

UNIT 3C: DOCTRINE

70: Eschatology and the Kingdom of God (Part 2)

In this lecture we continue to study Father Michael Pomazansky's seven themes of Orthodox Christian Eschatology in relation to the Kingdom of God. We rejoin this study at his third theme.

Third, the purposes of the Second Coming of Christ are very different from His first coming. Whereas in His first coming, Christ "humbled Himself" by becoming man and "by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Mathew 1; and Philippians 2:8), in his Second Coming Christ will come "on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Mathew 24:30). Whereas in His first coming Christ "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mathew 20:28), "not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17), in his Second Coming Christ "will reward every [person] according to his works" (Mathew 16:27) and "He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). It is appropriate then to consider the Second Coming of Christ as "the greatest future event of world history."¹

Metropolitan Hilarion suggests that "the main focus of Christian eschatology is the second coming of Christ"; but he also notes that there are conflicting responses to the Second Coming.² On the one hand, there is a "spirit of the joyful anticipation of Christ's coming" as "looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God", expressed in the cry of the early Christians, *Maranatha*, "O Lord, come" (1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20); yet there is also concern about the alarming

¹ See Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition* (Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005), tr. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose, pp. 338-339.

² Bishop [now Metropolitan] Hilarion Alfeyev, "Eschatology", in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 109.

events that will precede the Second Coming, especially the confrontation with the Antichrist (1 John 2:18-19; 2 Thessalonians 2:8-9; Revelation 11:7. 13:1-18; 17:1-20:15). In this confrontation between good and evil, it is important to remember that “the main character of the second coming will be Christ and not the Antichrist” and that the Second Coming itself “will not be a moment of defeat, but a great moment of the glory of God.”³

Perhaps one of the reasons why Christians become so confused by eschatology is that they focus on what will happen *before* the Second Coming, rather than being awed by the fruits of the Second Coming—the General Resurrection of the dead, the universal judgment and the replacement of the world with the Kingdom of Glory. The editors of the *New American Study Bible* suggest that in considering the book of Revelation, we should consider “its overall message” but “resist the temptation to become overly enamoured with the details.”⁴ No doubt this is a healthier approach than to work one’s way through the 16 novels of the *Left Behind* series, but such an attitude is to a considerable extent an opting out from facing one’s personal death, as well as the death of the world. When there is a problem in life, especially the inevitability of death, it is necessary to acknowledge that problem and face it, rather than ignore it.

Fourth, as St Paul sets out in 1 Corinthians 15, “the resurrection of the entire human race [both living and dead] follows from the resurrection of Christ with the same obvious logic as the death of all people follow[s] from the death of Adam.”⁵ Just as Adam leads humanity into an inclination to sin, so Christ leads humanity to reject sin and gain eternal life. Through the resurrection, Christ has demonstrated his ability to “transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject

³ Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 110.

⁴ *New American Study Bible*, p. 1847.

⁵ v. 17-23, 47-49; Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 111.

all things to Himself.”⁶ An appendix to this lecture reflects on what the “resurrection of the entire human race” means in the context of the search for social and economic justice.

St Isaac the Syrian offers an attractive interpretation of the resurrection of the dead, building on the traditional and liturgical understanding of the Sabbath as a symbol of death and the eighth day as a symbol of the resurrection:

Six days are accomplished in the husbandry of life by means of life by means of keeping the commandments; the seventh is spent entirely in the grave; and the eighth is in departure from it... The true Sabbath ... is the tomb, which reveals and manifests perfect repose from the tribulations of the passions and from the toil against them. The whole [person], both soul and body, then keeps the Sabbath. The true resurrection of the body is when it receives that ineffable transformation in that future state, at the stripping of all fleshly refuse and what belongs to it. The symbolic resurrection of the body is when it rises from all the sin to which it was attached in its activity, and applies itself to the excellent practice of service to God.⁷

Thus the life of the age to come is for St Isaac “a continual and ineffable rest in God” in which there is an “absence of bodily actions”, as the mind of each person gazes delightfully on God with a “vision without distraction”. After the general resurrection, “human nature never ceases from its awestruck wonder at God” because “how can the intellect depart from the beauty of God in its contemplation?”⁸

Echoing the cautious attitude of the editors of the *New American Study Bible*, Father Pomazansky suggests that we cannot fully understand “the universal

⁶ Philippians 3:21, cited by Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 111.

⁷ Cited by Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2000), pp. 274-275.

