



Amsterdam Lectures 2011-12:

Eastern Orthodox Theology: a Personal Introduction

Lecture I: Thinking and doing, being and praying: where do we start?

Well, where *do* we start? In *Alice in Wonderland*, the White Rabbit is advised by the King of Hearts: ‘Begin at the beginning... and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’ That sounds like good advice, but how are we to apply it in our case? Many accounts of the Christian Faith adopt the order of the creed, and begin with God the Father and then continue through the Son, and then the Spirit, to the Church and eternal life. That makes some sort of sense, but it seems to me to beg a question, that we need to face up to. For if there is one thing we know about God the Father, it is that he is unknowable. ‘No one has ever seen God’ (John 1:18). ‘You cannot see my face,’ God says to Moses, ‘for man shall not see me and live’ (Exod. 33:22): a warning that is repeated throughout the Old Testament, though usually in contexts where God is actually ‘seen’ or apprehended in some way (as with Moses). How can we start with God the Father, if we cannot know him? This is a question we can pursue in various ways. Perhaps this means that we start with God, not as knowing him, but as standing before a mystery that is, and will remain, beyond our understanding. In the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, at the beginning of the anaphora, we justify our attempts to worship God by saying: ‘for you are God, ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable, ever existing, eternally the

same'. Our worship is a response to an unfathomable mystery. In a sense, if we start there we shall never proceed: for once we glimpse the unfathomable mystery of God, we shall never drag ourselves away. Or maybe we shall proceed, but constantly find ourselves drawn back to the inexhaustibility of this mystery that God is. But if we do proceed, there is another problem. If we posit God and then consider him as Creator, source of all values, especially moral, and then continue, as we consider the creed, to think of the Incarnation of the God the Son, all that led up to that, all that has followed from it, the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit, the birth of the Church: what is it that we are doing? It looks like an objective list of persons and events, that we simply relate. But how can that be, how do we know that it is like that? The creed, we need to remind ourselves, is not a list of things to believe, it is itself a liturgical text, belonging, first of all, to the baptismal liturgy: it summarizes the faith that the newly baptized Christian is embracing; it is the culmination of a process of learning about the faith, and beginning to practise what it requires, in a doubtless stumbling way; it opens up to the new life of the baptized, a life that draws its sustenance from the Eucharist, which is immediately celebrated after the baptismal liturgy, or rather as the final part of the rite of initiation. Both the paths we have just sketched converge: if to acknowledge God is to acknowledge his unknowability and stand before Him in awe; if the creed is part of our initiation into a life, not a summary of things to be believed, then in both cases we do not stand over against God, rather we are finding ourselves caught up in the divine presence and the divine activity, and trying to make sense of it. It is something of what is involved in that, how that presence and that activity is felt by us, that I want to explore in this lecture.

I have called this course of lectures a ‘personal introduction’. There are two reasons for that. First of all, I claim no authority for what I am saying. I am keen to stand in the tradition of the Church, and hope that I do. But I am not a bishop, I do not have the grace to ‘rightly discern the word of the truth’.¹ But secondly, my presentation is personal; it is how I see it. Furthermore, what I see is personal: it is the result of a personal engagement (doubtless flawed), and demands personal engagement. I am not presenting something to you that is in some way independent of either what I see or what you see; I am suggesting that you look with me at something; I hope that you will see something of what it is that engages me. If that is so, then various conclusions follow from this. To change the metaphor, I am inviting you on a journey. I can point out various things that we encounter on the way, perhaps even warn you against some paths that I fear will simply mislead you; but the journey is yours—it will involve your commitment, your struggle. This is why I called this introductory lecture ‘thinking and doing, being and praying’. An introduction to Eastern Orthodox theology, as I understand it, may well involve learning various facts and dates, terminology and concepts, but at its heart it is an introduction to a way of life. I am a priest, and I am used to preaching, but I hope that you will not find these lectures too much like homilies, however there is no complete break between what I do as I try to lead my congregation deeper into their discipleship to Christ, and what I am doing in these lectures, as I try to sketch out what Eastern Orthodox theology involves. There will be a difference of emphasis, a difference of balance, but not a complete difference, because I don’t think one can present theology in the Orthodox tradition without making clear that at its heart there is an engagement, ultimately an engagement with God. ‘Thinking and doing, being and praying’: these are

