procession of the whole congregation. The landau was almost covered with roses.'* He was invited to step in. *'But I can't,'* I said. *'Why not? Is there any problem?'* was the courteous and worried reply. *'Well,'* I said, *'when our Lord rode in procession he rode on a donkey.'* *'Of course!'* said his Indian host with a smile. *'He did that so that you could do this. Please [to] get in.'* And Lesslie got into the landau.

'He did that so that you can do this.' So an Orthodox Lent does not much dwell on Christ's sufferings for me. As the Orthodox commentator, Frederika Matthews-Green observed of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, the Gospels are restrained about Christ's physical and mental torment – and so are the Orthodox services. We don't pass over events, and we rehearse at length the gospel narratives of the Passion; but the focus is elsewhere, on the Resurrection-life that Christ has made possible. The disciplines of Lent are directed toward realizing, living up to, what is on offer – which is, in essence, a return to a lost paradise.

At the Saturday Vespers before Forgiveness Sunday, which is also the Sunday when we remember the expulsion of Adam from Eden, we sing these poignant verses:

**O paradise, garden of delight and beauty,
Dwelling-place made perfect by God,
Unending gladness and eternal joy,
The hope of the prophets and the home of the saints,
By the music of your rustling leaves beseech the Creator of all
To open to me the gates which my sins have closed,
That I may partake of the tree of life and grace
Which was given to me in the beginning.**

A recurrent note throughout an Orthodox Lent is the human longing for that purification which will again open the gates. Even on the very first Sunday of the four that are preparatory to Lent, the Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican, we are already considering how that purification can be achieved. Plainly, it is not done by the self-congratulatory efforts of the Pharisee but by throwing oneself entirely on divine mercy. At Matins on the Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican we sing:

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.
Open to me the doors of repentance, O Life-Giver,
For my spirit rises early to pray toward Thy Holy Temple
Bearing the temple of my body all defiled;
But in Thy compassion purify me by the lovingkindness of Thy mercy.**

Now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

**Lead me on the paths of salvation, O Mother of God,
For I have profaned my soul with shameful sins
And have wasted my life in laziness.
But by your intercessions deliver me from all impurity.
Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy
And according to the multitude of Thy compassions
blot out my transgressions.**

**When I think of the many evil things I have done, wretch that I am,
I tremble at the fearful day of judgement;
But trusting in Thy loving-kindness like David, I cry to Thee:
Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy.**

[CUE CHOIR]

In all this, the Orthodox are helped by a somewhat kinder doctrine of human nature than is prevalent in the west. We have no truck with any Calvinist teaching as to Man's total depravity. It is true that mankind fell by turning away from the Source of Life and so condemned themselves to death. But sin and death are not natural to us: we were not made for corruption and we retain a memory of what we once were. Like the Psalmist 'by the waters of Babylon' (as we sing at the Matins of the Sunday of the Prodigal Son), we weep at our exile – but from our captivity we remember Zion. So God's grace does not strike like an arbitrary and unexpected thunderclap, but stirs inclinations already there, so that God's loving-kindness and human will combine in what we call a *synergy*, a working-together of God and Man towards our salvation. By this doctrine of synergy, Orthodoxy has largely escaped western disputes over which comes first, faith or works. With St Paul we proclaim salvation by faith; with St James we cry: '*Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith*' [James 2.18 NRSV].

The Orthodox in Lent are helped also by a somewhat kinder image of God. We do not at Communion, as does *The Book of Common Prayer*, address God as '*Judge of all men*', as a King against whose '*Divine Majesty*' we have offended '*by our manifold sins and wickedness*', '*provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us*'. Instead, again and again in every service and at almost every blessing, the Orthodox are reminded that '*He is a good God and the Lover of mankind*'.

We do not reject an understanding of the Atonement as Christ paying the ransom for our sin, since that is scriptural; but we largely avoid the western St Anselm's legalistic interpretation, that God's justice could only be satisfied if an innocent paid the penalty on our behalf. The precise mechanism of God's At-one-ment with Man is for us a mystery beyond human comprehension. Instead, we rejoice in the assurance of St Basil, whose liturgy is heard throughout Lent, that '*when your just judgement, O God, banished him [that is, Man] from paradise into this world and turned him back to the earth from which he was taken . . . yet you provided for him the salvation by rebirth that is in your Christ.*'

**For You did not entirely reject your creature whom You had made, O
gracious One, nor did You forget the work of your hands:**

You visited him in various ways through your merciful compassion. You sent out prophets; You did mighty works through your saints, who in every generation have been well-pleasing to You; You spoke to us by the mouth of your servants the prophets, who foretold the salvation that was to come; you gave us the Law to be our help; You appointed angels to watch over us.

