

B lent 04
22 March 2009
RCL

Orthodox* Christians

I believe that salvation comes only through God in Jesus Christ; that makes me an orthodox Christian. I believe that salvation becomes real and operative in human lives through trust in God in Jesus Christ; that, too, makes me an orthodox Christian. I also believe that our sisters and brothers who are Jewish, Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu, Wiccan, atheist, and whatever are saved by God in Jesus Christ and share with Christians in the joys of belonging to God in this world and in the next. I believe that also makes me an orthodox Christian, though there are many Christians who would dispute that. How can we put all this together?

Orthodox Christians believe that human beings are saved through responding to God in Jesus Christ by trust. Note the importance of two words in that sentence: *trust* and *responding*.

Responding means that Christians recognize that God is not coyly hidden in the mists of mysterious grandeur but rather constantly takes the initiative in coming to Her people. Saint Paul says in the book of *Romans*: “For what can be known about God is plain... Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (Romans 1.18-21) When we recognize God, we are not discovering Him by ourselves but rather responding to the presence and activity that God is already doing. God rejoices when we finally open our spiritual eyes and see Him already shining like the sun throughout our world. Response is a whole different energy from discovery, puts the initiative on God who is far more trustworthy than ourselves, and – once our eyes are open – provides far more confidence than our own weak powers could do.

Responding also means more than an inner movement of the human spirit toward God. It also means an inner and outer conforming to what is perceived and accepted, as the New Testament book of *James* testifies. Listen to James: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,... and you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.... You see that faith was active along with his (Abraham’s) works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.... For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.” (James 2.14-26) In other words, responding is not only about spirit and acceptance but also about body and doing. We respond to a loving God by loving; we respond to a faithful God by being faithful; we respond to a compassionate God by being compassionate. Not only in the inner world but in the outer world. Working for peace, feeding the hungry, being faithful to our spouse,

working for our parish, diocese, national and world church, curbing the rapacious, having confidence that God will provide – all this and much more are what response to the Divine is all about. Orthodox Christians believe that human beings are saved through responding by trust to God in Jesus Christ.

Now let's look at what *trust* means. Trust is most often spoken of as faith in the New Testament. But I think the word faith for us moderns may be misleading. Faith for us most often means the *content* of belief. Trust means a willingness to *depend upon* what is viewed as reliable. Faith, again for us moderns, means I believe *about* God; trust means I believe *in* God. Faith is the "I believe..." of our creeds, an important statement and an important commitment; but it is not in itself salvific or liberating. What is liberating, what is salvation in action, is *trust* in the God of our faith. Orthodox Christians believe that human beings are saved through responding to God in Jesus Christ by trust.

We can most easily see how this formulation works out for the believing Christian. We are the lucky ones, who see explicitly God's presence and activity in the Jewish God-man Jesus Christ, who walked the hills of Judea, drank the waters of Lake Galilee, died on a Roman cross, was resurrected through divine power. Divine saving initiative is clearest in Jesus Christ, and we Christians are the lucky ones who see that, who respond to that, who are committed to that.

How do we make room in this glorious mercy for those who are not explicitly Christian, for the Moslem, the Jew, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Wiccan, the atheist, the whatever?

As time goes by, I am ever more aware of Jesus' statement, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14.6) I take this statement literally, not metaphorically. What I mean is that wherever we find truth, wherever we find life, wherever we find a way to God, we find Jesus Christ. We may not recognize Him as the transfigured Galilean Carpenter, but He is there nonetheless. In other religions, I see much truth: God is one, God is personal, God is involved, God loves, God demands respect, God gives respect, and much more. In that truth is the saving presence of Jesus Christ. In other religions I see people struggling in honest fashion to live according to the way they understand God wants them to live; in that way of living toward God is the saving presence of Jesus Christ. Life manifests itself in all sorts of weird and wonderful ways, from the strange world of the virus through aardvarks and roses and humans to angels and beyond. Wherever there is life, there is Jesus Christ. John in his gospel's beginning says that God made the universe according to the pattern of His Word. (John 1.1-18) That means every created thing bears the stamp of God in His Word, or put another way, God in His Christ. Jesus Christ is present and saving wherever there is life and truth and way to God. It is He that is saving, as orthodox Christians affirm. And it is He that is merciful, forgiving the failings and shortcomings of Christian and nonChristian alike.

In the spirit of modern nonjudgmentalism, I wish I could say that all religions are of equal value and God's saving power comes to the human race through all of them. But then I would not be an orthodox Christian, who believes that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. I am orthodox, and I do believe that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. But I find Jesus Christ in the strangest and most unexpected places. My eyes widen in wonder and sometimes I have to giggle a little bit, but He's there. And, to tell the truth, I am immensely comforted that He is. It makes me even more respectful of God's presence however it is understood, and it makes me even more of an orthodox Christian.

*Orthodox here means not an identification of a Christian denomination (ie, Greek or Russian Orthodox) but rather "right praising" in the sense of the Greek origins of the word.