

## “GO JOYFULLY”: THE MYSTERY OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The end is where we start from.

*T. S. Eliot*

*“I knew you would come...”*

In the worship of the Russian Orthodox Church, while the prayers of preparation are being said before the start of the Eucharist, the doors in the center of the icon screen remain closed. Then comes the time for the Divine Liturgy itself to begin: the doors are opened, the sanctuary stands revealed, and the celebrant sings the initial blessing. It was precisely this moment that the religious philosopher Prince Evgeny Trubetskoy recalled as he lay dying. These were his last words: “The royal doors are opening! The Great Liturgy is about to begin.”<sup>1</sup> For him death was not the closing but the opening of a door, not an end but a beginning. Like the early Christians, he saw his death-day as his birthday.

Let us think of our human existence as a book. Most people regard this present life as the actual text, the main story, and they see the future life—if, indeed, they believe that there is any future life—as no more than an appendix. But the genuinely Christian attitude is the exact reverse of this. Our present life is in reality no more than the preface, the introduction, while it is the future life that constitutes the main story. The moment of death signifies not the conclusion of the book but the start of Chapter One.

Two things, so obvious that they are easily overlooked, need to be said about this end-point which is in fact the starting-point. First, death is an unavoidable and certain fact; second, death is a mystery. This means that we are to view our coming death with contrasting feelings—with sober

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Arseniev, *Russian Piety* (London: Faith Press, 1964), 90.

realism on the one side, and at the same time with awe and wonder.

### *Death is an unavoidable and certain fact*

In this life there is only one thing of which we can be sure: that we are all going to die (unless perchance the second coming of Christ should occur during our lifetime). Death is the one fixed, inevitable event to which every human must look forward. And if I try to forget about this fixed event and to hide its inevitability from myself, then it is I myself who am the loser. True humanism and the awareness of death are mutually dependent variables, for it is only by facing and accepting the reality of my coming death that I can become authentically alive. As D. H. Lawrence observed, “Without the song of death, the song of life becomes pointless and silly.” By ignoring the dimension of death, we deprive life of its true grandeur.

This is a point that has been powerfully expressed by Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh:

Death is the touchstone of our attitude to life. People who are afraid of death are afraid of life. It is impossible not to be afraid of life with all its complexity and dangers if one is afraid of death. . . . If we are afraid of death we will never be prepared to take ultimate risks; we will spend our life in a cowardly, careful and timid manner. It is only if we can face death, make sense of it, determine its place and our place in regard to it, that we will be able to live in a fearless way and to the fullness of our ability.<sup>2</sup>

Our realism, however, and our determination to “make sense” of death should not lead us to diminish the second truth: Death is a mystery. Despite all that we are told by our different religious traditions, we understand almost nothing about

The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns...

Truly, as Hamlet remarks, the dread of it “puzzles the will.” We must resist the temptation to try and say too much. We are not to trivialize death. It is an unavoidable and certain fact, but it is also the great unknown.

The attitude of sober realism with which we are to confront the fact of death is well expressed by St Isaac the Syrian:

<sup>2</sup> “On Death,” *Sobornost* 1:2 (1979), 8.

Prepare your heart for your departure. If you are wise, you will expect it every hour. Each day say to yourself: “See, the messenger who comes to fetch me is already at the door. Why am I sitting idle? I must depart for ever. I cannot come back again.” Go to sleep with these thoughts every night, and reflect on them throughout the day. And when the time of departure comes, go joyfully to meet it, saying: “Come in peace. I knew you would come, and I have not neglected anything that could help me on the journey.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Deaths great and little*

In determining death’s place and our place in regard to it, there are three aspects to be kept constantly in view:

Death is closer to us than we imagine.

Death is deeply unnatural, contrary to the divine plan, and yet it is God’s gift.

Death is a separation that is no separation.

