



**Saturday 17th August 2013**

**Assumptiontide Mass**

*St Barnabas church, Regent Road, Morecambe LA3 1BW*

## **Our Lady - the model of Prayer**

*Canon Nicholas Turner*

Exactly 100 years ago this month, over 1000 Russian monks were imprisoned by their own government in the Crimea, for their commitment to the truths of the Jesus Prayer. I salute their memory, and would like to share with you why their defiance matters. (I wrote a short piece on this for the *Church Times*; forgive me if you have heard this before, but I'm confident most of you do not read so liberal a publication.)

The story begins in 1912. The peninsula of Mount Athos, in the north of what is now Greece, had been settled by monks and hermits for well over a thousand years, and there were then around 6,000 Orthodox monks living there, the majority of whom were Russian. Under the Ottoman Empire, in exchange for heavy taxation, they had enjoyed considerable autonomy. But in 1912, under military pressure from the newly resurgent Greece and Bulgaria, the Ottomans finally withdrew, and the future of the whole of Mount Athos as a semi-independent territory was in the balance.

Greek troops had moved up ready to annexe the territory, and a bitter theological dispute among the Russian monks looked as though it might be just the excuse they were waiting for. Tsar Nicholas II, therefore, felt bound to sort out the Russian problem himself, put an end to the dispute, and so maintain the national influence. As it happened, it did exactly the opposite; it reduced the Russian influence and gave the initiative completely to the Greeks, but that's jumping ahead.

A blockade of the recalcitrant monks in early 1913 had failed, and so in late May a gunboat and two troop ships were dispatched from the Black Sea. And in June, 120 Marines from Imperial Russia stormed the Panteleimon Monastery on Mount Athos, to enforce orthodoxy.

The marines entered the monastery from the sea, set up machine guns and water cannons, and set about enforcing a surrender. The monks resisted as best they could, and many were severely wounded. Once captured by the marines, an Archbishop lectured the soaking wet monks and demanded they renounce their heresy. They of course refused. In the end, each monk was questioned individually. 700 complied, 900 still refused to do so. Meanwhile, in the nearby monasteries, further rebels were rooted out. In the end, as I said at the beginning, over 1000 were taken to Odessa, imprisoned and then dispersed around the Russian empire.

So, what was this so-called heresy that provoked so fierce a response? It came from a late C19th mystical movement in the Russian Orthodox Church. In essence, it was about the presence of God in one who prays. In this particular case, it concerned the Jesus Prayer, and those who believed, to cite the most well-known summary, 'the name of the Lord Jesus is as it were he himself', later summarized to the still more striking, 'the name of God is God himself'.

The *Im-yas-lav-tsy*, or Name-Worshippers as they were disparagingly called, used the Jesus Prayer with great devotion - 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner' - understanding that the proper praying of these simple words, within the orthodoxy and practice of Christ's Church, would indeed make present Jesus himself. This was not magic; there was no mechanical recitation; they remained aware of the need for faith, discipline and moral behaviour.

The Anti-Name-Worshippers dismissed all this as a misunderstanding, of for example the nature of a sacrament. If prayer alone could make Christ present, there'd be no need of any sacraments. True, but the fury of their response suggests a clericalist bias, as though they feared that the Jesus Prayer would circumvent the Church and the Clergy. And yet, when Jesus said, 'When two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them,' did he not intend to be present, as the Name-Worshippers suggested?

On the other hand, as one of the Russian hierarchy put it, 'The name of God, by itself, is only a holy symbol *created by man*.' True, but what of the Incarnation? And so the debate continued. In the end, there was no proper resolution. The next year saw the outbreak of the First World War and, as it happened the sinking by the Turkish navy of the gunship sent to subdue the monks. Another three years saw the October Revolution and the arrival of the Bolsheviks. The dispute faded as events overtook the participants. Looking back now, one would judge that the *Im-yas-lav-tsy* were, strictly speaking, wrong (led on perhaps by an excess of enthusiasm) but that their opponents were more wrong.

How should we judge them? They took much inspiration from Mary. Did she not, they argued, carry within her own body, the Person of the Lord Jesus? Mary was fully and only human, yet she held Jesus, Son of God, in her self. And is she not an example to all her fellow believers? Does she not set before us a model of Christian discipleship and response to the Word of God?

We honour Mary as Theotokos, the God-Bearer; and in so doing we acknowledge our own calling, as fellow disciples of the Lord, to carry the Lord Jesus in our hearts – literally, as the new Oxford English Dictionary now tells us. When therefore, with faith and perseverance and within the body of the Church, we pray with devotion and sincerity, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner', we do draw the Lord Jesus into our selves: he is no longer outside us, but as Paul teaches, he is 'Christ in me' to guide my life.

Prayer is not just talking to someone out there, it is about bringing Jesus into our very selves. And no one shows this more clearly than Our Lady – she is the model of prayer. Don't just ask for her prayers; keep her as the model and vision for your own prayer.

And give a thought to those stubborn monks, washed out of their barricaded cells, by marines wielding water cannons, and imprisoned in the Crimea. They showed us how to follow Mary's example.