¹ 2 Tim. 2:15: applied to ‘the episcopacy of the Orthodox’ in the anaphorae of both St John Chrysostom and St Basil.

fundamental human activities. It is the case, I would suggest, that we don't exactly learn to do these things—we engage in these simply by being human—what happens is that we learn what is involved in doing these things. For this reason, several movements in 20th-century philosophy are at some level deeply sympathetic to what I am suggesting here. For both the hermeneutical tradition associated with Heidegger, and the rather different tradition associated with Wittgenstein, have in common a conviction that we don't start out ignorant, and then by means of 'philosophy' come to a knowledge of the world. Rather we already know the world in some sense, simply by living in it, what philosophy does is help us to reflect on what is involved in that knowledge of the world. So it is with theology: thinking and doing, being and even praying, are activities we all engage in at some level or another. The questions about how we are to live, what does it mean to be, how do we engage with the world, how do we engage with what seems to transcend the world: we can hardly live without asking these questions. So we are already theologians. Orthodox theology takes us along a path, marked out by tradition, that helps us in our continuing grappling with these questions.

I began by asking: where do we start? and reflected on the paradox that we seem to start from a place of unknowing, not in the sense of ignorance—as if we started off with little knowledge and found that it increased—but in a more fundamental sense—starting off with an awareness that the One we seek to know is beyond any capacity we might have for knowing. I suggested that we find ourselves standing before the mystery of a God who is beyond knowledge. And it is from this point that I want to indicate our next steps. We stand before God. We are always standing before God, for there is no place where God is not, as opposed to a place where he is: wherever we are we are before God. But there are places where, from a human perspective, the

presence of God is more apparent to us, places where it is less easy to forget that God is here. These places are many and various, and our sensitivity to them is doubtless in part a matter of our own upbringing and history. There is, for example, a very strong tradition—in many different geographical and historical cultures—that mountains are places where God is encountered. The reason is partly because mountains are less easily amenable to human modification. Other places are more easily covered over with what humans have done to make themselves at home in them, but mountains—and rivers, and the sea itself—are resistant to human fashioning. One is already detached from what humans make of things; one is already open to the power that lies behind everything. We have a sense of the transcendent, as we put it, a sense of the divine. The Anglo-American poet, T.S. Eliot, put it well when he said of a holy place in England (Little Gidding, whose holiness is to do with historical events): ‘You are here to kneel, Where prayer has been valid’. I want to suggest that the first step in the pursuit of Orthodox theology, in coming to know God in accordance with the Orthodox tradition, is the rediscovery of this sense of standing before God (standing is a more customary attitude for prayer in the Eastern Orthodox tradition than kneeling), and pre-eminently standing before God in church, in the place where people pray, where the liturgical services take place, in a place surrounded and defined by icons, and filled with the evidence of human worship of God—the singing of sacred song, the sight of sacred architecture and garments, the smell of the incense, the touching of sacred things – icons and relics – and the sense of other people standing there before God. This is where we start. Many who stand in such a place are already committed to the faith being celebrated. But you don’t have to believe to go into a church; you can stand there alongside people who do believe, you can stand next to people you know, or even out of curiosity. But here it is where theology

begins, according to the Orthodox tradition, at least as I understand it: in a mysterious togetherness, mediated by silence (chattering during the services is not encouraged, even if it is sometimes difficult to prevent), full of sounds and smells that seem to interpret this silence, rather than dissolve it. And here, too, it may end—caught up in the presence of God, open to his spirit, bearing before him in our hearts the concerns of those with whom we have to do. But if we seek to understand it? We shall only ever understand in part, but there is something to understand, and such understanding is what we might well call theology.