But when the fullness of time had come, You spoke to us in Your Son Himself, through whom You had created the ages. He, though He is the Radiance of your glory, and the exact Image of your Being, sustaining all things by his word of power, did not regard equality with You, our God and Father, as something to be grasped; but though He was God before all ages, He appeared on earth and lived among men. Becoming incarnate of a holy virgin, he emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, conforming Himself to the body of our base condition, so we might be transformed into the image of his glory. For since by man sin came into the world, and by sin death, your only-begotten Son, though He was in your bosom, our God and Father, consented to be born of a woman, of the holy Theotokos, Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, to be born under the Law, so He might condemn sin in his flesh, and so that those who were dead in Adam might be made alive in Himself, your Christ.

Becoming a dweller in this world, and giving us his saving commandments, He turned us from the deceit of idols and brought us to the knowledge of You, the true God and Father, acquiring us for Himself as a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

Having cleansed us with water and sanctified us by the Holy Spirit, He gave Himself as a ransom to the death by which we were bound and sold to sin. Descending into Hell by his cross, so He might fill all things with Himself, He dissolved the pains of death; and on the third day He rose again, making a way for all flesh to the resurrection from the dead, for it was not possible that the Author of life should be subject to corruption. He became the First-fruits of those who had fallen asleep, so that He might be all in all pre-eminent.

(The Liturgy of St Basil, Australian Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, 1998)

Christ '*gave Himself as a ransom to the death by which we were bound*', He '*dissolved the pains of death*', '*on the third day He rose again, making a way for all flesh to the resurrection from the dead*'. The victory of the resurrection, therefore, is first and foremost a victory over death. It is this victory that Lent prepares us to share, and which we are fearful of missing through our sins. The fear of missing out is what drives us to embark on what Vespers on the Sunday of Forgiveness calls '*the great sea of the fast*', on which we sail '*to the third-day resurrection of our Lord*'. It is '*the spring-time of the fast*' (as Vespers for the Wednesday before Lent puts it, and so it is a time for spring-cleaning. We are encouraged to see our sea-travel as a joyful thing.

On the first day of Lent, the Greeks fly kites, making a line between earth and heaven, a sign that our spirits are enabled under gentle restraint to fly high, free of the clogs of earthly, fleshly demands. The physical deprivations of Lent are meant to loose us from pre-occupation with the body and to discipline our

appetites, reminding us of our total dependence upon God, and opening our spirits to the wind of Christ's Spirit.

But the fear of not properly responding to the resurrection-reality is very intense; and it is made greater by our use before and during Lent of much of material that the west puts into Advent, the season of preparation to greet both the First and the Second Coming. On the third of the Sundays preparatory to Lent we contemplate the Last Judgement. At the Vespers of Saturday and again throughout that Sunday, we consider our own position at that final reckoning:

**When the thrones are set up and the books opened,
and God sits in judgement, O what fear there will be then!
When the angels stand trembling in your presence
and the river of fire flows before you, what shall we do then,
guilty of many sins? When we hear Him call the blessed of his
Father into the kingdom, but send sinners to their punishment,
who shall endure his fearful condemnation?
But Saviour who alone loves mankind, King of the ages,
before the end comes turn me back through repentance
and have mercy on me.**

'Considering our position' involves facing the extent of our wrongdoing. And so the first week of Great Lent is devoted to rehearsing the canticles of the great penitential Ode or Canon of St Andrew of Crete, an intense outpouring of personal guilt which newcomers almost invariably find excessive, but which you come to realize is an expression of the guilt of the human race as well as one's own. As we identify ourselves one by one with the varied and various saints and sinners of the Old Testament, our corporate and personal guilts become indistinguishable. For as we believe that we are saved not on our own but in the community of the Church (John Wesley would agree), so we come to realize that we are condemned not just individually but as part of a doomed race, by whose crimes we are affected and in all of which we are implicated.

Yet at every point it is made clear that there is a way out – if we will only accept our status as erring children to a loving Father, who has sacrificed his Son for our sake. The Aposticha at Tuesday Vespers in the third week of Lent reminds us of our real status:

**Even though I am a creature of earth,
I dare to call on You, the Creator, as my Father.
I participate in your image even though I have forsaken my sonship,
living blindly as the prodigal,
squandering the gifts of your riches through forgetfulness.
But as You have sent your beloved Son
to endure crucifixion and death in the flesh for my sake,
so do not forsake me now, but bring me back from evil,
and join me to Yourself, O Lover of mankind!**

St Andrew of Crete places the same reliance on our standing as 'made in the image of God' in this brilliant application of Christ's parable about the woman who lost a coin

and could not rest till she found it. (It comes as Canticle Six in the Matins of Thursday of the Great Canon.)

