

Beyond Pascha (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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Forty days of Great Lent having been completed, along with Holy Week, and the Great Feast of Feasts, Pascha, having been marked in the Church, it is very easy to take a deep breath and say, “Now, that’s done!” And with the exhalation we take our leave of a liturgical feast and return to our daily routine and schedule. Just as the modern world has little understanding of the meaning of fasting, so, too, does it fail to understand the meaning of liturgy. Liturgy is not a means of marking time on a calendar – liturgy is a means (and mode) of existence.



Through baptism and chrismation we have entered into a new mode of existence. It is an existence of constant becoming. The Scriptures describe this as new birth, the death of the old man, the putting off of the old nature and the putting on of the new. This newness, this radical change in the mode of existence, is not accomplished by human effort. It is a gift from God. Rooted in the age to come, this new existence is maintained and nourished by the Eucharist. At every Divine Liturgy we hear the good news of Christ and enter into the process of conversion. We are given the possibility to acquire for ourselves the Eucharistic manner of existence. Little by little we become ourselves communion and love. At the Divine Liturgy the tragic elements of our fallen existence – pride, individualism, blasphemy, vanity, hypocrisy, envy, anger, division, fear, despair, pain, deceit,

untruth, malice, greed, vice, gluttony, passions, corruption, death – are being continuously defeated, in order to make us capable to be love, freedom and life.

Liturgy and the Feasts of the Church are thus not mere *calendar* events which mark the annual remembrance of occasions now lost within history. What we celebrate are events within the *Kingdom of God* – now manifest in our midst. The liturgy continually initiates and renews us in the life of the age of come.

The opposite approach (one which dominates our modern world) is to see liturgical events as simply things among other things. They mark historical events, now past, and, as such, are reminders not of God's presence, but His absence. Thus the modern Easter easily becomes a feast of the Christ that was (who can barely compete with the chocolate and bunny rabbits).

In the modern world, Christmas and Easter are frequently secular feasts (of various commercial interests). Thus many feasts (such as Pentecost, the Ascension, the Dormition of the Mother of God, the Annunciation – to name just a few) often pass with little attention in the Church. Even in the Orthodox Church such feasts are often poorly attended. Were there no commercial accompaniment to Christmas and Easter – those, too, I suspect, would be of some note – but not much. I recall a local Baptist Church cancelling Sunday services several years ago, because Christmas fell on Sunday that year.

I have written at length on the problems of Christianity in the secular world (cf. “two-storey universe” and the book Everywhere Present.

This historical sense of living “in-between” adds a twist to the two-storey experience: it is rooted in our modern understanding of history and time. It is easy, almost obvious, to think of ourselves as living *between* major events in the Christian story. Two-thousand years have passed since the resurrection of Christ. Christians continue to wait for His second-coming. How do we not perceive ourselves as living in-between?

St. Gregory Palamas (14th Century) uses an interesting example from the Scriptures that dismantles the “in-between” model that is so common in our modern world. His example comes in a sermon on the Cross (Homily XI). He begins with the assertion that the Cross, though manifest in history at Christ's Crucifixion, has always been God's means of salvation – at all times and places.

His example is quite illuminating:

Although the man of the sin, the son of lawlessness (*cf.* 2 Thess. 2:3), by which I mean the Antichrist, has not yet come, the theologian whom Christ loved says, “Even now, beloved, there is antichrist” (*cf.* 1 John 2:18). In the same way, the Cross existed in the time of our ancestors, even before it was accomplished. The great Paul teaches us absolutely clearly that Antichrist is among us, even though he has not yet come, saying, “His mystery doth already work in you” (*cf.* 2 Thess. 2:7). In exactly the same way Christ’s Cross was among our forefathers before it came into being, because its mystery was working in them. (Quotation from *The Homilies*).

St. Gregory goes on within this homily to illustrate (generally with typological interpretation) how the Cross was present in the lives of the Patriarchs and other righteous “friends of God” within the Old Testament period.

His sense of time recognizes a reality of history, “even though he has not yet come,” but transcends that limitation in recognizing that “his mystery doth already work in you.” And of the Cross “[it] was among our forefathers before it came into being, because its mystery was working in them.” This understanding of time and history places these categories in a subsidiary position – they are not the frozen, solid stuff of an empty, empirical world. They are a place in which we live – but also a place that is permeated by things that have not even “come into existence.”

St. Gregory’s treatment of these things is rooted in the classical Orthodox understanding of the relation between earth and heaven; past, present and future; and the mystery of the Kingdom of God at work in the world. His universe is distinctly “one-storey.” This understanding also undergirds the Orthodox understanding of eschatology (the study of the “last things”). St. John Chrysostom, in his Eucharistic prayer, gives thanks for the Second Coming of Christ in the past tense – not that he is saying that the Second Coming has already occurred in history – but that the Eucharistic celebration stands within the Kingdom of God, such that the Second Coming can be described in the past tense. The Eucharist is the “Marriage Feast of the Lamb,” the “Banquet at the End of the Age.”

To speak of ourselves as living “in-between” or to think of liturgy as mere remembrance, is to place history in the primary position, relegating the Kingdom of God to a lower status. It is the essence of secularism. The Kingdom of God is not *denied* – it is simply placed beyond our reach (as we are placed beyond its reach). The Kingdom, like God Himself, is reduced to an *idea*.

Living “in-between” is part of the loneliness and alienation of the modern Christian. Things are merely *things*, time is *inexorable* and *impenetrable*. There is an anxiety that accompanies all of this that is marked by doubt, argument and opinion. Faith is directed towards things past or things that have not yet happened.

This stands in sharp contrast to St. Paul’s statement in Hebrews: “Faith is the substance (*hypostasis*) of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (11:1). The relationship of faith with things “hoped for and not seen” is more than a trust that they will be, more than a longing for what is not. Faith is the very *substance* of such things.

In earlier postings on faith, I have noted that faith is more than an *intellectual* or *volitional* exercise. It is an actual participation (*koinonia*) with the object (or subject) of faith. To describe faith as the *substance* of things is to grant a kind of existence to them. And so in Hebrews 11, St. Paul describes the faith of our forefathers (Old Testament) and the impact that the *substance* of faith had in their lives and world. St. Gregory’s homily echoes this very same phenomenon (indeed he quotes extensively from this chapter in Hebrews).

By faith, we do not live in-between. By faith, we live in a one-storey universe in which the realities of God’s Kingdom permeate our existence. We are not alone nor need we be alienated. The anxiety that haunts our every step is produced by a false perception – a delusion.

Of course, this is an easy thing to assert, but a difficult thing to live: it is the great struggle of our times. But without this struggle, faith will remain alien to us and we will remain lost “in-between” the worlds, trapped within those things that “are passing away.” Christ has given us something greater.

St. Paul says, “But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus...” (Heb. 2:8-9). It is the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit that is made manifest in our feasts – but this is the same Christ who is made manifest in our hearts and who promised to “abide with us.” We do not see Jesus “in-between” but rather as the “author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Indeed, He is the Feast of feasts.

This article appeared in **Glory to God for All Things** on April 27, 2011
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