⁸ St Isaac, quoted by Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 276.

resurrection and the events that follow after it” because “we have never experienced them in their authentic future form.”⁹ He proposes that questions about the precise nature of the universal resurrection “do not enter into the subject of dogmatic theology, the duty of which is to sketch the precise truths of faith founded upon Sacred Scripture.”¹⁰ However, in the fourth century St Gregory of Nyssa proposed a quite profound understanding of how the body and the soul reunite at the general resurrection:

In answering the question of what the ‘mechanism’ of re-uniting the soul with the body will be like at the general resurrection, and how the souls will recognise their own bodies, Gregory advances his opinion that there is a natural mutual attraction between the soul and the body, an attraction which does not cease even after death. Each body has its own *eidos*, its own appearance, which remains in the soul like the imprint of a seal even after its separation from the body. At the general resurrection, the soul will recognise this *eidos* and will re-unite with its body. In doing so, the scattered particles that once comprised the material substance of the body will re-unite, just as the drops of spilled quicksilver gather together. The Bishop of Nyssa writes: ‘If it is God’s command that corresponding parts unite by themselves with that which is their own, this will present no difficulty for him who renewed nature.’¹¹

Sixteen hundred years later that may still be the closest we can come to understanding the general resurrection.

Fifth, in Orthodox eschatology the end of the world is seen in the context of the purification of “the whole material and human world” from human sin.¹² Thus the focus is on renewal, so that just as the human body “is sown a natural body” and

⁹ p. 340.

¹⁰ p. 341.

¹¹ Metropolitan Hilarion, pp. 111-112.

¹² Pomazansky, p. 344.

then “raised a spiritual body” at the general resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:44), St Simeon the New Theologian insists that “in the same way also the whole creation ... after the General Resurrection ... is to be re-created and to become a certain immaterial and spiritual dwelling.”¹³ The Biblical foundation for this teaching is in 2 Peter 3; and the practical implication is because we not know the timing of such an immense historical event we should be “diligent” so that when the end of the world does come the Lord will find us “in peace, spotless and blameless” growing “in the grace and knowledge of [Him]” (2 Peter 3:15, 3:18). That is a daily challenge because growing in knowledge of Him requires considerable study, prayer and liturgical commitment, in a context in which we can never know when we will experience God’s grace.

Sixth, the universal judgment is best seen not as an event to be feared when we die, but rather as an indication of “what spiritual state a person reached during his lifetime.”¹⁴ St Isaac the Syrian’s convictions are summarised in the words of Bishop Hilarion:

The Last Judgment is the moment of the human person’s encounter, not only with God, but also with the people with whom he was linked during his earthly life. The sentence of the Judge will mean that a person either enters into the kingdom of Christ together with the righteous, or is separated from them. This sentence will do no more than confirm the state reached by that person during his [or her] life. Someone who was separated from his fellows by his spiritual life will be separated from them in the life to come.¹⁵

St Isaac’s emphasis upon personal relationships is also evident in “the most complete picture of this Last Judgement” given in the Bible, in Matthew 25:31-46

¹³ Editors of the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood in Pomazansky, p. 345n.

¹⁴ Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 296, summarising the approach of St Isaac.

¹⁵ Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 275.

when “the Son of Man comes in His glory” with “all the angels with Him” and sits on His throne and “separates the sheep from the goats.”¹⁶

The traditional Orthodox interpretation of this parable of the universal judgment is given in Great Vespers on Meat-fare Sunday:

Having understood the Lord’s commandments, let us live in accordance with them: let us feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, give rest to strangers, visit the sick and those in prisons, so that he who will come to judge the entire world will say to us: come, blessed ones of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.¹⁷

However, this exhortation from St Matthew needs to be interpreted carefully. “The Orthodox Church teaches that all people without exception will stand before the Last Judgment”, but Christians appear to be in a particularly dangerous situation because we are “judged with special strictness.”¹⁸ It is quite clear that:

When acts committed during one’s life are evaluated, moral criteria will be applied to all people without exception, the only difference being that Jews will be judged according to the Law of Moses, Christians by the Gospel, and pagans according to the law of conscience written in their hearts.¹⁹

St John Chrysostom draws the radical conclusion: “If a pagan fulfils the law, nothing else will be necessary for his [or her] salvation.”²⁰ St Basil the Great presents the Last Judgment as “not so much an external as an internal event: it will take place primarily in the conscience of each person, in his mind and memory.”²¹ Thus the

¹⁶ Pomazansky, p. 346.