Death is far closer to us than we imagine—not just a distant event at the conclusion of our earthly existence, but a present reality that is going on continually around us and within us.<sup>4</sup> “I die daily,” said St Paul (1 Cor 15:31); in T. S. Eliot’s words, “The time of death is every moment.” All living is a kind of dying: we are dying all the time. But in this daily experience of dying, each death is followed by a new birth: all dying is also a kind of living. Life and death are not opposites, mutually exclusive, but they are intertwined. The whole of our human existence is a mixture of mortality and resurrection: “dying, and behold we live” (2 Cor 6:9). Our earthly journey is an unceasing passover, a constant crossing over through death into new life. Between our initial birth and our eventual death, the whole course of our existence is made up of a series of lesser deaths and births.

Every time we fall asleep at night, it is a foretaste of death; every time we wake up again next morning, it is as if we had risen from the dead. There is a Hebrew benediction which says, “Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who createst Thy world every morning afresh.”<sup>5</sup> So it

<sup>3</sup> *Homily* 65(64): tr. Wensinck, 309; tr. Miller, 315.

<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I am indebted to a talk by Father John Dalrymple, “Dying Before Death,” in Donald Reid (ed.), *The Experience of Death* (Edinburgh: The Fellowship of Saint Andrew, 1985), 1-8.

Barbara Green and Victor Gollancz, *God of a Hundred Names* (London: Gollancz, 1962), 19.

is also with ourselves: each morning, as we awake, we are as it were newly created. Perhaps our final death will be in the same way a recreation—a falling asleep followed by an awakening. We are not afraid to drop off to sleep each night, because we expect to wake up once more next morning. Can we not feel the same kind of confidence about our final falling asleep in death? May we not expect to wake up again recreated in eternity?

The death-life pattern is also apparent, in a somewhat different way, in the process of growing up. Repeatedly, something in us has to die so that we may pass on to the next stage of living. The transition from the baby to the child, from the child to adolescent, from the adolescent to the mature adult, involves at each juncture an inner death in order that something new may come alive. And these transitions, particularly in the case of the child becoming a teenager, can often be crisis-ridden and even acutely painful. Yet if at any point we decline to accept the need for a dying, we cannot develop into real persons. As George MacDonald says in his fantasy novel *Lilith*, “You will be dead so long as you refuse to die.” It is precisely the death of the old that makes possible the emergence of fresh growth within ourselves, and without the death there would be no new life.

If growing up is a form of death, then so is parting, the separation from a place or person that we have come to love: *partir, c'est mourir un peu*. Yet such separations are a necessary element in our continuing growth into maturity. Unless we have sometimes the courage to leave our familiar surroundings, to part with our existing friends and to forge new links, we shall never realize our true potentiality. By hanging on too long to the old, we are refusing the invitation to discover what is new. In the words of Cecil Day Lewis:

Selfhood begins with a walking away.  
And love is proved in the letting go.

Another kind of death that all of us have to face at some point is the experience of being rejected: rejection, perhaps, when we apply for a job—how often does every school-leaver or university graduate today have to live through that particular form of dying!—or else rejection in love. Something does indeed die within us when we find that our love is not returned, and that someone else is preferred in our place. And yet even this death can be a source of new life. For many young people such rejection in love is precisely the moment when they really begin to grow

up, their initiation into adult life. Bereavement, the loss of a loved one, involves equally a death in the heart of the one who remains alive. We feel that a part of ourselves is no longer there, that a limb has been amputated. Yet bereavement, when faced and inwardly accepted, makes each of us more authentically alive than we were before.

Almost as traumatic as the death of a friend or partner can be, for many believers, the death of faith—the loss of our root certainties (or seeming certainties) about God and the meaning of existence. But this too is a death-life experience through which we have to pass if our faith is to become mature. True faith is a constant dialogue with doubt, for God is incomparably greater than all our preconceptions about Him; our mental concepts are idols that need to be shattered. So as to be fully alive, our faith needs continually to die.

