

ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

Basic substantial teaching on what Orthodox Christians believe



1

WHO IS GOD?

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WHO IS GOD?

1 Who is God?

God meets human beings in a thousand ways. Our circumstances can be so different; human beings themselves are so varied. God however is also very humble. He adapts to the infinite variety of his creatures.

God has revealed himself under many names: the Holy One, the Mighty One, the God of Majesty, the Beautiful One, the God of Mercy, the God of Peace, and many others.

He tells us he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he tells us he is the God who delivered Moses, he is the God of David, the God of Elijah and so on. However he tells us more or less nothing about himself. At the greatest moment in the Old Testament, when Moses has the chance to ask him his Name, he simple says 'I am who I am'.

The word 'God' tells us nothing. It is a generic name just as the word 'man' tells us nothing about a specific human being. We know nothing about human beings until we meet one we can call by name, John, Peter, Jenny, Julia and so on.

God knows this. He wants to come and meet us in person. In Paradise Adam was able to talk with God in the cool of the evening. The Jews knew God had a Name, a holy name, a powerful name but still only a very mysterious name. They still needed him to come in

person.

We need a real person and a real name, so we can learn to trust him and get to know him intimately.

Jesus said, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'. Jn 14.9

Jesus came, people saw him, touched him, spoke with him in person. After being put to death he showed himself alive; then he disappeared so that he could send the Spirit that everyone everywhere could meet him and get to know him in person.

Today we cannot see him, touch him or speak with him in the same way. So how do we meet him?

2 HOW DO WE MEET HIM?

We may pick up the Gospels and read. This is a possible beginning. He will meet us but only if we are humble and still and are open to him.

However, in our times, people see many different things when reading: he is only a man, perhaps a good man; he is only a teacher, a prophet, a wonderworker. Others draw the conclusion he was deluded, an imposter, a charlatan. Historians add to the list: a radical zealot, a political and religious revolutionary. To these people, when Jesus met his death on the cross, it was the end; he got what was coming to him. All that we are left with now is a few ethical aspirations, a few moral ideals...

Many Christians do not get beyond seeing Jesus in one

or other of these ways. Many are influenced by what they have read or heard academics and historians conclude. These take the Gospels apart, examine each and every little bit. Then they try and put the picture back together again.

They may agree Jesus existed; they may accept that Jesus said various things and did various things. But what they put back together always excludes things: anything to do with the supernatural, and certainly the resurrection. They do this because they start from a premise that they cannot include anything that is unverifiable; and all these things are by nature unverifiable. All this suits the mood of our times.

In the Gospels there are eleven passages giving us accounts of the Resurrection. They are the eleven passages read in the Orthodox service of Matins each Sunday, each week in rotation. This, I want to suggest to you, is the place to start. There are several reasons.

First this is where the apostles and disciples started. Meeting Jesus as the One who is Risen changed their view of him completely. It changed them.

Secondly this is where the early Church began. Meeting the Risen Jesus completely re-shaped what the early church thought about Jesus. Without the experience of the Risen Jesus there would have been no church

Thirdly this is where the Gospel writers began. These writers started from the end, that is from the Resurrection, and then wrote the beginning – the life of Jesus. Without the Resurrection they could not have

understood his life, what he did and what he said. Without an understanding gained from the Resurrection they would have had no story to tell.

The church saw everything in a new light. They saw his Birth in a new light, his Baptism, his Transfiguration, and above all his Cross in a new light.

The encounter with the Risen Jesus changed everything.

Allow the Risen Jesus to make himself known to you.

There is no Jesus except for the Risen Jesus. All the other 'Jesus's' exist only in the imagination. Paul said it bluntly; 'if Jesus did not rise from the dead our faith is in vain'.

If Jesus meets us at all, it can only be because he is still alive. A dead man cannot meet us. A teacher or prophet or whatever of 2000 years ago cannot meet us. We cannot have a relationship with the dead, only with the living. We cannot have a 'spiritual' relationship with him if his bones lie somewhere in Palestine. He is either risen or dead.

Millions of Christians say they have met Jesus, that they have a relationship with him, that he acts and speaks. This cannot make any sense - unless Jesus really is alive and acts and speaks in relationship with us.

Worship would also be quite meaningless. If he is not alive there is no one there to receive it.