¹⁷ Cited by Hilarion Alfeyev, p. 112 in *The Lenten Triodion*.

¹⁸ Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 113. Cf. 1 Peter 4:17. It should be noted that St Peter’s precise phrase is that “it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God” stresses that followers of Christ will actually be in a better position than those who have rejected Him, since “if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” Peter then quotes Proverbs 11.31: “And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?”

¹⁹ Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 113.

²⁰ *Homily on Romans* 6.1, cited by Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 113.

²¹ *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah* 1.18, as summarised by Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 113.

Fathers have led Metropolitan Hilarion to suggest that “in the Orthodox understanding, the Last Judgment is not so much the moment of requital as the victory of truth. It is the revelation of God’s mercy and love that is underscored.”²²

Seventh, the eternal Kingdom of God, which is the Kingdom of Glory, draws us after our deaths into “varying degrees of closeness to God, each in accordance with [our own] capacity for accommodating the light of the Godhead.”²³ Each person experiences the one love of God; and there is no sense of “hierarchical inequality among those who have been saved.”²⁴ The reality expressed by Jesus Christ that “in My Father’s house are many dwelling places” (John 14:2), is interpreted by St Isaac to mean:

... He [Jesus Christ] did not mean that each person yonder will be confined in his existence by a separate spatial dwelling and by the manifest, distinguishing mark of the diverse placement of each man’s abode. Rather, it resembles how each of us derives a unique benefit through a single enjoyment of it common to all, each according to the clarity of his eyesight and the ability of his pupils to contain the sun’s constant effusion of light.²⁵

This situation of blessedness is, in St Peter’s words becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (1 Peter 1:4); and “the ultimate state” of human deification occurs “only after the General Resurrection when the whole [person]—both body and soul—will dwell forever in a deified state, penetrated by Uncreated Light.”²⁶

²² Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 113.

²³ Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* p. 277, summarising the approach of St Isaac.

²⁴ Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* p. 277.

²⁵ Metropolitan Hilarion, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* p. 278.

²⁶ Notes from the St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Pomazansky, pp. 221n.; 352-354.

Excursus - Universal Salvation?

The very possibility of this ultimate state of human deification raises the question of whether every human being can reach such a state or whether some people, acting in free will, choose to reject the possibility of human deification and are confronted with the torments of hell. Metropolitan Hilarion comments:

According to many theological and liturgical texts of the Eastern Church, Christ in his descent into hell liberated all people from hell—without exception. Truly, hell has been abolished by the resurrection of Christ: it is no longer unavoidable for people and no longer holds them under its power. But people re-create it for themselves each time sin is consciously committed and not followed by repentance.²⁷

Moreover, it is important to distinguish between sorrow as “a fruitless and belated remorse” and repentance that is grounded in a genuine “remorse for sins accompanied by a *change of mind* (this is the literal meaning of the Greek *metanoia*), a change in one’s whole way of living.”²⁸

Reflecting on the Church’s condemnation of aspects of Origen’s theology, Metropolitan Kallistos tackles this question of whether universal salvation is possible:

When I am waiting at Oxford Station for the train to London, sometimes I walk up to the northernmost stretch of the long platform until I reach a notice: ‘Passengers must not proceed beyond this point. Penalty £50.’ In discussion of the future hope [of salvation for all], we need a similar notice: ‘Theologians must not proceed beyond this point.’—Let my readers devise a suitable penalty. Doubtless, Origen’s mistake was that he tried to say too much. It is a fault that I admire rather than execrate, but it was a mistake nonetheless.

²⁷ Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 114.

²⁸ Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 114.

Our belief in human freedom means that we have no right to categorically affirm, 'All *must* be saved.' But our faith in God's love makes us dare to *hope* that all will be saved.²⁹

We must take care not to walk off the platform into the path of an oncoming train of heresy, but perhaps it is acceptable to say that human deification is ultimately a possibility for each of us.

Conclusion: Can We Reach the Kingdom of God Now?