In all these cases, then, death turns out to be not destructive but creative. Out of dying comes resurrection. Something dies—something comes alive. May not the death that ensues at the end of our earthly life fit into this same pattern? It is to be seen as the last and greatest in the long series of deaths and resurrections that we have been experiencing ever since the day that we were born. It is not something totally unrelated to all that has been happening to us previously throughout our life, but it is a larger, more comprehensive expression of what we have been undergoing all the time. If the little deaths through which we have had to pass have each led us beyond death to resurrection, may this not be true of the great moment of death that we await when it is finally time to depart from this world?

Nor is this all. For Christians, the constantly repeated pattern of death-resurrection within our own lives is given fuller meaning by the life, death and Resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. Our own story is to be understood in the light of His story—that story which we celebrate annually during Holy Week, and also each Sunday at the Eucharist. Our little deaths and resurrections are joined across history to His definitive death and Resurrection, our little passovers are taken up and reaffirmed in His great passover. Christ’s dying, in the words of the Liturgy of St Basil, is a “life-creating death.” With His example as our assurance, we believe that our own death can also be “life-creating.” He is our forerunner and our first fruits. As we Orthodox affirm at the Paschal midnight service, in words attributed to St John Chrysostom:

Let none fear death, for the death of the Savior has set us free.  
 He has destroyed death by undergoing death...  
 Christ is risen, and life reigns in freedom.  
 Christ is risen, and there is none left dead in the tomb.<sup>6</sup>

### *Both tragedy and blessing*

Death, then, is present with us throughout our life, as a constant, ever-recurring daily experience. Yet, familiar though it may be, at the same time it is deeply unnatural. Death is not part of God's primary purpose for His creation. He created us, not in order that we should die, but in order that we should live. What is more, He created us as an undivided unity. In the Jewish and Christian view, the human person is to be seen in thoroughly holistic terms: we are each of us, not a soul temporarily imprisoned in a body and longing to escape, but an integrated totality that embraces soul and body together. C. G. Jung was right to insist on what he terms the "mysterious truth": "Spirit is the living body seen from within, and the body the outer manifestation of the living spirit—the two being really one."<sup>7</sup> As the separation of body and soul, death is therefore a violent affront against the wholeness of our human nature. Death may be something that awaits us all, but it is at the same time profoundly abnormal. It is monstrous and tragic. Confronted by the death of those close to us and by our own death, despite all our realism we are justified in feeling also a sense of desolation, of horror and even indignation:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus Himself wept beside the grave of His friend Lazarus (Jn 11:35), and in Gethsemane He was filled with anguish at the prospect of His own coming death (Mt 26:38). St Paul regards death as an "enemy to be destroyed" (1 Cor 15:26), and he links it closely with sinfulness: "The sting of death is sin" (1 Cor 15:56). The fact that we are all going to die is a reflection of the fact that we are all living in a fallen world—in a world that is distorted and out of joint, crazy, *écrasé*.

Yet, even though death is tragic, it is at the same time a blessing. Al-

6 For the full text, see Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 247-49.

7 *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Ark Paperbacks (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 253.

8 Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems* (London: Dent, 1952), 116.

though not part of God's original plan, it is nonetheless His gift, an expression of His mercy and compassion. For us humans to live unendingly in this fallen world, caught forever in the vicious circle of boredom and sin, would have been a fate too terrible for us to endure; and so God has supplied us with a way of escape. He dissolves the union of soul and body, so that He may afterwards shape them anew, uniting them again at the bodily resurrection on the Last Day and so recreating them to fullness of life. He is like the potter whom Jeremiah watched: "So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him" (18:4-5). The Divine Potter lays His hand on the vessel of our humanity, marred by sin, and He breaks it in pieces, so as to mold it again on His wheel and refashion it according to its first glory. Death serves in this way as the means of our restoration. In the words of the Orthodox funeral service:

Of old Thou hast created me from nothing  
 And honored me with Thy divine image.  
 But when I disobeyed Thy commandment,  
 Thou hast returned me to the earth whence I was taken.  
 Lead me back again to Thy likeness.  
 Refashioning my ancient beauty.<sup>9</sup>

As Benjamin Franklin stated in the epitaph that he composed for himself, death is the way in which we are "corrected and amended":

The body of  
 Benjamin Franklin, printer,  
 (Like the cover of an old book,  
 Its contents worn out,  
 And stript of its lettering and gilding)  
 Lies here; food for worms!  
 Yet the work itself will not be lost,  
 For it will, as he believed, appear once more  
 In a new  
 And more beautiful edition,  
 Corrected and amended  
 By its Author!