There are lots of things that further such understanding that we call theology, and in the rest of these lectures we shall explore some of them. What I want to do in this lecture is give some sense of orientation. What is it that furthers theological understanding, and how are we to approach it? What is involved in theological understanding in the Christian tradition, and especially the Orthodox tradition, is fairly familiar. There are the Scriptures; there is reflection on the Scriptures by those we often call theologians, but also by others to whom we rarely extend the title; there are controversies that have arisen over the interpretation of the tradition, and the attempts to solve these controversies that have become established in the Orthodox tradition, notably among these attempts, especially for the Orthodox tradition, the synods or councils, especially those called ‘œcumenical’; there is also a living voice in the Church, articulating the tradition in the different historical circumstances in which the Church has found itself, a voice that is not merely human, but safeguarded and inspired by God’s help or grace—we hear this living voice in the bishops, who have the grace ‘rightly to discern the word of the truth’. But there is also the prayer of the Church: the liturgical prayers of the Divine Liturgy and the offices of the Church, where what we believe is spelled out in the words we use as we turn to God, but also

lives of prayer—most prominently the lives of monks and ascetics, but just as validly in the lives of those in whose lives we can see a living out of the life in Christ—and the authority of these lives, though not provided for in a formal way, as is the authority of bishops – except retrospectively, in the case of the saints – has been nonetheless fundamentally important in the history of the Orthodox Church.

This can become a list: scriptural exegesis, patristic theology, the theology of the councils (and alongside this the tradition of the Holy Canons, spelling out aspects of the Christian life), Church history and rebuttal of heresy, the role of the hierarchy, the place of the monastic order, and the role of prayer (which includes the way in which liturgy defines meaning—both of sacraments and the great feasts of the Church—as well as the role of those who ‘prayer has been valid’, the saints and martyrs, and the way in which devotion to the saints has been expressed through the cult of relics and the development of iconography). But this list can become something quite different, something more like labelling the limbs and organs of a body, so that there is an organic relationship between all the elements thus labelled. It is this that I want to explore briefly now.

There seem to me to be two elements in seeing how all these different factors come to form a single organic whole. On the one hand, and fundamentally, there is the realization that all these factors relate to Christ. The scriptures are not primarily sources of reliable – still less infallible – information about religious matters, rather Christ stands at their centre; they bear witness to him. The books of the Old Testament tell of God’s ways with the world and humans, at the centre of which there is the history of the people of Israel, among whom the Son of God became incarnate, as the fulfilment of the promises to Israel and the hopes of all humanity. The New

Testament contains the apostolic witness to Christ, to his birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Church and the whole human race. But all this is more than record: it is through the Scriptures that Christ continues to encounter human kind; to read the Bible as Scripture is to be open to encounter with Christ. The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to the writings of the Fathers, the history of the Church and its councils, the lives of the saints: all these are ways of encountering Christ, or of understanding the dimensions of such an encounter. And what makes this a possibility is prayer; it is prayer that creates beings capable of hearing the voice of Christ. And these lead us to the other element involved. For prayer to Christ and openness to his voice takes us back to the point we started with—the mystery of God. For that mystery is not simply an intellectual mystery; it is something much deeper, for, as we shall see again and again in the following months, encounter with Christ entails opening ourselves to an inner transformation, to a fundamental repentance. Mother Thekla, a Russian nun who died at a great age this summer, once wrote about what her monastery was engaged in as it sought (through publishing: the immediate context of this quotation) to express the Orthodox tradition in their English environment, and spoke of ‘the one innermost battle-cry of the monastery, the austere demand of refusing to discuss what is not lived, and the impossibility of living this ourselves: back into the revolving wheel of repentance: Face God, not man’.² This sense of theology as rooted in experience, and yet a constant sense that this experience is beyond us, so that we are constantly pushed back to repent, to turn again to God: this seems to me absolutely central to the Orthodox experience of theology, of coming to know God.

² Mother Thekla, *The Monastery of the Assumption: a history*, Library of Orthodox Thinking, pamphlet no. 8, Whitby: Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption, 1984, p. 16.