The problem for many people is how to perceive this.

Some try and think of him as some sort of shadowy figure who floats about; others try and picture him in their imagination, perhaps thinking of some oil painting they have seen. But the Risen Jesus has nothing to do with a shadowy figure, nor with the imagination, nor with an oil painting. Much of Western art has deceived us in this respect. All pictures of this type exist in the imagination. But we do not have to conceive, imagine, or picture him in our minds. He exists in an altogether different order of things, one which is not perceptible in images related to our senses. This is why, as such, he had to disappear.

We should not condemn people if they picture him in some kind of way if this is all they can do. The difficulty with it is that there is something so much better: they miss the real thing. To meet the Risen Jesus we must abandon the desire to hold onto some picture in our mind – just as the Risen Jesus told Mary not to cling to what she saw before her eyes. The Risen Jesus comes to us silently, in his own way, in a mystery, but quite indubitably.

We must let our minds become still. We must learn to pray and wait on God in the manner in which the Saints teach us. It is a way of ‘not knowing’ to the senses but in the spirit, with perseverance, the Risen Jesus will come to us in a way deeper than our minds can tell. This is a tried and tested way of praying which works, though you will need support and encouragement.

The accounts of the Resurrection help us in this respect. In these accounts notice how the participants, whether men or women, were always on the wrong tack. They had expectations which were always wrong. In this they are like us: we come to Jesus with all our funny ideas.

The real Jesus has to turn them all upside down. Then suddenly, like those men and women, we see him in a quite different way from the one we expected.

The account in Mark 16.1-8 is very simple. The women get up very early just after sunrise and make their way to the tomb. They have formed a plan of action, they think they know what to do. They chatter about who is to roll the stone away from the tomb. In short, they think Jesus is dead. In a moment their plan is shattered. They expected to find a dead body; there wasn't one.

Trembling, bewildered, they fled; they said nothing; they were afraid.

At this point they discovered that they were the dead ones: they were paralysed by fear, incapable of belief, incapable of action, lifeless to the core. So they remained - until they met the Risen Jesus.

This is how it is for us all. We think we are alive. In reality we are dead – we are controlled by the self, we live for ourselves; we are trapped in our sin and blind in our own darkness. We are going to die and that is the end of it. We are men and women truly without hope: until we meet the Risen Jesus.

The account in Luke 24 1-8 underlines the brief account of Mark. The women go to the tomb with the spices. They find the stone rolled away and no body. In Luke an angel makes explicit what was implicit in Mark: 'Why do you look for the living among the dead. He is not here. He has risen. Remember how he told you..?'

All the other accounts reinforce the basic point in one

blow after another. 'Don't you realise...? Dumb, forgetful, unbelieving, foolish,....how many times do I have to tell you? I am risen. I am here. It is me. I walk through walls, I show you my side, I eat broiled fish, I walk by your side... I told you. What more can you possibly want?'

The Resurrection stories are blunt and real. In them Jesus is also speaking to you and me. Jesus comes, he continues to come. He says, 'What is the problem? What more do you want? Do you not believe? Why do you doubt?' We wrestle with our mind, we wrestle with fear (because after all this is scary stuff), we struggle with our doubt – until...something clicks.

John (20:10-18) is very instructive. The women came to the tomb. The apostles came and went. Mary Magdalene, left at the tomb, stands alone, outside, weeping. She peers into the tomb just to get another look, to make sure after all he is dead. She believes 'they', whoever they are, have taken him away and all she wants to know is where 'they' have laid him. She cannot get beyond her self-inflicted agenda.

Two angels appear. 'Why are you weeping' they ask. She has a little moan. Then Jesus himself speaks. 'Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?' Jesus does not call her by name at this point: he is addressing us all.

See the drama. She thinks he is someone else – the gardener of all people. (is John alluding here to the garden of Eden?) She is still fixated on what she has got to do. The gardener finally speaks to her by name: 'Mary'. Now she is truly scared, she almost jumps out of

her skin: it dawns on her who this is. The natural instincts kick in strongly: she tries to grab him. He evades her. She, like us, cannot do this.

When we too realise the Risen Jesus stands before us, we too will be scared. He stands before us as the one who lives in eternity, a being who dwells for ever in heaven. The reality takes us far out of our comfort zones. We have no alternative but, however haltingly, however 'unwillingly', to submit. We now have a Lord and Master. We are now out of our control.

