

immortal.” The Spirit of God, the Comforter, the Giver of Life, has been sent upon the earth to seal the victory of Christ, and abides in the Church, since Pentecost. The gift of life, of the true life, has been given to men, and is being given to them constantly, and abundantly, and increasingly. It is given, but not always readily “received.” For to be truly quickened one must overcome one’s fleshly desires, “to put aside all worldly cares,” pride and prejudice, hatred and selfishness, and self-complacency, and even to renounce one’s self. God knocks perpetually at the gate of human hearts, but it is man himself who can unlock them.

God never breaks in by violence. He respects, in the phrase of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, “the ancient law of human freedom,” once chartered by Himself. Surely, without Him, without Christ, man can do nothing. Yet, there is one thing that can be done only by man—that is to respond to the Divine call and to “receive” Christ. And this so many fail to do.

We are living in a grim and nervous age. The sense of historical security has been lost long ago. It seems that our traditional civilization may collapse altogether and fall to pieces. The sense of direction is also confused. There is no way out of this predicament and impasse unless a radical change takes place. Unless—unless we repent, unless we ask for a gift of repentance. “For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore turn and live!” (Ezekiel 18:32).

There are two ways. “See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil... I call heaven and earth to record this day against you that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19).

Let us choose life. First, we have to dedicate all our life to God, and to “receive” or accept Him as our only Lord and Master, and this not only in the spirit of formal obedience, but in the spirit of love. For He is more than our Lord, He is our Father. To love Him means also to serve Him, to make His purpose our

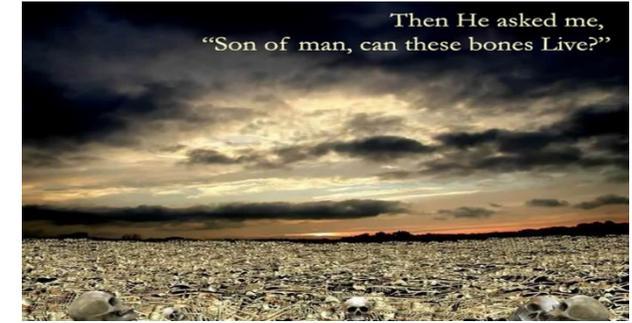
own, to share His designs and aims. “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15).

Our Lord left to us His own work to carry on and to accomplish. We must enter into the very spirit of His redeeming work. And we are given power to do this: “power to become the sons of God” (John 1:12). Even the Prodigal son was not allowed to lose his privilege of birth and to be counted among the hirelings. And even more, we are members of Christ, in the Church, which is His Body, His life indwelling us by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, secondly, we must draw closer together and search in all our life for that unity which was in the mind of our Blessed Lord on His last day, before the Passion and the Cross: “that all may be one”—in faith and love, one-in Him. Such unity is only found in the Truth, in the fulness of Truth. “Make schisms to cease in the Church. Quench the ragings of the nations. Speedily destroy, by the might of the Holy Spirit, all uprisings of heresies” (The Liturgy of St. Basil).

We have to watch—not to miss the day of our visitation, as the Israel of old missed hers. “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37). Let us choose life, in the knowledge of the Father and His Only Son, our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And then the glory of the Cross and Resurrection will be revealed in our own lives. And the glorious prophecy of old will once more come true. “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel... Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it, says the Lord.” (Ezekiel 37:12, 14).

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The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893–1979)

A glorious vision was granted to the Prophet. By the hand of the Lord the prophet Ezekiel was taken to the valley of death, a valley of despair and desolation. There was nothing alive there. There was nothing but dry bones, and very dry they were indeed. This was all that had been left of those who were once living. Life was gone. And a question was put to the Prophet: “Can these dry bones live again? Can life come back once more?” (Ezekiel 37:3). The human answer to this question would have been obviously, no. Life never comes back. What is once dead, is dead forever. Life cannot come out of dust and ashes. “For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again” (2 Reigns [2 Samuel] 14:14). Death is an ultimate ending, a complete frustration of human hopes and prospects. Death comes from sin, from the original Fall. It was not divinely instituted. Human death did not belong to the Divine order of creation. It was not normal or natural for man to die. It was an abnormal estrangement from God, who is man’s Maker and Master— even physical death; i.e. the separation of soul and body. Man’s mortality is the stigma or “the wages” of sin (Romans 6:23).

