

## Finding the Altar of the Heart

"The humans live in time, but our Enemy (God) destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself and to that point in time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. . . Our business is to get them away from the eternal and the Present." From *Wormwood* (C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*)

C.S. Lewis writes in the *Screwtape Letters* of a conversation between Screwtape, a demon, and his understudy, Wormwood. Screwtape is advising Wormwood on how to cause the destruction of a Christian. C.S. Lewis illustrates that our enemy seeks to separate us from God by keeping us from living in the Present. The enemy does this by occupying our thoughts with the past or with the future.

The Orthodox Tradition has always been aware that experiencing God and eternity is something done in the Present. In ALL the hymnography of the Church the events are told in the Present.

*"Today Christ is born of the Virgin in Bethlehem, Today he who knows no beginning now begins to be, and the Word is made flesh. . . Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, and good will among men,"* (Matins of the Nativity).

The reason the hymns of the Church are written in the Present is because the work of Christ is always pointing to eternity. C. S. Lewis wrote that "the present is the point at which time touches eternity." In the advent of Christ, the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated, along with it, what is known as Christian time.

"This messianic Kingdom or life in the aeon is actualized - becomes real - in the assembly of the Church..." (Fr. Schmemmann, *An Introduction to Liturgical Theology*). Christian time makes time into a sacrament of the Kingdom (Schmemmann). The instructions given by Christ as he sent out his disciples along with seventy others was to preach this message: "And heal the sick there, and say to them, The Kingdom of God is at hand" (Luke 10:9).

This is what is experienced in the assembly of the Church - God's very Kingdom in our midst. Even though it was two thousand years ago that Christ was born, the birth of Christ is also the beginning of eternity. The eternal Kingdom of God is always Present. The Festal celebrations lift our hearts up into the presence of Christ.

Secular life is defined by Fr. Schmemmann as life without the worship of God. Secular society (*which may even include Christians not worshipping in spirit and truth*) is void of the experience of Christian time. The result is always a substitution.

At Christmas a consumer based society is driven by an unfulfilled people who haven't experienced the Kingdom of God. The result is the creation of an event (the Christmas season) that has no power to fulfill.

Memories of the Advent season with families united in love or the helping of someone in need are part of Christian time. These are acts of divine love that ought to fill us with good feelings. When Christ is absent, Christmas slogans, lights, and decorations ring empty in the soul that is in need of God.

The Feast of the Nativity of Christ is a celebration of our adoption as children of God. This marriage abolishes everything dark and oppressive that finds its way into hearts that have not the worship of God.

Christ's entrance into the womb of the Virgin Mary is God's way of saying: "You are not animals, but you are Temples meant for worship!" Souls and bodies are the altars upon which communion with our Lord in prayer, worship, and silence takes place. Here, as the adopted children of God, healing flows by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:6-7).

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control" (Gal. 5:22).

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are not sentimental ornaments to be hung in store front windows but the very presence of God dwelling within his adopted Children. The presence of the Holy Spirit heals all failings of the past and quenches any fears of the future by restoring the altar that has been forgotten within.

The altar of the heart is something that can never be taken away. The enemy hides the altar within, by keeping us from worship, thus producing self-doubt, anger, malice, hatred, jealousy and pride. There is no escape from these passions as long as Christ is absent. If God is not able to be experienced in the Present, a devastating result is the loss of knowing oneself.

On altars offerings were ordered by God for sacrifices to occur. A table of offering and communion are necessary elements for a relationship with God.

On December twenty-fifth homes will be filled with families and friends gathered to share a feast from one table. This is a sign that there is an altar in everyone's heart. The table surrounded by people in fellowship, enjoying the divine beauty within each miracle of one another - this is what God also desires to celebrate within the chamber of our hearts.

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