

ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

Basic substantial teaching on what
Orthodox Christians believe



11

LIVING, DYING AND DEPARTED

The Orthodox Parish of St Bega, St Mungo, and St Herbert
Fr John Musther, 16 Greta Villas, KESWICK, Cumbria CA12 5LJ
orthodoxcumbria.org.uk

Format revised: March 2018

LIVING, DYING AND DEPARTED

1 Death

We all know it. None of us can get away from it. We are all going to die.

So much in our modern culture however wants to deny this. We don't talk about death. Most taboos have been broken but, generally speaking, not talking about death. We feel too threatened by death. We think, 'how can this lovely life possibly come to an end?'

It was not always like this. Years ago there were many child deaths and life expectancy was generally shorter. Advances in modern medicine however now suggest to us that we can all live longer, have more fun, and that, in keeping with life's expectations, life is one long entertainment. Should death come early, as it does, the anger can be intense. Death is sometimes felt as very unfair.

Death is often disassociated from anything to do with God.

Increasingly we humans want to make decisions to extend life as much as possible, even to the extent of life becoming almost pointless. We want to replace every worn out part. We want to recycle the re-usable parts of the dead to keep others going, and feel aggrieved when people don't release their parts for this. Brain transplants are now being discussed. Everything is geared to keeping this life going for as long as possible – as though we all have an inalienable right to live. Bluntly God is not involved.

However God himself 'appointed all men to die'. Death was made precisely so that we cannot avoid God.

Before we switch off in resentment, muttering that God is supposed to be love, let us say straight away God is not interested in death. He made humans beings to live. He never wanted anyone to die.

When God made Adam and Eve and put them in the Garden of Eden there were two trees among all the others. One of them was the Tree of Life. God never forbade them to eat of it.

Adam and Eve chose to eat of the other Tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; the very one which God had said they were not to eat.

Death came because a limit had to be set to human mischief. Death is very effective. It puts an end to all our folly. Our stupidity can never become eternal. God is not only good, he is wise.

Modern man wants to cut the theology and have his life. God has to say very gently, very lovingly, 'don't be like a silly child. My gift of death to you will make you pause and think. It offers you a way back, if only you will learn'.

In today's world the incessant round of entertainment inevitably palls. We can play computer games faster and faster, music louder and louder, drive souped up cars more dangerously (especially on alcohol), do extreme sports more extremely and take more drugs to keep everything going as fast as possible. The whole thing comes crashing down. Our bodies cannot take it. Death stares us in the face. Perhaps, even then, death will be our friend.

However we human beings do not have to be like this. We do not have to be childish. We do not have to be obsessed with the ultimate adrenalin rush.

God chooses many ways to gently bring us to our senses. If we brush these aside then, regrettably, more dramatic things will serve to do so: sickness, breakdown, tragedy.

We do not like to acknowledge that God is in control of the universe. We thought we could banish him to outer oblivion. We can even account for the universe without him by a big bang. Control is the issue. We want to think that we can control. We put a man on the moon. Why not Mars? – or anywhere else we fancy?

If death acts as a final stop to our foolishness, a more immediate stop comes when we admit that we are not in control of the universe, that we have very little control over our lives, and when we stop trying to control things over which we have no control.

The truth is that God is very good. He is battling for our soul. Whereas we would cheerfully ruin our soul in the pursuit of 'experience', God would save it, cleanse it, restore it, and make it whole.

2 Life

God is the Giver of Life. He wants to give us life, not death. We can have life if we learn to receive it as a gift from him. Let us stop believing we have a right to everything: life, breath, happiness, wealth, pleasure, freedom. Everything in life is a gift.

Let us instead humbly thank God for life when we awake, for breath when we breathe, and for the day as it comes

with all its uncertainties. Let us stand before God, however briefly, and thank him for all these things. Let us ask him that we may be found worthy to serve him in the midst of all that he has made. Jesus called this humility.

God gives us life. People argue about when life begins. The Book of Genesis ('beginnings') still says it well: 'God breathed into Adam a life-giving spirit'. To ordinary mortal observation we see that one minute there is no life, the next there is. We see that one minute there is life, the next there is none. Even today it is difficult to say exactly why this is the case. We say, with Job, 'the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Thanks be to God'.