9 *The Lenten Triodion*, tr. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber, 1978), 128.

There is, then, a dialectic in our attitude to death, but the two ways of approach are not in the final analysis contradictory. We see death as unnatural, abnormal, as contrary to the original plan of the Creator, and so we recoil from it with grief and despair. But we see it also as part of the divine will, as a blessing, not a punishment. It is an escape from the *impasse*, a means of grace, the doorway to our recreation. It is our way of return: to quote the Orthodox funeral service once more, “I am the lost sheep: call me back and save me, O Savior.”<sup>10</sup> We therefore draw near to death with eagerness and hope, saying with St Francis of Assisi, “Praised be my Lord for our Sister, bodily death,” for through this bodily death the Savior is calling home the child of God. We look beyond the separation of body and soul at death to their future reintegration at the final resurrection.

This dialectic is clearly apparent at an Orthodox funeral. No attempt is made to hide the painful and shocking reality of the fact of death. The coffin is left open, and it can often be a harrowing moment when the relatives and friends approach one by one to give the last kiss to the departed. Yet at the same time it is customary in many places to wear not black but white vestments, as in the Resurrection service at Paschal midnight; for Christ, risen from the dead, is summoning the departed Christian to share in His own Resurrection. We are not forbidden to mourn at a funeral; and this is surely wise, for tears can have a healing effect, and when grief is suppressed the wound goes deeper. But we are not to grieve “as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). Our grief, however heart-rending, is not a hopeless grief; for, as we confess in the Creed, “we are expecting the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.”

### *Continuing communion*

Death is, in the third place, a separation that is no separation. This is a point to which Orthodox tradition attaches the utmost importance. The living and the departed belong to a single family. The chasm of death is not impassable, for we can all meet around the altar of God. In the words of the Russian writer Iulia de Beausobre, “The Church...is a meeting-place of persons dead, alive and yet to be born, who, loving one another, come together round the rock of the Altar to proclaim their love of

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

God.”<sup>11</sup> The point is well developed by another Russian author, the missionary priest Makary Glukharev, in a letter to one recently bereaved:

In Christ we live and move and have our being. Whether alive or dead, we are all in Him. It would be more true to say: We are all alive in Him, for in Him there is no death. Our God is not a God of the dead but of the living. He is your God, He is the God of her who has died. There is only one God, and in that one God you are both united. Only you cannot see each other for the time being. But this means that your future meeting will be all the more joyful; and then no one will take your joy from you. Yet even now you live together; all that has happened is that she has gone into another room and closed the door... Spiritual love is not conscious of visible separation.<sup>12</sup>

How is this continuing communion maintained? There is, first, a false turning which some have found attractive, but which the Orthodox tradition utterly rejects. Communion between the living and the dead is not to be maintained through spiritualism and necromancy. There can be no place within true Christianity for any techniques seeking to communicate with the dead through mediums, ouija boards and the like. Indeed, such practices are highly dangerous, often exposing those who indulge in them to invasion by demonic forces. Spiritualism is also the expression of an illegitimate curiosity, much in the manner of one trying to look through the key-hole of a closed door (“What the butler saw...”). As Father Alexander Elchaninov puts it, “We must humbly admit the existence of a Mystery, and not try to slip round by the backstairs to eavesdrop.”<sup>13</sup>

As we learn from the lives of the saints, there are certainly occasions when the dead communicate directly with the living, either in dreams or in waking visions. But we on our side are not to attempt to force such contacts. Any contrivance aimed at manipulating the dead is surely abhorrent to the Christian conscience. The fellowship between us and them is not on the psychic but on the spiritual level, and the place of our meeting is not the séance-parlor but the Eucharistic table. The only legitimate foundation for our fellowship with the dead is communion in prayer, above all at the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. We pray for them, and at the same time we are confident they are praying for us; and it is through

<sup>11</sup> *Creative Suffering* (Westminster: Dacre, 1940), 44.

