

In modern Israel there have been many terrorist outrages over the years. There is, in fact, a charitable organisation whose volunteers are ready to perform a particular service after the carnage of a terrorist bomb. In high-visibility jackets and wearing rubber surgical gloves, they scour the area of the blast and its surroundings looking for human body parts, no matter how small. They place them in bags and have them buried with all due respect - such is the attention paid to the dead body in Judaism which has also come down to us in Orthodox Christianity.

That care for the dead is natural for us and goes back thousands of years to our prehistoric ancestors. As soon as the mind is capable of asking the question, where has that person gone, we know that there is more to us than just the sum of our body parts and yet, those very parts contained, or rather, gave physical expression to the Self, the soul, the very person.

We are told in the book of Genesis that Abraham, after the death of his wife Sarah, bought the field of Machpelah in Hebron in the land of Canaan. And there, in a cave, he buried his late wife. Following that same tradition, from Abraham to the burial of Our Lord Himself, Orthodox Christian practice is to bury our dead. This is not just because cremation was, from time to time, associated with pagan practice. Rather, burial for us has a real symbolic significance: the planting of a grain in anticipation of the resurrection harvest. If that still sounds strange, remember that symbols, the visible, the tangible realities, objects and actions, manifest for us a deeper, a further reality: the Spiritual, the real world!

You might recall the opening of St John's first epistle: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning **the Word of life***— John and the other apostles knew - they not only believed *but they knew* that the One they encountered was Christ the Word of God in reality.

In our understanding there is no separation between outward form and inner reality; there is a clear relationship between Word and sacrament, between action and mystery. They are grounded together in profound silence for what we cannot comprehend or explain demands that we but stand in awed silence and wonder. In this Liturgy there are two discrete parts: the proclamation of the Word of God in hymns, in the sacred scriptures and in homilies and there is the offering of the Holy Gifts when

our hearts are on high, feasting at the wedding supper of the Lamb. The two parts are intimately entwined, so that, whether we are feeding from the table of God's word or united with his true body and blood, they cannot be separated.

Behold today the Myrrh bearers, Joseph with Nicodemus even, coming to bury Christ with that ancient care and devotion, out of love for Him and with deep respect for that body in which he came to dwell; in which He was heard, was seen, touched and handled. To be handled now and wrapped in grave clothes and hidden away beneath the earth. But for all that devotion and loyalty it was a ritual action, still burdened with grief, with wailing and weeping - with **unknowing**.

We can imagine the grief but we can also imagine the questions they asked themselves, these Myrrh bearers, Joseph & Nicodemus, elders of Israel; the cowering apostles, now hidden away for fear; His own virgin mother and her family and tribe, how they must have puzzled over His death: He who with His word healed the sick, cast out demons, ruled over the natural elements, even raised the dead! And yet here is the very mystery of mysteries. St John's gospel in particular, of all the books of the New Testament, reveals and uncovers for us the true understanding of the Logos, *The Word*. For St John makes clear that The Word reveals His power precisely *in weakness*, in suffering, in abasement and humiliation, in death. Everything, in fact, as is shown in the Icon we displayed in Holy Week of the Heavenly Bridegroom called, 'The Extreme Humility.' Even what seems the utter impotence and silence of death only serves to confirm His power, for not only is He harrowing Hell - raising those who had fallen asleep from all ages - it is through His cross and death that the final mystery is revealed: His and our resurrection.

What does St Paul tell us, *we*, who have been entrusted with this gospel of reconciliation with God? *"Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* (II Cor.12:9-10) The Church herself may well from time to time, speak wisdom unto those who have power but we ourselves, cannot be interested in world power: the Church is not here to rearrange and run the world, we are here to proclaim and serve the gospel of reconciliation between heaven and earth, to proclaim and await the coming of the kingdom. How do we do this? By following the Baptist: *"He must increase but I must decrease"* (Jn.3:30). This *Kenosis*, this emptying of the Self,

we see also is the Hesychasts, the life of silence before the Word of God, the monastics whose words and teaching are recorded for us in the *Philokalia*, where the mind dwells in the heart and all that is heard are the murmurings of the prayer: *Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

But if that is too much of a mystery for us at present, we who are still climbing that time-bound ladder of ascent, let us consider what we have heard and seen and touched with our own hands. Let us think of this place: this image of the kingdom of God that we care for, maintain and clean and repair; where we bring our most urgent needs and concerns; where we pray; where primarily, we serve the Liturgy, echoing, reverberating, reflecting, as in a mirror, the Liturgy of heaven itself. Here we bring the *same* devotion that drove the myrrh-bearing women but our sweet spices are offered and poured out, not with the grief of *unknowing* but with full knowledge of the resurrection of Christ. Think of how we must behave here in fear and trembling, in awe at the glory, respecting the silence, treading these courts circumspectly, attending in wisdom, as we are so often commanded by the deacon.

For this place holds the book of the gospels and the Holy Antimension bearing the saintly relics, all on the holy table within the altar. And the Holy Gifts themselves in the Artophorion. And there are the holy images of the saints, looking out at us in the first place as we step with humility into *their* presence. But if this is a holy house, consider your own body: into which are received the Holy Gifts, coming like Christ at Christmas to a lowly cattle stall (there being no room in the guest chamber). If the Artophorion is holy for what it holds, *then so are you!* For the Christian's body is the rock-hewn tomb, the upper-room in Jerusalem; the very womb of Mary; the temple of the Holy Spirit. Think then of how we too must care for *this* body of ours and the bodies of one another; with what respect and awe and circumspection we must approach ourselves and each other; with what virtue and care and honour. And of how we must labour to rid ourselves of any sin and if we cannot be delivered yet from all passion, at least we may pray for courage and strength to fight our temptations manfully. As the Psalmist says in Ps.100 (101), applying the words to ourselves:

“I will set nothing wicked before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; It shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will not know wickedness. Whoever secretly slanders his neighbour, Him I will destroy; the one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, Him I will not endure ... Early

I will destroy all the wicked of the land, that I may cut off all the evildoers from the city of the Lord.”

And we are that city of the Lord. As is this building, this house of God, so are we! You are holy as this house is holy. And if that idea shocks you, if your piety tells you, No! This cannot possibly be true of me, *then repent!* For as the New Testament tells us, we are ‘called to be saints.’ To imagine that we cannot strive for holiness is to say that the demons have won the mastery over us, that they are stronger than Christ! **Never!** For with a word He casts out demons. And it is *in* our weakness and *despite* our weakness and *because* of our weakness that Christ can rebuild this house of God which is the body. This *is* the way of Christ: that in weakness we triumph and that through the cross we are raised.