But let us be more specific: how do we interpret Scripture in the Orthodox tradition? What is the role of the Fathers, of Church Councils, of the prayers of the Church in her various offices? Let us start with Scripture. How does the interpretation of Scripture differ from the way Scripture is interpreted by other Christians, by scholars? It is sometimes said that Orthodox Christians kiss the Gospel book, but they don't read it. I hope that is not true, but it is certainly true that we don't only read the Gospel, the Gospel Book is an object of veneration: it is carried in procession at the Little Entrance, its binding is usually decorated with icons—of the Resurrection and of the Cross—there are examples of Gospel Books with marvellous illuminations throughout. This is not irrelevant, or superfluous, for the Gospel Book is seen as an icon of Christ. St Theodore the Studite, in the second stage of the Iconoclast controversy, spoke of icons as 'written in gold', compared with the Gospel that was 'written in ink'. The comparison works both ways: just as an icon is venerated, because it images forth the one depicted, and so provides access to the one depicted, so the Gospel, through what is written in it, provides us with access to the one who is the Gospel: Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us. It is still 'writing in ink', which needs to be interpreted, but it is important because it discloses Christ, it invites us to an encounter with Christ. The Orthodox approach to the Scriptures endeavours to keep a balance between these two dimensions. The patient work of scholarship is important. The Bible is a collection of books written over hundreds, even thousands, of years. They were written and rewritten in particular historical circumstances, and understanding those historical circumstances will help us to read them in an appropriate way. The text of the scriptural books themselves is not something we can take for granted. There are a host of manuscripts, with differing readings, and there are scholarly methods for seeking to establish the original meaning. All this is useful,

and there is no reason why an Orthodox Christian should ignore it. But it is not the whole story. Scholarly interpretation is governed by an overriding concern to establish the original text. But there are many circumstances in which this is either not appropriate or not the whole story. For the Scriptures are not books that simply belong to their original context: they have been read and re-read over the centuries. When we venerate the Book of the Gospels we are acknowledging it as something that belongs to the present: it bodies forth Christ now. When we read the passages from the Gospels, we are not simply reading some text that we can trace back to the first century, based on an oral tradition that goes back to some events in the life of Christ, and those who were there: we are reading the Gospel, confident that we can discern Christ's voice speaking to us now. The recognition that we are dealing with a living text, a text that, in some sense, is contemporary, not just to the time of its composition, but to the time of its reading, suggests considerations that even the driest scholarship should be able to take into account. Take, for example, the book of the Psalms: what is it? It is a collection of poetry, belonging to a wide range of dates, written by individuals of whom we now know nothing, or even in some cases by individuals whom we can identify—King David, as tradition has it for several of the psalms (the evidence is contradictory, for clearly it is possible to have different views about the provenance of the inscriptions to the psalms, which differ between the Hebrew and the Greek texts). But it is also a collection of religious poetry that was used in the worship of the Temple—certainly in the case of the Second Temple (built *c.* 520 and—after a period of desecration under Antiochos Epiphanes—finally destroyed by the Romans AD 70), the temple in which Jesus worshipped, and probably in the case of the first Temple, built in the reign of King Solomon and destroyed by the Babylonians *c.* 586. Used in that context, it related to the temple services, and

helped people to relate their own concerns to the services in which they participated. Furthermore, it is a body of religious poetry used in the Jewish synagogue, after the destruction of the Temple: another context elicited further meaning. And it has become the song book of the Christian Church, and that in a host of ways, from the use of particular psalms in particular contexts—for instance, the use of Ps 103, a psalm of creation, at Vespers in the Byzantine office—to the recitation of the whole psalter on a regular basis, which became the practice in monasticism, both in the East and in the West, in the East by the dividing up of the Psalter into twenty sections of roughly equal length called *kathismata* ('sittings'), which are distributed over the monastic office on a weekly basis. Given that variety of uses, to ask what a particular psalm means cannot be restricted to some supposed original use by the one who composed it—a context that is no more than conjectural, anyway. For a Christian interpretation of the psalms, it would make sense to pay attention to the Christian use of the psalter, which does not exclude other interpretations.

