

The Feast of the Resurrection, Pentecost, & Pascha

By Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

This is the starting point for our understanding of the sanctification of time. It is the Orthodox experience, which goes back to the apostles themselves, that in the centre of our liturgical life, in the very centre of that time which we measure as year, we find the Feast of Christ's Resurrection. What is the Resurrection? Resurrection is the appearance in this world, completely dominated by time and therefore by death, of life that shall have not end. The One who rose again from the dead does not die anymore. In this world of ours, not somewhere else, not in any "other" world, there appeared one morning someone who is beyond death and yet in our time. This meaning of Christ's Resurrection, this great joy, is the central theme of Christianity; and it has been preserved in its fullness in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. There is much truth expressed by those who say that the central theme of Orthodoxy, the centre of all its experience, the frame of reference for everything else in her, is the Resurrection of Christ.

We Orthodox living in the West are in danger of losing this resurrection spirit of Christianity. We are concerned with death much more than with resurrection, and church life sometimes is dominated by the funeral rather than the resurrection type of piety. Yet no one can understand the real structure of the liturgical cycle of the year unless he understands that the center, the day that gives meaning to all days and therefore to all time, is the yearly commemoration of Christ's Resurrection at Pascha. Pascha is always the end and always the beginning. We are always living after Pascha, and we are always going towards Pascha. The whole spirit and meaning of liturgical life is contained in Pascha, together with the subsequent fifty-day period which culminates in the feast of Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. This unique Paschal celebration is reflected every week in the Christian Sunday, the day which Russians, for example, still call Voskresenie, "Resurrection." Though it may seem strange to you, it is important to realize that every Sunday is a little Pascha. I say "Little Pascha," but it is really "Great Pascha." Every week the Church comes to the same central experience: "Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ . . ." Every Saturday night, when the Priest carries the Gospel from the Altar to the center of the Church, after he has read the Gospel of the Resurrection, the same fundamental fact of our Christian Faith is proclaimed: CHRIST IS RISEN! St. Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (I Cor. 15:14). There is nothing else to believe. This is the heart of our Faith; and it is only the reference to Pascha, as the end of all merely natural time and the beginning of the new time, that we can understand the whole liturgical year.

Pentecost is the fulfillment of Pascha. If you open a calendar, you will find all our Sundays are called Sundays after

Pentecost, and Pentecost itself is fifty days after Pascha. Pentecost is the fulfillment of Pascha. Christ ascended into heaven and sent down His Holy Spirit. When He sent down His Holy Spirit into the world, a new society was instituted, a body of people, whose took on a new meaning. This new meaning comes directly from Christ's Resurrection. We are no longer people in meaningless time that leads to a meaningless end. We are given not only a new meaning in life, but even death itself has acquired a new significance. In the troparion of Pascha we say, "trampling down death by death." We do not say that He trampled down death by the Resurrection, but by death. And although a Christian still faces death, being in this way similar to any other man, death has for him a new significance. It means entering into the Pascha of the Lord, into His own passage from the old into a new life. This is the key to the liturgical year of the Church. Christianity is, first of all, the proclamation in this world of Christ's Resurrection. Orthodox spirituality is paschal in its inner content, and the real content of the Christian life is joy.

We speak of feasts, and the feast is the expression of Christianity as joy. When you teach children, you convey to them not only certain knowledge but also the spirit which is behind this knowledge. You know that the one thing a child accepts easily is joy. But we have made our Christianity so adult, so serious, so sad, so solemn, that we have virtually emptied it of that joy. Yet Christ has said, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mark 10:15, and Luke 18:17). To become like a child, in Christ's words, means to be capable of that joy of which an adult is no longer capable, to enter into communion with things, with nature, with other people, without suspicion or fear or frustration. We often use the term grace, but what is grace? Charis in Greek means not only grace but also joy. If I stress this point so much, it is because of my certainty that our first message must be this message of Paschal Joy. When on Pascha night we stand at the door of the Church and the Priest says, "Christ is Risen," the night in the words of Gregory of Nyssa, becomes "lighter than the day." Here is the strength, the real root of the Christian experience. And only within the framework of this joy can we understand everything else. Let us keep in mind that Pascha is the real beginning of our liturgical year. The year "officially" begins on September 1st; but I am speaking here in terms of its spiritual principle and foundation, because Pascha truly opens our understanding of time. The world was dark, and Someone brought in light and warmth. The world was sad because it had become a cemetery, and Someone said, "Death is no more." This is what Christ did in this world. It was cold and sinful and cruel, and He came and said, "Rejoice!" This is the way Christ addressed His disciples. "Rejoice! Peace be with you!" Paschal joy is, therefore, the beginning of Christian experience.