We want to be guided by our senses. I guess nowadays, if it was us, our instinct would be to get the camera out: to catch the 'proof'. We want to 'possess' so that we do not have to face the prospect of functioning by faith with all the vulnerability that implies. But we have to set aside our reliance on the world of our senses so we can realise that beyond them is something more real: the world of the spirit. Eventually that will become much more real than the life of the senses.

Somewhere, out of our depth, beyond the floundering of our senses, beyond the doubting of our mind, something will click. We will realise Jesus can only come to us now because he rose from the dead and lives now in 'eternity'. He comes to us now not as a lonely figure wandering the dusty roads of Palestine long ago. He comes into time from another dimension, himself untouched by sin, darkness and death. All that he did and said have the same divine energy to impact our lives and speak to us.

Beyond the postures of the self, beyond the protests,

beyond the fluster, he puts one question only: Do you believe?

If you do then you will understand: to see him is to see the Father.

But there is more. Jesus also said that he would send 'another'. This other was sent by the Risen and Ascended Jesus to be with us for ever, the Holy Spirit. Without the Resurrection there would have been no sending of the Holy Spirit.

There is no way to escape this three-ness at the heart of Christian experience. The three-ness brings everything together. The Risen Jesus reveals the Father, the Spirit makes manifest the Son and the Father. Jesus, Father, Holy Spirit, we cannot do without any one of them without a fundamental distortion of the Gospel. The unity of God does not obliterate the three. The three does not obliterate the unity.

The Three became clear when the Risen Jesus returned to the Father and sent the Spirit. The one whom Jesus had spoken of, the Father, now becomes the one to whom we are fully united and who comes to dwell in us. By the Holy Spirit now poured upon us, Christ also dwells in us and we live in him.

This is the big change: there are no more 'riddles': there is one God, three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Risen Jesus will show us the mystery of the Trinity. The Son dwells in the bosom of the Father. The Holy Spirit shows us the love the Son has for the Father. He

shows us the love the Father has for the Son. Here we touch the heart of the Gospel. We do not understand the Gospel until we understand communion with the Trinity. From the very beginning, from the first page of the Gospel, the Light of God the Trinity, shines upon us.

3 WILL I MEET JESUS?

The answer is yes.

The question is when.

Every single human being will meet Christ. That should never be in doubt.

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him...’ (Mt 25.31-2).

We will meet him; and we will have to give account.

In the liturgy Orthodox pray for a ‘good answer before the fearful judgment seat of Christ’. Many times I have thought about what this means. The Living Christ, who sees all things, will be listening and so will the angel standing by his side. He has recorded everything I ever did, everything I ever said and everything I ever thought.

If you do not tremble at this you have a heart of stone.

I am not going to gamble on the answer. I am not going to leave it to ‘chance’. At the point of answer there is no chance left. There is only the Living God; before him I

have to make an answer, and before him, let's face it, I am a sinner.

We have to make a decision; Christ Jesus, are you alive; and if you are alive I am going to repent, starting right now

Even dithering is a form of decision. We either decide; or do not decide - and will discover later this was the wrong decision. We can put it off till later, even to our dying breath. But that is still a decision.

We cannot live until we recognise that Jesus is alive. We cannot have a real life until we repent. The only alternative is to be caught in the rounds of doubt, more doubt, and more doubt, until we choose to believe. When we believe Jesus will say, 'I came to give you life'.

Human beings tend to think how hard it must be to believe. The reality is life is so much easier when you believe. Not because everything becomes a bed of roses, it does not. However when you believe you know where you are; and you begin to form the answer you will give to Jesus on the final day.

We form that answer now as we begin to repent of every deed and word and thought that comes from the self. We form that answer as we learn to pray continually 'Jesus have mercy'. When you have made this prayer your faithful companion over many years in your heart so that it has truly become part of you, you will have asked for Jesus' mercy on every deed you have ever done, on every idle word, and on all the ridiculous thoughts that have ever gone around your head. And there will come a

point when you know you have received it.

And when you stand before Jesus you will be able to say to him 'I have sought your mercy on every moment of my life - and you have given it'.