The 'spirit' is not something extra to the body: it is that which gives it life. The soul is not an extra, but that which makes a particular life specific and personal. It is this gift to each one of us, of a uniquely personal life, that we have to accept as it is, for what it is, and for each one of us to use as best we can in response to God.

Knowledge is an important gift. It is the role of every parent of a new-born child to communicate and mediate the accumulated wisdom of mankind to it. This is what education is about. We educate children so that one day they may take responsibility for the gifts they have received and so take their place in the fulfilment of life which God would give us all. In the past, to bring up a child usually included the provision of a good moral sense and sense of purpose. Increasingly nowadays, many children are brought up with precious little moral sensibility and with absolutely no sense of purpose in life.

Today we tend to think we know everything. A common attitude is 'leave this to me, I know how to do everything,

thank you. I don't need you. I'll live my life exactly how I please'.

Today our brightest playthings are often the mobile phone and i-pod. With them we can send a message to anyone anywhere, check e-mails, and download from the internet anything we like. In the meantime, just in case we have a few seconds in which silence is unbearable, we can listen to whatever music we wish, take a photo of ourselves or even watch a video. Before long we will be able to press a button and it will eat my dinner for me.

The reality is that anyone who wishes to live life exactly as they please knows nothing. Human society, even humanity, means nothing. It is clear that in society today there are people who will kick others quite literally to bits, until they die. The preferred pastime is often to get drunk. Somewhere society has broken down. There is little knowledge, no wisdom, and ultimately no humanity.

The truth is that none of us know what is going to happen on earth from one moment to the next. We do not control what happens; and in not knowing we are very vulnerable. Wisdom consists in accepting the truth of this. It is what Jesus called poverty of spirit.

In accepting our collective and personal vulnerability, God comes to our aid.

God comes to us very humbly and says, 'Ok, I understand. Ok, take my hand and trust me. Let us go through this day together. You do not have to know everything that is going to happen, just live in my presence and give your attention to me, and I will show you all that you need to know'.

The human centred universe is a nightmare. In the God-

centred one we find sanity and peace.

3 Making a good death

The greatest shift in human experience is from a death-centred universe to a life-centred one. Before we die we can enter that

God-centred universe and live.

Unfortunately, each day, long before we have got up, we may have filled our heads with all the things we want to do. Long before we greet the Lord we have tucked an agenda into our hearts and we are determined to accomplish it.

It takes us a very long time to become humble before God. Humility is to acknowledge that all things come from God, that everything is to be received from him thankfully. The corollary is that when we receive them in faith we work with him to use all God's gifts creatively, in order to fulfil his purposes both for ourselves and the whole creation.

But we cannot live the 'good' life until we learn to die to our own innate self-centredness.

Self-centredness ruins our potential for a good life. Self deals death. All the self's choices wrap life round the self. Everything turns to dust, to emptiness, to non-fulfilment. We have to learn, as Orthodox pray, how to make a 'good' death.

If death is inevitable, a good death is not. We have a choice to make a good death or a bad one.

A bad death is one which finds us still in the place where we were. A bad death is one which finds us still hostile to

God, which finds us in the place of the silly and petulant child, who stomps off and sulks in the corner and throws his things around, which finds us still in the place of isolation and separation.

A good death is one which finds us in a place where we have recognised our foolishness and decided to get back to God. We have begun 'repenting' (re-thinking'), when we have decided on another approach; when we start to receive everything from God with thanksgiving, when we acknowledge his control over our lives. We begin a good death when we give thanks to God even for the gift of death itself, and putting ourselves into his hands accordingly.

As we receive, quite literally, each day as a gift, all the events of the day, with all its challenges and difficulties, are also found to be gifts of God. We can continue to be humble and poor in spirit in each and every circumstance of the day. We do not have to wait till death itself comes to make a good death. We can learn to make a good 'death' – dying to self - every day as we choose humility instead of knowledge and poverty instead of control.

