

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Valley of the Shadow of Death *

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“O YE DRY BONES”... Ezekiel 37

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?” The human answer to this question would have been obviously, no. Life never comes back. What is once dead, is dead for ever. 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 Sam. 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

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of soul and body. Man’s mortality is the stigma or “the wages” of sin (Rom. 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 widely 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

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corruption, and why have we been wedded unto death?" (St. John of Damascus in the "Burial office"). 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" (Ps. 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" (Ps. 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 quest 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" (Ps. 33:9). And now God speaks again and acts. He sends His Spirit and renews the face of the earth (Ps. 104:30). The Spirit of God is the Giver of Life. And the Prophet could

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witness a marvelous 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 has 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 stiffnecked 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, of many waters, of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay.

The prophecy has been accomplished. The promised deliverance came one day. 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" (Matt. 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, was 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 labor and are heavy laden,” and to give them rest. Instead of a charter of political freedom and independence, He brought to His people, and

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to all men indeed, 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 put to death, 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 holden of it” (Acts 2:23-24, the words of St. Peter). 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 men indeed, was raised. He is the first fruits of them that slept, and all are to follow Him in their own order (I Cor. 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” (Rom. 5:21).

The prophecy of Ezekiel is read in the Orthodox Church at Matins on Great Saturday, at that glorious office at which 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 for the day, the “encomia”—one of the most precious creations of devotional poetry—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

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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. All of us have been, in recent years, driven back into the valley of death. Every one, who had to walk on the ruins of once

flourishing cities, realizes the terrible power of death and destruction. 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. The old saying of St. Augustine finds anew echoes in the human soul: *Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum*, “you never understand of what weight is sin.” The power of death is broken indeed. Christ is risen indeed. “The Prince of Life, who died, reigns 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 in order to be truly quickened one has to 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. Otherwise one would quench the Spirit. 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— it is to respond to the Divine

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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... In the Christian language it reads— unless we repent, unless we ask for a gift of repentance... Life is given abundantly to all men, and yet we are still dead. “Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby you have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye” (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

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 (Deuter. 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. “Henceforth I call you not

servants; for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I heard of my Father I have made known unto you” (John 15:15).

Our Lord left to us His own work to carry on and to accomplish. We have to enter into the very spirit of His redeeming work. And we are given power to do this. We are given power to be the sons of God. Even the Prodigal son was not allowed to lose his privilege of birth and to be

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counted among the hirelings. And even more, we are members of Christ, in the Church, which is His Body. His life is indwelt unto us by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, secondly, we have to 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.

The world is utterly divided still. There is too much strife and division even among those who claim to be of Christ. The peace among nations and above all the unity among Christians, this is the common bound duty, this is the most urgent task of the day. And surely the ultimate destiny of man is decided not on the battlefields, nor by the deliberations of the clever men. The destiny of man is decided in human hearts. Will they be locked up even at the knocking of the Heavenly Father? Or will man succeed in unlocking them in response to the call of Divine Love?

Even in our gloomy days there are signs of hope. There is not only “darkness at noon,” but also lights in the night. There is a growing search for unity. But true 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). Life is given abundantly.

We have to watch— not to miss the day of our visitation, as the Israel of old had missed hers. “How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not” (Matt. 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 out of

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your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel... Then shall you know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord” (Ezekiel, 37:12, 14).