<sup>12</sup> In S. Tyszkiewicz and T. Belpaire, *Écrits d'Ascètes Russes* (Namur, Belgium: Les Éditions du Soleil Levant, 1957), 104.

<sup>13</sup> *The Diary of a Russian Priest* (London: Faber, 1967), 43.

this mutual intercession that we and they are joined, across the boundary of death, in a firm and unbroken bond of unity.

The bond that unites the living and the departed is experienced by Orthodox Christians as being particularly close throughout the forty days immediately after death. There is at such a time but a thin veil between this world and the next, and so during these first few weeks memorial services for the newly departed are celebrated with exceptional frequency. When the forty days are over, public prayers are offered less often, although of course we continue to remember the newly departed daily in our private intercessions. While the bond between living and dead remains unbroken, we the living have as it were gradually to “let go” the one who has died, so that she or he may be free to pursue in peace the appointed journey on the other shore. This does not mean, however, that at the end of the forty days the living cease to mourn for the one who has died; on the contrary, the time of special grieving needs to extend far longer than that—far longer, indeed, than our contemporary western culture usually deems necessary.

Prayer for the dead is not seen by Orthodox Christians as an optional extra, but it is an accepted and unvarying feature in all our daily worship. Here are some of the prayers that we say:

O Thou who with wisdom profound orderest all things in Thy love for mankind, who bestowest on all, O only Creator, that which is best for each: give rest, O Lord, to the souls of Thy servants, for they have set their hope in Thee, our Maker and Creator and our God.

With the saints give rest, O Lord, to the souls of Thy servants, where there is no pain, no sorrow, no sighing, but life without end.

May Christ give you rest in the land of the living, and open for you the gates of paradise; may He receive you as a citizen of the Kingdom, and grant you forgiveness of your sins: for you were His friend.

Yet some of the prayers strike a more somber note, reminding us of the possibility of an eternal separation from God:

From the ever-burning fire, from the darkness without light, from the gnashing of teeth and the worm that torments without ceasing, from every punishment, deliver, O our Savior, all who have died in faith.<sup>14</sup>

14 For these and other prayers for the departed, see *The Lenten Triodion*, 124-41 (especially 126,

To this intercession for the dead no rigid bounds can be set. For whom do we pray? Strictly interpreted, the Orthodox rules allow prayers by name, in public liturgical worship, only for those who have died in the visible communion of the Church. But there are occasions when our prayers are far more wide-ranging. At Kneeling Vespers on the Sunday of Pentecost, prayers are said even for those in hell:

On this final and saving festival Thou art pleased to accept intercessory propitiation for those imprisoned in hell, affording us great hopes that Thou wilt send down relaxation and refreshment to all held fast in bondage...<sup>15</sup>

What is the doctrinal basis for this constantly repeated prayer for the dead? How can it be theologically justified? To this the answer is extremely straightforward. The basis is our solidarity in mutual love. We pray for the dead because we love them. The Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple calls such prayer the “ministry of love,” and he states in words that any Orthodox Christian would be happy to make his own: “We do not pray for them because God will otherwise neglect them. We pray for them because we know that He loves and cares for them, and we claim the privilege of uniting our love for them with God’s.”<sup>16</sup> In the words of another Anglican, Dr. E. B. Pusey, to refuse to pray for the dead is “so cold a thought...so contrary to love” that it must needs, on that ground alone, be false.<sup>17</sup>

No further explanation or defense of prayer for the departed is necessary or, indeed, possible. Such prayer is simply the spontaneous expression of our love for each other. Here on earth we pray for others; should we not continue to pray for them after their death? Have they ceased to exist, that we should cease to make intercession for them? Whether alive or dead, we are all members of the same family; and so, whether alive or dead, we intercede for each other. In the risen Christ there is no separation between the dead and the living; in Father Makary’s words, “We are all alive in Him, for in Him there is no death.” Physical death cannot sever the bonds of mutual

134); Isabel Florence Hapgood (tr.), *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church*, 2nd edn. (New York: Association Press, 1922), 360-453 (especially 387).