**O Saviour, I am the coin marked with the King's likeness,
which you have lost of old. But, O Word, light your lamp, your
Forerunner, and seek and find again your own image.**

However, you may have noticed in the Aposticha that Christ's endurance of 'crucifixion and death' is mentioned as a guarantee of the Father's love and not chiefly as a reminder of his suffering for *me*. When the Lenten services turn toward considering what Christ endured, that tends to be seen through the eyes of his Mother – who does not forget that crucifixion and death are not the end. This is from the Aposticha that responds to the eleventh of the twelve gospels on Holy Friday:

**Today the most pure Virgin saw You hanging on the cross, O Word;
and with a mother's love she wept and bitterly her heart was wounded.
She groaned in anguish from the depth of her soul, and in her grief she
struck her face and tore her hair. And, beating her breast, she cried,
lamenting: 'Woe is me, my divine Child! Woe is me, You Light of the
world! Why do You vanish from my sight, O Lamb of God?' Then the
host of angels were seized with trembling, and they said, 'O Lord beyond
our understanding, glory to You.' (And again. after the psalm verse:)**

**Seeing you hanging on the cross, O Christ the Creator and God of all,
bitterly your Virgin Mother cried: 'O my Son, where is the beauty of your
form? I cannot bear to look on You crucified unjustly. Make haste, then,
to arise, that I too may see your resurrection on the third day from the
dead.'**

Oddly, when the Lenten services dwell on pain, it is on the suffering that Christ's wounds have caused *Satan*. At Matins on the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross, the emphasis of the Kontakion that follows Canticle Six is on victory and restoration:

**The sword of flame no longer guards the gate of Eden,
for a strange bond came upon it: the wood of the cross.
The sting of death and the victory of Hades were nailed to it.
For you appeared, my Saviour, crying to those in Hades:
'Be brought back
again to paradise'.**

(The *Ikos* reflects what is going on in the other camp:)

**Three crosses Pilate fixed on Golgotha,
Two for the thieves and one for the Giver of life,
Whom Hades saw and said to those below,
'My ministers and powers,
Who has fixed a nail in my heart?
A wooden lance has suddenly pierced me
and I am being torn apart.
My insides are in pain, my belly in agony;
My senses make my spirit tremble,**

**And I am compelled to disgorge Adam and Adam's race,
given me by a tree;
A tree is bringing them back
again to paradise.'**

You might say that this glossing-over the physical facts of crucifixion points to a potential weakness in an Orthodox Lent. We can be so concerned with our own state and with the dangers of missing-out on the wonder that is offered that we forget both the cost of salvation and the sufferings of other people. We once took a very devout Orthodox lady to Mel Gibson's film of the Passion, and she was shattered: 'I had no idea', she said after a prolonged silence, 'that it was like *that*.' The beauties of the cult, the practices of the fast, the triumphal hymns had obscured the reality from her. At its worst, an Orthodox fast can turn into some self-regarding physical and spiritual gymnastic, a toning-up – and this despite St John Chrysostom's insistence that a true fast involves 'Abstinence not only from food but from sins'. 'The fast', he says, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone': the eye must reject impure sights, the ear malicious gossip and the hand acts of injustice. St Basil observes tartly that a true fast means also giving up eating your fellow-man. I have on several occasions heard priests remind their congregation that fasting, prayer *and* almsgiving are the three pillars of Lent: what you save from not eating meat or drinking wine is intended to do more than just help out the family budget.

Yet I cannot avoid the conclusion that, because of the constant association of crucifixion with resurrection, Lent and Easter in the Orthodox Church are more *fun*. We don't have to look for ways to liven up the penitential season. The alternative to a Church Triumphant is usually a Church Despondent. I think instead of my Good Fridays and Easter Saturdays at the Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral in Sydney and rejoice to think how we turned Christ's funeral into a celebration.

The bier is set up in the midst of the church, and on it is the *epitaphion*, the image of Christ crucified and laid out for burial, beautifully embroidered on a stiff cloth. The bier is covered with flowers, often with red roses. One by one we go up, prostrate ourselves before the image of Christ's tomb and kiss the *epitaphion* as we would kiss goodbye to a dead relative or a friend in their open coffin at an Orthodox funeral.

When all have paid their respects to the image of the dead Christ, the bier, festooned with flowers, is lifted on the shoulders of the strong men of the congregation and out we go by a side door, led by the priest, the censers and the candle-bearers, following the bier in procession all round the outside of the church. (The Greeks in Sydney, who seem to have some deal with the New South Wales police, get the streets round their Cathedral closed to traffic, so their procession is even more spectacular.) But at the main entrance to the church, whether Greek or Arab, we halt. Inside it is brightly lit, we are in the darkness – and probably in the cold also. The price of our entering into the light of the church is to go under Christ's bier, which is held head-high over the doorway. One by one we stoop to enter, through what Cranmer would call 'the grave and gate of death' – for the accompaniment of entering resurrection is to submit oneself to Christ, to die to oneself, and to live for him. '*As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia!*' was the antiphon we sang yesterday on Lazarus Saturday. But as St Paul says, to be baptised into Christ is to be baptised into his death, to be ready to give up everything, even life, for his sake. There is no resurrection without crucifixion.