Jesus will turn to the recording angel and say: 'Is that true? And he will say, 'Yes, Lord'. And before the whole of heaven there will be silence, a silence of living joy. Because there will be no one, neither in the spirits of the heavens nor of the people of the earth who will be allowed to accuse you.

When we meet the Risen Christ we find abundant mercy and abundant life.

We go to the liturgy week by week to hear him, meet him and receive his Body and Blood even now into ourselves.

In one sense it is a strange life because life changes so much. But Christianity is an experiential faith – we do discover truth in experience. The self we always knew and which always gave us grief and death changes. As we keep up our prayer for mercy Christ cleanses us deep inside and we are changed. We are changed bit by bit, day by day and eventually the pace quickens. Our attachments go, our obsessions disappear, and a strange new energy works inside us.

As St Paul says, 'we are being changed from grace to grace, and from glory to glory'.

The change is this. Whereas once we were dead – like those at the tomb – we too become a 'risen one'.

A new life arises within us, a life that cannot be touched by death. It is life eternal which has already entered time - in us.

A new person has come into being which is capable of responding to God with the whole heart and which becomes fully united with him in his death and resurrection. When this person comes alive, you can look forward to growing and growing ever more close to him and in him and your change of identity is recognisable.

Very humbly you can look forward to meeting Jesus again on the last day.

4 FINALLY, WHY DID PEOPLE NOT RECOGNISE JESUS THEN?

When we read the Gospel accounts it becomes clear that people could not recognise Jesus.

The truth is they never could have done so.

What was before their eyes was too great to understand. Until they met the Risen Jesus they simply did not have the mental framework to recognise him.

At first this may seem strange. But if we look back to the time before Christ and the time when he came we see this clearly.

If we look at all the instances when people in the Old Testament met with God, that is from Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Solomon, Elijah and so on. what is striking is that, though God truly met with them, they actually learnt

almost nothing about God himself.

When God revealed himself to Abraham he simply said 'I am the God of your Fathers'. When Jacob wrestled with God to learn his name, God said 'why do you ask'? When God revealed himself to Moses he simply said 'I am who I am'. When Solomon saw the presence of God in the Temple he saw only the cloud. When God came to Elijah it was not in the thunder or in an earthquake but in a voice that was both still and small. Job knew God only as hidden in 'thick clouds'. On no occasion did God, though he truly met with his people, give anything away.

This makes abundantly clear: God is a mystery.

Indeed the very nature of God, in himself, is unknowable.

Many well-intentioned people may tell you what they know about God. They may be less inclined to acknowledge the extent to which he is unknowable. There is a very delicate balance here: on the one hand he always remains hidden and inscrutable. This is obvious from the examples above. On the other hand if we accept that God is a mystery in himself, then because he sent Jesus, the mystery far from being baffling, becomes full of light.

Jesus is the 'true light that gives light to every man who comes into the world'.

When the time for Jesus drew near things got darker - because the Light throws everything else into darkness.

This is true even for a Christian. When Christ draws near

to us we will seem out of our depth – because the coming of God is darkness to the natural human mind.

This happened with the Jews. They had lost their existence as a free and independent Kingdom. The Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and also the Romans, all conquered them. To the Jews this was a deep humiliation, a profound frustration. It was perfectly natural to ask: what on earth was God doing?

The Jews wanted to do God's will. They tried hard to see what to do. However at this point God's will was far beyond their comprehension. They had no chance of understanding it.

It was quite impossible for anyone to realise that the Son of God would take upon himself human flesh in order to save, heal and sanctify the world. There was simply no conceptual framework for anyone to see him in this way. The proof of this, if you want one, is that it took even the church a long time to find the words it needed to speak about the mystery of his coming.

The problem human beings have in recognising God is their agendas. We want God to meet us in a way that we want. We want him to do things in the way that we want, say things that we want. This causes a blockage in our perceptions. It makes us blind. It is only those who completely let go of their agendas who can begin to see God in God's way, and, in particular, to see Jesus for who he truly is.

The agendas of the Jews were many. The Zealots, the Essenes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians,

all had their different agendas. As we listen to the Gospels we become aware of different political and religious power struggles going on. And there, in the middle, is the Son of God and none can understand him.

The Gospels underline the incomprehension of the people, of the leaders, of the priests. The story of the Passion underlines the incomprehension of all - even of the Apostles. They had seen everything connected with Jesus in Jesus' lifetime but scarcely understood anything. This is a very honest and daring admission. If this was true of them, it is not surprising it was true of the rest of the Jews.

