

## REPORT ON THE DEANERY CONFERENCE/FESTIVAL 2013

This year's Conference had a note of sadness and a note of joy. The sadness was the absence of Archbishop Gabriel. We were able to send him assurance of our love and prayers and received a response through Fr Alexander Fostiropoulos who also gave us an up to date report on the Archbishop's health. The joy was the lively presence of young Orthodox Christians, from babes in arms to highly articulate teenagers. The memory of a very small boy standing gazing at the Icon of the Mother of God in rapt attention is one I cherish.

The Conference theme was Mission and Vision. On the first evening **Fr John Musther** introduced the theme. Mission is seen as individualistic; we should return to emphasis on the Trinity and Christ, the Church as the place of true holiness, to the Liturgy and priesthood, to the Kingdom which is to come. He quoted Fr Sophrony; 'The purpose of the Christian life is to ask Christ to send the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that he may cleanse our hearts and make us like Christ.' We are to be changed, cleansed and sanctified. This happens through the Liturgy which 'missionises' us. As missionaries we bring the Kingdom which is to come into time, changing the world. If our church life is only maintenance and not mission we have become too much tied to the earth. To be effective missionaries we need to make friends with the saints, be plugged in to the living Tradition, through a place, a person on earth or on in heaven. We must recognise other Christians as our brothers and sisters however much we disagree with them and their practices.

Next day **Fr Edwin Hunt** continued by speaking on The Church and Salvation. Do we have to drag people into Orthodoxy to save them? Is that what mission means? Starting from the Gospels and Peter's confession of Christ he showed that divine action rather than human understanding was the key; evangelism springs from God's initiative. Mission means being sent to recognise God's initiative where it is at work in the most unlikely people as it was in the centurion whose servant Jesus healed. Miracles happen outside Orthodoxy and not all Orthodox are nice people. We are told to be ready to give an account of the faith that is in us. Put our faith in God and faith will beget faith. The Liturgy provides the context for catching faith and growing in faith with its mystery, its strangeness and the presence of the saints as friends who help us change, or rather to be changed from within. We are being changed from self-centredness so that God's love can show forth from us. LOVE BEGETS LOVE. Is the Church the only way to salvation? No if we think of an institution. Yes if we think of a people called to set out into the adventure of holiness.

Fr Alexander Fostiropoulos spoke of those icons in which black is used:- the cave in the Nativity icons, the empty tomb and the void from which Adam and Eve are lifted in the icons of Pascha and the space at the foot of icons of Pentecost where stands a figure holding a cloth. These places are not black but lightless. The figure in the Pentecost icon holds 12 scrolls. He is Cosmos, the world, waiting for the teaching of the 12 apostles, those sent into the world. Eleven apostles were also martyrs, both witnesses and killed for their faith. Life is given to be taken. Baptism provides the travel kit for us as apostles. God's gift of the Eucharist is given to be shared with others. As the divided relics of St John Chrysostom show he belongs not to one place but everywhere, so do we; we are sent into the lightless places. In St John's eucharistic prayer we praise the God who brought the cosmos into being from non-being and out of love for the cosmos gave his Son. Christ is a martyr for the life of the cosmos. We offer for the cosmos, thine of thine own, remembering the departed, (including those who have not been enlightened) and for the whole inhabited world. (When we remember our own world, the place in which we live, should we not name it?) The ultimate purpose of mission is the ultimate destiny of the world, theosis, sharing in the divine life. We can see others in the world as if from outside or our journey can join theirs, as on the Emmaus road. Our proshphora lists perhaps should include someone we met in the week and when we pray for the catechumens we pray for those who are catechumens to God, those living in the space

without light.

Last year we heard about Alexander Ogorodnikov. This year he was with us in person and filled two sessions with accounts of his transformation from organising blockades of churches at Pascha to belief, aided by an encounter with Metropolitan Anthony, whose identity was at that time unknown to him. He felt he was encountering a different kind of person, one who felt answerable for what he said and did. When he found a spiritual father his confession lasted all night although it seemed only a short time.

Not knowing about the catacomb church he and others started underground seminars exploring the faith. The official church and the state did not approve and many of the new believers were limited to menial work and subjected to persecution and imprisonment. Yet in these circumstances many miracles happened. Now there is religious freedom but some aspects of the old ways have returned, so he remains a dissident.

Two new departures this year brought, firstly, prepared responses to the first two talks. These varied from personal experiences to the radical suggestion by Fr Christopher Wallace that we should emulate the Church in Finland and adopt the new calendar even for Pascha and use only English. Secondly, at the end of Fr Alexander's talk we split into groups and thought together about questions which the speakers had set us.

Annemarie de Visser as usual produced wonders from a scratch choir. This year they sang only two services, the Saturday evening Vigil and the Sunday Liturgy. Without the Archbishop's presence these were not quite as splendid as in past years. At the Liturgy we had to make do with only thirteen priests and five deacons.

The party on Sunday evening seems to last longer each year; people had to be sent to bed at midnight, reeling from three different renderings of the hippopotamus song.