15 *The Pentecostarion* (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1990), 424.

16 Quoted in *Prayer and the Departed: A Report of the Archbishop’s Commission on Christian Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1971), 90.

17 *Op. cit.*, 85.

love and mutual prayer that unite us all to one another in a single Body.

Of course we do not understand exactly *how* such prayer benefits the departed. Yet equally, when we intercede for people still alive, we cannot explain how this intercession assists them. We know from our personal experience that prayer for others is effective, and so we continue to practice it. But, whether offered for the living or for the dead, such prayer works in a way that remains mysterious. We are unable to fathom the precise interaction between the act of prayer, the free will of the other person, and God's grace and foreknowledge. When we pray for the departed, it is enough for us to know that they are still growing in their love for God, and so need our support. Let us leave the rest to God.

If we truly believe that we enjoy an unbroken and continuing communion with the dead, then we shall take care to speak of them so far as possible in the present tense, not the past. We shall not say, "We loved each other," "She was so very dear to me," "We were so happy together." We shall say, "We *still* love each other—now more than before," "She *is* as dear to me as ever," "We *are* so happy together." There is a Russian lady in the Orthodox community at Oxford who strongly objects to being called a widow. Although her husband died many years ago, she insists: "I am his wife, not his widow." She is right.

If we learn to speak of the dead in this way, using the present tense and not the past, this can help with a particular problem that sometimes causes people anguish. All too easily it can happen that we postpone seeking a reconciliation with someone whom we have alienated, and death intervenes before we have forgiven each other. In bitter remorse we are tempted to say to ourselves: "Too late, too late, the chance has gone for ever; there is nothing more to be done." But we are altogether mistaken, for it is not too late. On the contrary, we can go home this very day, and in our evening prayers we can speak directly to the dead friend from whom we were estranged. Using the same words that we would employ if they were still alive and we were meeting them face to face, we can ask their forgiveness and reaffirm our love. And from that very moment our mutual relationship will be changed. Although we do not see their face or hear their response, although we have not the slightest idea how our words reach them, yet we know in our hearts that we and they have together made a fresh start. It is not too late to begin again.

### *A hundred times finer and more subtle...*

There remains a question that in our present state of knowledge is unanswerable, and yet it is often asked. We have said that the human person was originally created by God as an undivided unity of body and soul and that we look, beyond the separation of the two at bodily death, to their ultimate reunification on the Last Day. A holistic anthropology commits us to believing, not merely in the immortality of the soul, but in the resurrection of the body. Since the body is an integral part of the total human person, when we think of our future immortality as persons in the full and true sense, such immortality cannot be simply an immortality of the soul alone, but must also involve the body. What, in that case, is the relationship between our present body and our resurrected body in the Age to come? At the resurrection, shall we have the same body as we do now, or will it be a new body?

Perhaps the best response is to say: it will be the same body, and yet not the same. Let us begin by considering the Resurrection of Christ, already accomplished on the third day; for it is this that forms the model for the future resurrection of all humankind at the Second Coming. Christ is the "first fruits," to use St Paul's imagery, and we are the harvest (1 Cor 15:20-24). Now in Christ's case the Gospel narratives render it abundantly clear that He is raised from the dead not in a new body, but in the same body as He had before. That is why the tomb is found to be empty, and that is why the first action of the risen Christ on meeting the apostles is to show them the wounds of the Crucifixion in His hands and feet and side, so as to assure them that He is once more truly present with them in the selfsame physical body which they had seen hanging on the Cross (Jn 20:20-28; compare Lk 24: 37-40).