In this life, none of us can reach the Kingdom of God in the sense of the Kingdom of Glory that hopefully awaits us after the combination of our own deaths and the Second Coming of Christ. When Christ told his disciples that "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power" (Mark 9:1), he was referring to the fact that six days later Peter, James and John would see Him transfigured before them, joined by Elijah and Moses. Bishop Hilarion proposes that this was "not only a prefiguration of the eternal blessedness to which all Christians look forward, but also the Kingdom of God already revealed, realised and come." ³⁰

It is unlikely any of us will see Christ transfigured while we are still alive, but we can experience the Kingdom of God as a regular occurrence in our own lives by participating fully in the Divine Liturgy:

The words of the eucharistic prayer place events of the past, present and future into one continuous series: 'You brought us into being out of nothing, and when we fell, you raised us up again. You did not

²⁹ "Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All" in *The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2001, pp. 193-215). Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh concurs with Metropolitan Kallistos: "The certainty of the salvation of all people cannot be a certainty of the faith, since there are no clear assertions of it in holy scripture that might serve as proof, but it can be a certainty of hope since, knowing God as we know him, we have the right to hope for all things." Cited by Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 118.

³⁰ Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 108.

cease doing everything until you had led us to heaven and granted us your kingdom to come'. The Kingdom of God is 'the future', but at the same time it has *already* been given. The Liturgy *already* raises people into the heavens; it is *already* 'heaven on earth.'³¹

We can all understand enough Orthodox eschatology to touch the Kingdom of God now.

Appendix: The Search for Social Justice and the Transformation of Humanity: Responding to the Presence of the Holy Trinity Fully in Our Lives.

It will be clear from these 10 lectures on Orthodox Christian doctrine that our goal as human beings on earth is personal redemption, as well as the recovery of the whole of creation in God's plan for the universe. However, it is also clear that during our time on earth we can each be confronted with possibilities to advance social and economic justice in a local, national or global context. Hymn 22 on the Nativity by St Ephrem the Syrian offers important guidelines for how to integrate the search for social justice with the transformation of humanity, focusing on responding to the Presence of the Trinity fully in each of our lives.

As a commentary by Kathleen McVey on #22 of St Ephrem's *Hymns on Nativity* points out: "The main theme [here] is the need to know the disease in order to appreciate the healer. In the case of the coming of Christ the disease is idolatry and healing is the freedom from idolatry...."³² St Ephrem asks: "How indeed can one marvel at a healer unless one hears and learns what the pains were?" His response is profound:

Creatures were worshipped since the worshipper was foolish.

He worshipped everything so that the One they did not worship came down [and] compassion broke the yoke that enslaved the universe.

Blessed is He Who released our yoke! (str. 4)

³¹ Emphasis in original, Metropolitan Hilarion, p. 109.

³² *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, translated and introduced by Kathleen E. McVey (New York: Paulist Press, The Classics of Western Spirituality, 1989), p. 181 str. 1-3.

In other words, in worshiping other human beings and their ability to exert power and influence (often violently) over others we created a yoke for ourselves.

St Ephrem rightly sees the devil as the initiator of this destructive cycle which makes the achievement of social and economic justice on earth immensely difficult:

The evil one knew [how] to harm us...

With possessions he maimed us, by gold he made us poor.

With graven images he made us a heart of stone. [Cf. Ezekiel 11:19f.]

Blessed is He who came to soften it! (str. 17)

His analysis of how this situation arose is thought-provoking:

Sin spread its wings to cover everything

so that no one could see the truth from above it.

Truth came down to the womb, emerged [and] rolled away error.

Blessed is He Who dispelled [sin] by His birth! (str. 19)

St Ephrem proposes that:

The All-Knowing [God] saw that we worshipped creatures.

He put on a created body to catch us by our habit,

to draw us by a created body toward the Creator.

Blessed is He Who contrived to draw us [to Him]...

You put on a visible body; let us put on your hidden power.

Our body became Your garment; Your spirit became our robe.

Blessed is He Who was adorned and adorned us!...

You gave us the Paraclete,...

great power came down to us...

Come all your mouths, pour out and become a type

of water and wells of voices; let the Spirit of truth come! (str. 16, 39-41)

In less poetic terms, human inadequacies and failures, both personally and in any community, cannot be resolved solely through human means—we need the Presence of the Holy Trinity fully in our lives.

Metropolitan Kallistos has written in *The Orthodox Way* of the challenges that face each of us:

We are to hold in balance two complementary truths: without God's grace we can do nothing; but without our voluntary co-operation God will do nothing. . . . Our salvation results from the convergence of two factors, unequal in value yet both indispensable: divine initiative and human response. What God does is incomparably the more important, but [human] participation is also required." ³³

Hopefully, these 10 lectures on Orthodox Christian doctrine have increased our understanding of both divine initiatives and of possible human responses.

³³ Bishop [now Metropolitan] Kallistos, *The Orthodox Way*, Rev. Ed. (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1998), p. 112.