God gives us each day as a day in which to grow closer to him. Suddenly, instead of God being a far off distant non-entity, he is a present, ever-close companion with whom we are entering a relationship destined for union and love. He is not the God of the dead but of the Living

Of course, we cannot work this out with our heads. Our heads can only offer a way of knowing because that is how they work. But we cannot know God like this. Knowing, in the Biblical sense, is not thinking but doing.

Orthodoxy teaches that God is a Mystery. We do not

know what God is, where he is, what to say to him or how to hear him. But with the coming of Christ that Mystery is made full of Light.

The church, the creed, the scriptures, and the liturgy provide us a wealth of experience of living with the Mystery of Christ. Here we are given enough words to understand what faith is; we are given enough practical teaching to keep us headed in the right direction; enough words with which to express our cry to him. In following these, as the Saints show clearly, we shall not go wrong.

But we have to do it: live by faith each day, and put our trust and hope in Christ.

With the gift of each day, with all the circumstances and difficulties in it God is able to show us the difference between where we really are with God, so distant from him, and where we are called to be, living every moment in his presence. The difference between these two realities has to be experienced as pain ; and that pain will be the motivation to work through our 'stuff' and get all the rubbish out of our heads and heart.

If we work on a daily basis at making a good death – dying to the self-centred universe – Jesus said we that shall have life. As we take up our daily struggle we will find that we have an unparalleled opportunity to grow in faith and hope in God as well as love for him.

We will however experience a conflict between what the self will demand in obedience, and what God is asking of us. Obedience to the self is obsessive, compulsive and destructive. Obedience to God is free and produces a relationship that works through love.

In our struggle – in our dying - God will be secretly

implanting his life in us.

We have to persevere in growing in the God-centred universe long enough until God's life becomes truly rooted in us and takes inalienable hold. Then it will become manifest. The great thing about this life is, it cannot ever die. Death has no dominion over it.

4 Dying, and behold we live

God does not allow us back into the Garden any other way than by obedience. We cannot find a way back by using our own cleverness. We cannot get back by wriggling under the wire. The sword of the Seraphim set by God to guard the garden is acutely sharp in this respect. Such is the goodness and wisdom of God. He knows exactly what he is doing.

The Fathers teach us what they themselves learnt: that only true humility avails. Humans have devised many appearances of humility but no counterfeit will do. We cannot fool God; and he does not let us fool ourselves. With humility there is no way we can say 'we have arrived'. That would take us straight back into the lie, into what ruined the Garden, the ability to say, 'I know...'

The way of not knowing ensures that we stay humble for ever. It keeps us on the way to life. The moment we say I know we are looking at ourselves. We lose everything. We are out of the God-centred universe.

We also lose everything when we try to take back control. We lose poverty of spirit. The only way is to hand over control. This is complete death to the self.

Once we let God control we are no longer poor but rich. Unseen, God takes over the control of our inmost hearts.

Obedience lets him have access to the energies of our whole being. He unites our hearts to his, our energies to his divine energies.

A good life, a good death.

If you have died well in your spirit, your spirit will be ready to leave when you die. If your body has served the spirit in life it will serve the spirit when it packs up and ceases to function.

The spirit often has a struggle to leave the body. This is mainly due to the attachments we have with the world and to the fact we have not thoroughly repented of them. But if we no longer have any attachments to the world, the spirit will long to be away from the body and be with the Lord. The spirit will be prepared that, when the brain tells our organs to pack up, our spirit will have no other concern whatsoever but to go to the Lord.

Sickness sometimes helps us understand.

Severe sickness is a form of dying.

In severe sickness our bodies cannot cope with their normal load. The body has, to a degree, to shut down. It takes no food. The digestive tract becomes empty. With pain, the feelings and emotions also pack up. In order to survive we disconnect from normal daily life. The mind too may pack up. It doesn't want to think of anything. It cannot think of anything. Our spirit descends into a lonely place. It may appropriately be termed a pit. Though our heart still beats, the pit is a deathly place. We do not know whether we will live.