Thereafter, whether it is east or west, we move through Easter Eve to the proclamation at midnight of Christ's Arising, the Anastasis, the Resurrection-fact – something so amazing that it overwhelms all human considerations and distinctions, dissolves all petty animosities, *'making us call "brothers" even those who hate us'* (as the Paschal Verses will put it). In a way, it seems to make all the effort we have put into Lent somehow irrelevant. For what is on offer is completely unconditional: all that matters is to respond – the theme of St John Chrysostom's Paschal Homily that is read in every Orthodox church on Easter Day:

If anyone is devout and a lover of God, let him enjoy this beautiful and radiant festival.

If anyone is a wise servant, let him, rejoicing, enter into the joy of his Lord.

If anyone has wearied himself in fasting, let him now receive his recompense.

If anyone has laboured from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If anyone has come at the third hour, with thanksgiving let him keep the feast. If anyone has arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; for he shall suffer no loss. If anyone has delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near without hesitation. If anyone has arrived even at the eleventh hour, let him not fear on account of his delay. For the Master is gracious and receives the last, even as the first; he gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, just as to him who has laboured from the first. He had mercy upon the last and cares for the first; to the one he gives, and to the other he is gracious. He both honours the work and praises the intention.

Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and whether first or last, receive your reward. O rich and poor, one with another, dance for joy! O you ascetics and you negligent, celebrate the day! You that have fasted and you that have disregarded the fast, rejoice today! The table is rich-laden; feast royally, all of you! The calf is fatted; let no one go forth hungry!

Let all partake of the feast of faith. Let all receive the riches of goodness.

Let no one lament his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed.

Let no one lament his transgressions, for pardon has dawned from the grave.

Let no one fear death, for the Saviour's death has set us free.

He that was taken by death has annihilated it! He descended into Hades and took Hades captive! He embittered it when it tasted his flesh! And anticipating this Isaiah exclaimed, 'Hades was embittered when it encountered thee in the lower regions'. It was embittered, for it was abolished! It was embittered, for it was mocked! It was embittered, for it

was purged! It was embittered, for it was despoiled! It was embittered, for it was bound in chains!

It took a body and, face to face, met God! It took earth and encountered heaven! It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen!

‘O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’

Christ is risen, and you are overthrown!

Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!

Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!

Christ is risen, and life reigns!

Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in a tomb!

For Christ, being raised from the dead, has become the First-fruits of them that slept.

To him be glory and might unto ages of ages. Amen.

Therefore at midnight we cry:

Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered.

For this is Pascha and

**Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death
And upon those in the tombs bestowing life.**

[CUE CHOIR]

Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered.

**Today a sacred Pascha is revealed to us.
A new and holy Pascha. A mystical Pascha,
A Pascha worthy of veneration. A Pascha which is Christ, the Redeemer.
A blameless Pascha. A great Pascha. A Pascha of the faithful.
A Pascha which has opened for us the gates of Paradise.
A Pascha which sanctifies all the faithful.**

As smokes vanishes, so let them vanish.

**Come from that scene, O women-bearers of glad tidings and say to Zion:
Receive from us the glad tidings of joy of Christ’s resurrection:
Exult and be glad, and rejoice, O Jerusalem,
seeing Christ the King who comes forth from the tomb,**

like a bridegroom in procession.

So the sinners will perish from the face of God, but let the righteous be glad.

**The myrrh-bearing women at the break of dawn
drew near to the tomb of the Life-giver.
There they found an angel sitting upon the stone.
He greeted them with these words:
Why do you seek the living among the dead?
Why do you mourn the incorrupt amid corruption?
Go: proclaim the glad tidings to his disciples.**

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

**Pascha of beauty! Pascha of the Lord!
A Pascha worthy of all honour has dawned for us.
Pascha! Let us embrace each other joyously.
Pascha! Ransom from affliction!
For today Christ has shone forth from the tomb
and filled the women with joy, saying:
Proclaim the glad tidings to the apostles!**

*Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.*

**This is the day of resurrection! Let us be illumined by the feast!
Let us embrace each other, and call ‘brothers’ even those that hate us,
and forgive all by the resurrection, and so let us cry:**

**Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!**

**Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!**

**Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!**

*(Note: The services of *The Lenten Triodion* were made extensively available in English in the classic edition by Mother Mary and Archimandrite (now Bishop) Kallistos Ware, first published in 1978 by Faber & Faber and reprinted by St Tikhon’s Seminary Press (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: 1999) ISBN 1-878997-51-3. Archimandrite Ephrem Lash’s website <http://www.anastasis.org.uk> has good translations in ‘you’ form of many of the texts and a number of articles on particular topics.)*