Many Christians today have lost this Biblical conception of death and mortality and regard death rather as a release, a release of an immortal soul out of the bondage of the body. As wide-spread as this conception of death may actually be, it is utterly alien to the Scriptures. In fact, it is a Greek, a gentile conception. Death is not a release, it is a catastrophe. "Death is a mystery indeed: for the soul is by violence severed from the body, is separated from the natural connection and composition, by the Divine will. O marvel. Why have we been given over unto corruption, and why have we been wedded unto death?" (St. John of Damascus, in the Funeral Service). A dead man is no man any more. For man is not a bodiless spirit. Body and soul belong together, and their separation is a decomposition of the human being. A discarnate soul is but a ghost. A soulless body is but a corpse. *"For in death there is no remembrance of Thee, in the grave who shall give Thee thanks"* (Psalm 6:5). Or again: *"Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise Thee? shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or Thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark? and Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness"* (Psalm 88:10-12). And the Psalmist was perfectly sure: *"and they are cut off from Thy hand"* (v. 5). Death is hopeless. And thus the only reasonable answer could be given, from the human point of view, to the question about the dry bones: No, the dry bones will never live again.

But the Divine reply was very different from that. And it was not just an answer in words, but a mighty deed of God. And even the Word of God is creative: *"for He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast"* (Psalm 33:9). And now God speaks again and acts. He sends His Spirit and renews the face of the earth (Psalm 104:30). The Spirit of God is the Giver of Life. And the Prophet could witness a marvellous restoration. By the power of God the dry bones were brought again together, and linked, and shaped, and covered over again with a living flesh, and the breath of life came back into the bodies. And they stood up

again, in full strength, *"an exceedingly great congregation."* Life came back, death was overcome.

The explanation of this vision goes along with the vision itself. Those bones were the house of Israel, the chosen People of God. She was dead, by her sins and apostasy, and had fallen into the ditch which she made herself, was defeated and rejected, lost her glory, and freedom, and strength. Israel, the People of Divine Love and adoption, the obstinate, rebellious and stiff-necked people, and yet still the Chosen People . . . And God brings her out of the valley of the shadow of death back to the green pastures, out of the snare of death, out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay.

The prophecy has been accomplished. The promised Deliverer, or Redeemer, the Messiah, came in the due time, and His name was Jesus: *"for He shall save His people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21). He was *"a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel."*

And then something incredible and paradoxical happened. He was not recognized or "received" by His people, but rejected and reviled, was condemned and put to death, as a false prophet, even as a liar or "deceiver." For the fleshly conception of the deliverance held by the people was very different from that which was in God's own design. Instead of a mighty earthly Prince expected by the Jews, Jesus of Nazareth came, *"meek and lowly in heart."* The King of Heaven, the King of Kings Himself, came down, the King of Glory, yet under the form of a Servant. And not to dominate, but to serve all those *"that labour and are heavy laden,"* and to give them rest. Instead of a charter of political freedom and independence, He brought to His people, and to all mankind, a charter of Salvation, the Gospel of Eternal Life. Instead of political liberation He brought freedom from sin and death, the forgiveness of sins and Life Everlasting. He came unto His own and was not "received." He was put to death, to shameful death, and *"was numbered with the transgressors."* Life Divine sentenced to death by men-this is the mystery of the Crucifixion.

Once more God has acted. *"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain; Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that He should be held by it"* (Acts 2:23-24). Once more Life came out of the grave. Christ is risen, He came forth out of His grave, as a Bridegroom out of his chamber. And with Him the whole human race, all mankind, was raised. He is the first fruits of them that slept, and all are to follow Him in their own order (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). *"That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 5:21).

The prophecy of Ezekiel is read in the Orthodox Church at Matins on Great Saturday, when believers are invited to keep a watch at the grave of the Lord, at that Sacred and Holy Grave out of which Life sprung abundantly for all creation. In the beautiful hymns and anthems appointed this tremendous mystery is depicted and adored: Life laid down in the grave, Life shining forth out of the grave. "For lo, He who dwelleth on high is numbered among the dead and is lodged in the narrow grave" (The Canon, Ode 8, Irmos). The faithful are called to contemplate and to adore this mystery of the Life-bearing and Life-bringing tomb.

And yet, the old prophecy is still a prophecy, or rather both a prophecy and a witness. Life came forth from the grave, but the fulness of life is still to come. The human race, even the redeemed, even the Church itself, are still in the valley of the shadow of death.

The house of the New Israel of God is again very much like dry bones. There is so little true life in all of us. The historical path of man is still tragic and insecure. Man is still spreading death and desolation. One may expect even worse things to come. For the root of death is sin. No wonder that there is, in many and diverse quarters, a growing understanding of the seriousness of sin.

Yet the power of death is broken. Christ is risen indeed. "The Prince of Life, who died, reigns