The pit shows us where our spirit is. If the spirit has already learnt to trust God in all things, if it has learnt to

thank God for all things, the spirit will be very humble, very poor and very still. But it will be alive. It will be looking constantly to God, and it will live. And living, it will restore life to the body.

But this is not the case with the anxious soul, the fearful soul, the angry soul, or the miserable soul. Then the spirit will feel the cold of death. It may even enter torment.

Let us pray God that we may learn to bear sickness well. Bear sickness well and the spirit will be armed with fortitude against the day of its death.

Death? or Life? What are we talking about? We are saying that in the midst of death, life can be found welling up secretly within us; and this life is stronger than death and remains for ever.

To make sense of death, we have to understand life. To understand life – including sickness and death - we have understand God.

5 The One who came back

Long before Adam and Eve bit of the apple and lost life, God, being good, and full of love and mercy for mankind, knew how to draw us back to Paradise.

God gives us life because he endured death. What a God! What strange rules to the game. Because Christ died and rose again from the dead, God 'by death destroyed death' as we Orthodox sing at Easter.

People were there to see Jesus die. They turned away in disbelief. No one was there to see Jesus rise. He was met by unbelieving women. The apostles, informed by the women, were no more inclined to believe. Jesus had

the apostles on the run: you see me here, see me there? 'You see me now, you see me again, you see me yet again, you see me truly: do you not believe?'

The entire edifice of Christian belief stems from the fact Jesus is risen. This is the one reality on which the very existence of Christianity depends. There is no Jesus unless he is the Risen Jesus. Without the Resurrection there is no one in existence in whom to believe or to follow.

Without the Resurrection there is no Life Victorious over death. Without the Resurrection there is no union of God and man, no redemption. Without the Resurrection the sting of death remains. Without the Resurrection there is no forgiveness. Without the Resurrection there is no exchange of life for death. Without the Resurrection there is no life after death.

We have to wrestle with the issue of God. God is a Mystery. The only thing we know about God is that he raised Jesus from the dead and gave us Life. He gave his own divine Life to our humanity. The Son of God who had taken our humanity and inalienably united it to himself, after dying, united our humanity to his divinity for all eternity. When we believe, Light is shed on everything, literally from the Beginning to the End

6 What happens when we die?

This is the immediate concern of everyone when we meet death. Contrary to popular opinion there is no simple straightforward answer.

There is a judgement. At this stage this involves the individual person.

There is a universal judgement at the End of all things when the judgement of each one is put fully into effect. On death our bodies lie in the grave. But each one of us appears before Jesus, whether we believe or whether we do not believe, whether we have done good in this life or whether we have done ill. Each one of us has to render account for the gift of life given to him.

Jesus made it clear In many parables that when God gives life to each of us he expects to see it returned to him with a positive response on our part. The most terrible thing of all is to have wasted this gift. We have to render account for how we have used it: for the Kingdom of God in the good of others? or for ourselves and the pleasures of our self-centred universe?

Today we hate to give account. We think we are back at school, threatened with punishment. We think we can lie and cover up – perhaps as we did at school. But God isn't like that. God is good. He is not here to punish. He wants our good. He wants to give us Life. If all we are interested in is dodging issues we will not be happy appearing before hw who is the Light of Perfect Truth.

In the Light of Perfect Truth we will see ourselves exactly as we are. In the Light of Perfect Truth we shall know our eternal destiny. we will know whether at the End of all things we shall go to be with Jesus or whether, for whatever reason of ours, we preclude that. But no one else knows.

Whatever the judgement, we shall have to wait till the End before our final destiny comes into effect. But we shall know our destiny, and – very importantly - we shall be content. We shall see that God' judgement is perfectly

good. There will be no complaint. There will be rest.

Meanwhile, here on earth, we do not know what happens to any particular individual. By the very nature of things it is impossible for us to know. We like to think we know. We like to think that if we have been good we will go to heaven. We tend to think that those who in our eyes have done wrong will be punished and go to hell.

There is another reason why we do not know. The judgements and the mercies of God are beyond our comprehension. We really have no idea. We really do not know why people have done what they have done. Further, any close attention to the ways of God strongly suggests that those who are good in their own sight, or those who we think have done good, frequently have an awful lot to learn about themselves and God.