There is, so far as I can tell, no real consensus over how the Scriptures are to be interpreted in the Orthodox world; many departments of Old Testament and New Testament in faculties of theology in Greece, Russian and Romania, for example, seem to approach the scriptures in much the same way as Catholic and Protestant faculties in the West, perhaps with an inclination to be conservative in their adoption of scholarly approaches. There is a sense that patristic interpretation of the Scriptures is important, but no systematic attempt to put that into practice. Perhaps there is no systematic way of incorporating patristic interpretation, perhaps we should be looking for something else. It does, however, seem to me that the liturgical use of Scripture should have some kind of priority in the Orthodox Church, though what this means still needs to be worked out. But it would involve paying attention to how the

Scripture is presented in the lectionary. Even a brief glance at that (all we can do now) provides some indications.

The lectionary was clearly put together with some care, though we know virtually nothing about how it was done, and what were the principles of selection, apart from what can be deduced from the lectionary as we have it (which is very ancient, and reached its final form in the second quarter of the first millennium). Broadly speaking, the Gospels and the ‘Apostle’ (the Acts and the epistles of Paul and other apostles) are read sequentially; no attempt is made to select themes (except on feast days). That suggests that the New Testament can be left to speak for itself. However, within this sequential reading, the readings on Saturdays and Sundays select the more important passages (though it is not clear what the criteria were for such selection), while the rest of the week we have a sequential reading of what is left. The sequence starts on Easter Sunday when the beginning of John’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are read, and the reading of the fourth Gospel and Acts continues throughout the fifty days to Pentecost. After Pentecost, we begin to read the Gospel of Matthew and the epistles of the Apostle Paul. In the Greek practice, after the feast of the Lifting up of the Holy Cross (14 September) we turn to the Gospel of Luke; while the Gospel of Mark is read on the Sundays of Lent (and on the weekdays towards the end of the ‘Matthaeian’ period, when passages from the first Gospel run out). The readings from the epistles of Paul, then James, Peter and John, continue through until the end of the pre-Lenten period. During Lent, there are readings from the New Testament only at the weekends, when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated (from Hebrews for the Apostle, from Mark, as we have seen, for the Gospel); on weekdays the readings are from the Old Testament: Isaias at the Sixth Hour, and Genesis and Proverbs at Vespers—Ezekiel, Exodus and Job during Holy Week). In addition, on

major feasts, there are readings (generally three) from the Old Testament at Vespers, and readings from the Apostle and Gospel at the Divine Liturgy: there are chosen for their relevance to the feast being celebrated.

There seem to be several principles behind all this. The New Testament (apart from the Apocalypse) is read in full, and always read in conjunction with the Divine Liturgy: there is clearly some link between celebrating the Liturgy in remembrance of Christ and reading from the New Testament. The Old Testament, in contrast, is read very selectively, and read at Vespers. Vespers, in the Byzantine rite (and in the Western rite until the reforms of the last century), celebrates the beginning of the liturgical day, following the Jewish practice to which the account of creation in Genesis bears witness: each day of creation is presented as ‘evening and morning’, in that order. Vespers, then, looks forward to the breaking of the new day, and the Old Testament is read then because it, too, from a Christian perspective, looks forward to the rising of the day star, Christ as God incarnate. Furthermore, the Old Testament is read following the text of the Greek Bible. That sounds curiously innocent, but I think there may be more there than meets the eye. It is well known that the New Testament, for the most part, cites the Old Testament according to the Greek text of the Septuagint (the pre-Christian Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek), and thereafter it was the Septuagint that became the authoritative text for virtually all Christians (even Jerome’s preference for *Hebraica Veritas* was much qualified in practice – qualified by the experience of the Church). But the situation is more complicated than that. In the second century there were several other Jewish translations, presumably intended to rescue the text of the Old Testament from the Christian use based on the Septuagint. In the third century, Origen gathered the various translations together, and laid them out in six columns, in a vast work of