Yet, although it is the selfsame physical body, it is also different. It is a body that can pass through closed doors (Jn 20:19), that has "another form" (Mk 16:12), so that it is not at once recognizable to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:16) or to the apostles at the lake of Tiberias (Jn 21:4). From the Gospel accounts of the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension, we gain the impression that Jesus is present with the disciples not continually but intermittently, appearing suddenly and then once more withdrawing His visible presence. His body has not

ceased to be genuinely physical, but it is at the same time released from the limitations of materiality as now known to us, dwelling as we do in a fallen world. It has become a *spiritual* body; but by “spiritual” in this context is meant not “dematerialized” but “transformed by the power and glory of the Spirit.”

If such is the condition of the risen Christ, our paradigm and “first fruits,” what does this tell us about our own coming resurrection on the Last Day? St Paul affirms that in our case, as in that of the risen Christ, there will be both continuity and change. That there will be continuity is evident from the Pauline analogy of the seed sown in the earth (1 Cor 15:36-37). The seed is “buried” in the earth and there it undergoes “death” (compare Jn 12:24); and then out of this “death” there comes new life. The stalk or plant that shoots up out of the ground is not identical with the seed that has died, but it is directly derived from it.

Alongside this continuity, however, there will also be change. Describing the relationship between the present and the resurrection body, St Paul writes: “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical (or “natural” [*psychikon*]) body, it is raised a spiritual [*pneumatikon*] body” (1 Cor 15: 42-44). By a “spiritual” body is meant, in our case as in Christ’s, not “dematerialized” but “transformed by the Spirit.” Christ was not raised as a ghost (Lk 24:39) but in His integral human nature, soul and body together; and the same will be true also of us.

Thus our future resurrection body, while transfigured and rendered “spiritual,” will yet be in some significant sense the same physical body as we have now. But how exactly should this “sameness” be understood? Today, as in the past, many Christians envisage the continuity in a narrowly literal manner. Typical of this approach is the statement in the *Spiritual Homilies* attributed to St Macarius of Egypt: “At the resurrection all the members of the body are raised; not a hair perishes.”<sup>18</sup>

St Gregory of Nyssa, however, while still wishing to affirm that our resurrection body is constituted from the same physical elements as comprise our present body, suggests a slightly less literal approach by introducing the

18 *Spiritual Homilies* 15, 10: ed. Dörries, 132; tr. Maloney, 111-12. Compare Lk 21:18.

notion of a “form” (*eidos*) or configuration imposed upon these physical elements by the soul. Throughout our present life, he points out, the constituent elements making up our material body undergo unceasing change; but the “form” marked by the soul upon these elements remains the same, and thus by virtue of the uninterrupted preservation of this “form” we continue throughout our life to have the same body. At the resurrection, then, the soul will reassemble the scattered fragments of matter which once belonged to our body during this present life, and on which its “form” remains imprinted. In relation to our present body, then, our resurrection body will be indeed the same body, because it will possess the same “form” imposed upon the same physical elements.<sup>19</sup>

In this way Gregory posits a direct material continuity between the present body and the resurrection body. But can we not develop, in a more far-reaching manner than Gregory himself chooses to do, his notion of a distinctive and unique “form” (*eidos*) possessed by the psychosomatic totality of each human person? If the physical elements constituting our body in this present life are always changing, then surely it is not necessary for our body at the final resurrection to be composed of precisely the same material elements as constitute it at the moment of our death. All that we need to assert is that the characteristic “form” imprinted by the soul remains the same.