Further, those who have had experience of people caught in the most awful suffering abandon every attempt to see those people in the light of what is usually deemed good and bad. They sometimes get a glimpse that those apparently sunk in the midst of evil are met by the infinite most tender mercies of God.

How many times have we heard it said that the 'unbeliever' is consigned to hell – and conversely the believer waltzes into heaven. Having attended the deathbed of an apparent unbeliever many a time, and conversely attended the dying believer hardened in the most judgemental of attitudes, I think no. The mystery of the appearing of each one of us before Jesus is great.

Reality demands that we regard our appearance before Jesus with the utmost humility, with the utmost poverty of spirit, with a life which has been given over to the most

complete heart-felt repentance, totally dependent on his mercy. Nothing, absolutely nothing else will do. Neither our simplicities nor our religion. Nor our faith that has borne no fruit.

We are not safe. Who ever told us that we were? Jesus certainly didn't.

7 The Dead shall be raised

Jesus told us how it will be in the judgment at the end of all things. Nothing in the whole history of the world will be more dramatic and awe-inspiring than the raising of the dead.

The light-filled spirits of those who are alive in Christ will be given a new body.

This new body is a spiritual body which will have some mysterious connection with the body we had on earth. For we shall be recognisable. The dead shall be raised; and all those who are washed in the blood of the Lamb will ascend and go to the heavenly mansions. This surely will be the most stupendous sight in the whole universe.

The parable of the sheep and the goats speaks of the universal judgement. It is one of the most beautifully crafted in the whole of the Gospel. But it also describes our individual judgement. Built into its very heart is the fact we do not know what our judgment will be when we appear before him. Both the sheep and the goats are in for a big surprise.

In the previous chapters Jesus is shown as one who continually confounds the judgment of men. These chapters (Mt 21 ff) are some of the most salutary chapters we can read. They set out with the utmost clarity

that God judges not as men judge. Then we come to this awesome moment; 'When the Son of man comes in glory....Then the king shall say: 'Come, you blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world...'

This is the moment of truth. Not until we come to our personal judgement do we know our future, and not a moment before. While we live we live only in the perfecting of faith and hope.

We do not know where Auntie Flo and Uncle Bob have gone. We can have faith and hope in Jesus for them. We can be charitable. Whatever we think, we should not fail to pray for them.

8 Prayer for the dead

It has been a near universal instinct among humanity that when someone dies we should pray for them. The church, from the beginning, felt this instinct appropriate and prayed for the departed. We find reference to this already in the time of Tertullian in the second century when he mentions praying for the departed on the anniversary of their death. This practice was given full expression in the early liturgies of the church especially those of St Basil and St John Chrysostom which are the normative liturgies for all Orthodox churches even today.

The Orthodox church does not tell us where individual departed have gone because, quite simply, no one knows. The church has always said that prayer for the dead avails. But it has never said in any way how. That is how it has to be. God keeps his secrets from our prying mind. The most that we can say is that the church is the Body of Christ and that we can never cease to love one

another. Prayer for the departed is an expression of that love; and love never fails.

Some Christians have not always observed such silence. Some have elaborated ideas of purgatory, some have seen visions of heaven and others of hell. The difficulty with all these is how do we know?

Some have elaborated theories of how prayers help the dead. These gave rise to the practice of granting 'indulgences' which supposed that, on the commission of some meritorious act, the suffering of a departed loved one is somehow assuaged. Later this involved payments of money. All this has to do with an obsession in the West with issues of guilt, justice and punishment. This makes for a very distorted theology. It is better to leave it alone.

On the other hand the disgust felt at the Reformation at indulgences and payments of money led to a reaction, which like all reactions, jettisoned the good with bad. Praying for the dead was forbidden, and anything to do with the intercession of Mary and the saints was thrown out. They failed to comprehend the unity of the Body of Christ, and in tearing that unity were infinitely impoverished.