scholarship called the *Hexapla*. The purpose of this was not, as is often asserted, to enable Origen to establish a text more correct than that of the Septuagint, but rather to lay bare the richness of meaning contained in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Passages from the other columns of the *Hexapla* found their way into Christian copies of the Septuagint—so-called ‘Hexaplaric’ readings—and it is these readings that we often find in patristic commentaries on Scripture, as well as in the texts included in the services in the Byzantine liturgy. The consequence of this, it seems to me, profound: there is no ‘authoritative text’ of the Old Testament for Orthodox Christians, instead there is a long process of exploring what there might be in the witness of the Hebrew writings to the coming of Christ. A Greek ‘Old Testament’ is not what it seems. The one published by Zoe has modified some version of the Septuagint by assimilating the text to that found in the service books, when such passages are used—clearly a rather hit-and-miss process; while the Church of Greece has published, under its authority, the scholarly version of the Septuagint prepared by Rahlfs which omits passages, universally found in the MSS and important in the texts of the Church—for instance the words which begin the anaphora of St Basil: Ὁ ὄν, Δέσποτα, Κύριε (cf. Jer. 1:6).

What does all this add up to? It suggests to my mind an attitude to Scripture that sees it not as some flat collection of infallible texts about religious matters, but rather as a body of witness, of varying significance—some clearly crucial, as witnessing very directly to Christ, others less important (though never of no importance), as their witness to Christ is more oblique. And the criteria for importance are bound up in some way with the way the Church has taken them up into her experience. There is a hierarchy, a shape: the Gospel book at the centre, the Apostle flanking it, and then a variety of texts from the Old Testament, generally accessed not through some volume

called the Bible, but from extracts contained in the liturgical books, along with other texts: songs, passages from the Fathers, and so on. The Scriptures then have a kind of shape, a shape that relates to our experience of them.

I would like to say something similar about the other ‘authorities’ we consult in Orthodox theology: the Fathers, the Councils and the prayers of the Church. There is no question of making the Fathers, or any selection of them, infallible authorities. They disagree with one another over all sorts of issues, and we should beware of trying to iron out the differences between them. What we should hear from the chorus of the Fathers is a rich harmony, not a thin unison. Similarly with the decisions of the councils, especially the Holy Canons. Although the canons have been collected together, time and again, there is no disguising the fact that the canons were issued by councils for particular reasons, in particular contexts. If we put them altogether, we shall not find in them detailed guidance on all the problems that face us nowadays. Some Orthodox thinkers have made capital of this, arguing that the open texture of the canons makes room for a creative freedom as we seek to live the Gospel—and I would agree with them. Perhaps most important, outside the Scriptures, are the prayers and songs of the Church, which take us into the experience of the sacred mysteries. It seems to me, for instance, that the texts of the songs that we sing at the feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God take us more closely and assuredly to the meaning of the feast than any dogmatic definition could ever do. Take, for instance, the kontakion for the Dormition:

Neither tomb nor death overpowered the Mother of God, unsleeping in her prayers, unfailing hope in intercession; for as Mother of Life she has been taken over into life by him who dwelt in her ever-virgin womb.

Here we learn that the mystery of the Dormition is the mystery of intercession, intercession that is constantly life-giving, for life has overcome death, and in her death we see the barrier between death and life quite transparent.

I want to end this lecture with a quotation from one of the greatest Russian thinkers and theologians of the last century, Fr Pavel Florensky. Towards the end of the first letter in his *Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, he says:

... the life of the Church is assimilated and known only through life—not in the abstract, not in a rational way. If one must nevertheless apply concepts to the life of the Church, the most appropriate concepts would be not juridical and archaeological ones but biological and aesthetic ones. What is ecclesiality? It is a new life, life in the Spirit. What is the criterion of the rightness of this life? Beauty. Yes, there is a special beauty of the spirit, and, ungraspable by logical formulas, it is at the same time the only true path to the definition of what is orthodox and what is not orthodox.

The connoisseurs of this beauty are the spiritual elders, the *startsy*, the masters of the ‘art of arts’, as the holy fathers call asceticism. The *startsy* were adept at assessing the quality of spiritual life. The Orthodox taste, the Orthodox temper, is felt but it is not subject to arithmetical calculation. Orthodoxy is shown, nor proved. That is why there is only one way to understand Orthodoxy: through direct orthodox experience... to become Orthodox, it is necessary to immerse oneself all at once in the very element of Orthodoxy, to begin living in an Orthodox way. There is no other way.³

³ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth. An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. by Boris Jakim, Princeton NJ, 1997, pp. 8–9.