No one, not even one, could have possibly anticipated what was before them: the mystery of the Son of God made flesh.

As we ponder the Gospels we begin to sense that with Jesus there is something very different about him. There is a certain space about him, even a distance; there is an altogether different sense of time about him, even a stillness. This is because he always lived in the presence of the Father. Because of this he was able to hear and obey the Father all the time. That presence is the presence of the supernatural and the eternal. This is why there is something different about Jesus.

We have been deceived by the movies. No actor has that stillness out of which Jesus lived. No actor has perfect union with the Father.

The iconography of the church expresses much better the sense of distance and of timelessness when Jesus

acted and spoke. And yet he was fully present and engaged with the people among whom he walked and to whom he spoke.

That same sense of distance, of eternity, of stillness and of presence comes to us when Jesus meets with us. It is impossible to describe. But as we, as human beings, learn to be still, we will recognise it.

If no one understood at the time, what made the difference? The answer is the reality of the resurrection.

Even the accounts of the Resurrection underline the lack of belief even among apostles. This is quite extraordinary if the Gospels were window-dressing. This unbelief only goes to indicate what an extraordinary thing the resurrection was and just how far it stretched the minds of those who believed.

Generally speaking Christians hugely underestimate the sheer influx of divine grace in the early church.

With the resurrection the apostles experienced the influx of the Divine Light upon them and Divine Life into them. John hit it exactly: the Light was coming into the world; and that Light was the Life of men. It was coming – at his Birth. It came fully in the Resurrection.

Often emphasis has been put on the apostles' institutional authority, or on their evangelism, or on their 'spiritual gifts'. All these reflect Western Churches' preoccupations.

The apostles saw the Divine Light and they received the

Divine Life into their bodies and souls. In the bright Light of the Risen Christ and in the inexpressible Gift of his divine Life the church was able to enter into an essentially divine way of knowing of God, quite different from that associated with our normal modes of perception.

In this way the church was able to recognise Jesus for who he was and what he had come to accomplish. The church was able to understand everything as it celebrated the Liturgy and received still more of the Light and Life of Christ in communion. It was able to see in the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Passion, and all the actions and words of Jesus the revelation of the mystery of the Son of God. The mystery was great but it was full of Light.

The church grasped its identity in Christ. This identity is about being a partaker in that divine-human unity which the Son of God came to effect in the flesh, that same divine-human unity into which the Risen Christ drew the apostles and others.

Paul says again and again, Christians are made one with Christ, they are united to him, corporately and personally, in his Risen divine life.

Peter says 'we are made partakers of the Divine Nature'.

Who can understand this? No one. However we can enter into it and in a real sense, experientially, 'know' it. However this union with God is altogether beyond the natural mind of man to understand. Only as Christ cleanses our mind and heart and unites us to himself, do

we perceive what it means and what it involves. But then we are using an entirely different mode of perception. We call it contemplation.

That is what it all comes down to – a different mode of perception. The Orthodox Church throughout the centuries, has always been faithful, in its worship, in its doctrine, and in its spiritual teaching, to the primacy of contemplation as the true mode of the perception of God.

When the Son of God came and took on himself our human nature, no one could recognise the mystery. However in the church Christ has been found to have the power to save, sanctify and transform our humanity in body, soul, heart and mind. The Saints demonstrate this again and again in every century in every culture, including our own.

In the gift of contemplation in the church we see that Christ has made the mystery of God to be full of light; that the Father who sent him is the Father of us all; that the Holy Spirit whom Christ sends to us is the Giver of all Truth.

The Holy Spirit has his own way of convincing us that Christ is true and that we remain in sin until turn to Him who is able to heal our souls.

Finally, one of the most frequent prayers Orthodox say is:

***Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy Immortal,
have mercy on us
Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy Immortal,
have mercy on us
Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy Immortal,
have mercy on us
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the
Holy Spirit***

Holy God	God is a profound mystery
Holy and Strong	he is able to do his will
Holy and Immortal	he is always present before us, always willing to hear, full of love and mercy

When we sing this our mind does not need to know anything else.

We can let our deep heart surrender everything that we are, and everything that we do, with perfect trust in him.

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