In considering both the “sameness” of our physical body at the different moments of this earthly life, and likewise the “sameness” of our resurrection body *vis-à-vis* our present body, the crucial point at issue is not the identity of the material constituents but the continuity of the “form.” If in each case the “form” remains the same, then the body remains also the same, even though the “form” is imprinted on different matter. We may illustrate the continuity, in both cases, by appealing as C. S. Lewis does to the example of a waterfall: “My form remains one, though the matter in it changes continually. I am, in that respect, like the curve in a waterfall.”<sup>20</sup> The drops in a waterfall are never the same from one moment to another, but since the

19 See *On the creation of humanity* 27 (PG 44: 225C-228A); *On the soul and the resurrection* (PG 46: 73A-80A); tr. Roth, 65-69.

20 *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 180. Gregory uses similar analogies in *On the soul and the resurrection* (PG 46: 141AB; tr. Roth, 110: a stream, the flame of a candle).

curve of flowing water preserves the same “form,” it is indeed the same waterfall. The resurrection body of each person, then, even though perhaps formed of different material constituents, will yet be in a truly recognizable manner the same body as that which the person possesses at present, because it will possess the same “form.”

Such an approach saves us from the unhelpful questions which in early centuries disturbed simpleminded Christians concerning, for example, the fate of a human being eaten by a wild animal which is then eaten in turn by other human beings. (Recalling a traditional song, we may style this the “Ilkley Moor” problematic.) But the approach here suggested in its turn raises other difficulties. If we suggest that there is no direct material continuity between a person’s present body and his or her resurrection body, are we not in danger of undervaluing the sanctification of our physical body during this earthly life through the Holy Mysteries of Baptism, Eucharist and Anointing with Oil? If the human body in this life experiences through the sacraments a true inauguration of the bodily glory of the Age to come, surely there must be some direct physical connection between the present and the resurrection body. What significance, moreover, are we to ascribe to the uncorrupted relics of the saints? I wonder whether a link between the present and the future can be safeguarded by emphasizing the *communal* aspect of resurrection and transfiguration in the Age to come. The sanctification of matter in this life, that is to say, contributes to the ultimate redemption of humankind and of the cosmos understood in *corporate* terms.

We have said enough about these puzzling matters, and perhaps too much. We are reminded, as before, how delicate it is, and indeed how perilous, to attempt any detailed formulations concerning the future life. On the basis of our existing knowledge we can do no more than conjecture tentatively about the character of the Age to come. “At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror” (1 Cor 13:12); “what we shall be has not yet been disclosed” (1 Jn 3:2).

Regarding one point, however, we may certainly be confident. Whatever else can or cannot be said about the resurrection body, it will undoubtedly possess a transparency and vivacity, a lightness and sensitivity, of which at this moment we can form no more than a dim and totally inadequate notion. At this present juncture we experience the material

world and our own material bodies as they are in a fallen state. Despite the precious intimations provided in Scripture and in the lives of the saints, it lies almost entirely beyond the power of our imagination to conceive the qualities that matter and the human body will manifest in a transfigured cosmos from which sin has disappeared.

St Ephraim the Syrian, however, comes closer than most theologians to imagining the unimaginable when he writes:

Consider the man in whom there dwelt a legion of all kinds of devils (Mk 5:9): they were there though they were not recognized, for their army is of stuff finer and more subtil than the soul itself. That whole army dwelt in a single body.

A hundred times finer and more subtil is the body of the just when they are risen, at the resurrection: it resembles a thought that is able, if it wills, to stretch out and expand, or, should it wish, to contract and shrink: if it shrinks, it is somewhere; if it expands, it is everywhere.

The spiritual beings [in paradise]...are so refined in substance that even thoughts cannot touch them!<sup>21</sup>

That is perhaps as good a description of the resurrection glory as we can expect to find. Let us leave the rest to silence.

### *You are the music...*

Two weeks before his death, the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams was asked what the future life meant to him. “Music,” he said, “music. But in the next world I shan’t be doing music, with all the striving and disappointments. I shall be being it.”<sup>22</sup>

“You are the music while the music lasts,” says T. S. Eliot. And in heaven the music lasts forever.

21 Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, Studies Supplementary to *Sobornost* 4, 2nd edn. (London: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1983), 23-4.

22 D. J. Enright, *The Oxford Book of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 332.