'We are justified by faith' became the watchword. Out went the way of holiness because, in this view, it looked like 'works'. This was perhaps the greatest mistake the Reformers made. The vacuum left by the Reformation has however been filled with other certainties: 'if I am justified, I go to heaven'; 'with blessed assurance I avoid hell'; 'born again and I am saved for ever'.

There is a flaw in such certainties because they assume that we can know. But we have to be honest: we do not

know where Auntie Flo is, or Uncle Bob, or anyone else. We are not privy to what happened when they came before Jesus. We simply were not there; and we do not know.

It is spurious certainties that bring the Christian faith into disrepute. Flo may have been a lifelong servant of the Lord. Bob may have given his life to Jesus and was 'born again'. But the reading of the Gospels shows that those who thought they had done mighty things in his Name were the ones who –sometimes - were put to shame. We have to maintain an appropriate reserve. We cannot say we know. There is no way round this.

Above all spurious certainties should not prevent us from praying for the departed. It is an awful thing that this has done so.

The Orthodox burial service takes the death of a human being with all seriousness. Someone to whom God gave the breath of life has gone – and we do not know where. The long service focuses on the realities we know. We know God created us, we know he gives us gifts to use, we know we are prone to sin, we know we commit sin, knowingly and not knowing, seen and unseen, repented and not repented. We know that we live 'in Christ'. We own the acuteness of our trial.

But the whole mystery of death and life is not about us. It is about God and what he does.

The great Litany of the Departed prays for many things: for peace from on high, for the 'ever memorable' servant of God, for his repose, tranquillity and 'blessed memory'. We know we can rely on God 'remembering' those who are his. There is never a time when he does not, and

loves to do so when we ask him. We ask that 'he will pardon every sin, both voluntary and involuntary', 'that God will establish their soul in a place of refreshment, light and peace', 'a place of repose where all the righteous dwell', and 'that he will number them with those in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob'. This latter phrase is not a strange archaism. Quite apart from being scriptural, it is typical of the restraint and deference of the liturgy.

The keenness of the tragedy is matched by the keen cry of prayer for love and for mercy for the departed. Indeed the prayer rises so strongly that at one point the one who prays and the one who is prayed for becomes identical. We sing, 'the choir of the saints has found the fountain of life and the door of Paradise; may I also find the way through repentance. I am the lost sheep; call me back, O Saviour and save me'. This is extremely poignant and extremely moving. The service goes on in similar vein, weaving in one theme after another. The setting always that of Christ, the Mother of God, the martyrs, the saints the church in heaven and earth praying for us. 'Rest eternal' is the repeated hope, 'memory eternal' the last, even triumphant, cry. We realise that we do truly live as one in Christ. There can be no greater consolation than this.

9 Saints

The church developed its understanding of the Saints by reflection on experience and scripture. To declare that there are already Saints in heaven may appear at first to contradict what has been said above. But for the early church there was one overwhelming certainty: that Christ

is risen.

Along with this came the clear conviction that those who are completely united to Christ in his death and resurrection are not dead because, even after death, they remain alive in him. The union of the church in heaven and on earth was experienced particularly acutely in the liturgy.

When Christians gave their lives in martyrdom, the church became deeply aware of their continued 'presence' in Christ and of their intercession for those on earth. The church celebrated the liturgy on the anniversary of the martyrs' deaths at their graves and held 'love-feasts' in their honour. Later the same was found to be true on the anniversaries of the death of saints. Their prayers availed, just as those of the martyrs had done. This could not be true unless the martyrs and saints actually possessed and enjoyed their final blessedness.

Consequently the prayers of the saints have produced great miracles. Prayer to the saints in no way detracts from Jesus. The Saints live in Jesus and their prayers give him all the more glory. We just have to take courage and start honouring them. Then we realise they are there with Jesus. We sense their presence along with his.

The Booklets

- 1 Who is God?
- 2 Who is Jesus?
- 3 Why the Church?
- 4 The Holy Spirit
- 5 What is Salvation?
- 6 What is Tradition?
- 7 Why Liturgy?
- 8 The Interpretation of Scripture
- 9 Knowing the Will of God
- 10 The Way of Holiness
- 11 **Living, Dying and Departed**
- 12 The Saints