

1] We have in Christianity a beautiful expression which we use when one of our brothers or sisters dies. We say that so-and-so has *fallen asleep in the Lord*. This is much more than just a euphemism; this is not about hiding from the idea of death: it is a proclamation of our faith. When writing to the Corinthians about the resurrection of Christ, St Paul, you will recall, mentions that he appeared to over five hundred, most of whom were still alive, though some, he says, have *fallen asleep* (1 Cor.15:6).

2] In one of his commentaries on St Matthew's gospel, St John Chrysostom explained this idea. Calling to mind the raising of Jairus' daughter, St John says, '*The maid is not dead but sleeping... and with respect to Lazarus also, He says, Our friend Lazarus is sleeping... He is teaching us not to fear death, for that is not death, but has henceforth become a sleep... Let no man torture himself any further... nor disparage Christ's achievement. For indeed He overcame death. Why then do you wail for nothing? Henceforth it is now a sleep.*' (Homily XXXI on Matt. IX)

3] The great archbishop of Constantinople is referring here to Christ *before* His resurrection from the dead. Even as the new dispensation and revelation of God is happening; before the New Covenant is actually sealed with the blood of the Cross, Our Lord is showing that the long stranglehold of death is being loosened. With this in mind, next Sunday, the first of August, we begin the Dormition Fast, leading up to the feast of the Dormition or, *the falling asleep* of the blessed Theotokos.

4] But, as ever, the mysteries of the New Testament are prefigured in the Old. I have often encouraged you to study the Old Testament stories, to know the history of salvation in the experience of ancient Israel and to teach them to your children. And today is no different, for today we commemorate the falling asleep of Anna, herself the mother of the Theotokos, and

according to the natural line, the grandparent of God after the flesh. What a wonderful paradox, that she and her husband, Joachim, can be called the ancestors of the Eternal One! Such is the scandal, the stumbling-block, of the incarnation of God to unbelievers.

5] So what, if the falling asleep of Our Lady is prefigured in that of her own mother? Is that not true of all of us, generation by generation, living and dying upon the earth? But what is different here is that the righteous Anna belongs to a line of infertile couples blessed by God, including Zechariah and Elizabeth, that reached back through the wife of Manoah, the mother of Samson; Hannah, the mother of Samuel; and even Sarah, the ancient matriarch of the Hebrew people.

6] It is from within that line, taken from those declared righteous under the old dispensation, a family line known to the foreknowledge of God and chosen by God, that He Himself will enter His own world, into our history, into our flesh and even into our death. But Anna and her husband, Joachim, belong firmly to the Old Testament; righteous before God in this world under the Law of Moses. But being for this life only, the ultimate human longing could not yet be fulfilled in the Old Law. All those who longed for the redemption of Israel and the coming of the Messiah, the Chosen One, had to learn the spiritual discipline of waiting patiently. Speaking of the righteous in the Old testament, the letter to the Hebrews says, *'These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.'* [Heb.11:13]

7] Think of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus; of the prophetess Anna and the elder, Simeon in the temple, even John the Forerunner and Baptist: they, as it were, closed the books of the Old Testament. Only with the conception and birth blessed Theotokos herself is the New inaugurated, and with the

mysterious sign that is her virginal conception of Christ, the renewal of our fallen humanity is begun afresh.

8] For Christ to take all our human nature into the whole of the Divine nature - what we call *eternal salvation*, it was necessary for Him to be both fully God and fully man, as Fr Filip reiterated last week. To that end the God-Man, Christ, had to have a human ancestry. Do you know your own? I know mine. I had a genetic test that showed, just as I suspected, that my antecedence are for the most part found in these islands, mostly around the West Country, although a quarter comes from my maternal grandmother who was Dutch. My daughter has even traced our ancestry back to Devon in 1600, where, it appears, my ancestors were farmers.

9] Well, we know the ancestry of Christ as well. And He comes not from the great and powerful, from the celebrated, successful and influential, but from Anna and Joachim, who were barren, unable to show themselves blessed with children; appearing cursed, according to the mores of the times in which they lived. Unable to continue their generation and add to the children of Israel, many might have thought, in fact, that they had to be among the unrighteous.

10] But *God having provided something better*, as it says in Hebrews, heard their prayers and blessed them in the birth of the Theotokos, whom having received from God, they brought her to His temple in Jerusalem, one made by human hands; yet they brought the very one who would become the real temple of God, formed not by hands but by God, the Holy Spirit.

11] But for all that, Anna, having fallen asleep in the Lord, had still to await the final redemption. For the old Law, albeit a tutor and a spiritual discipline, and an identity for the chosen people, could not conquer death, no matter how righteous, how officiously, how scrupulously, one kept the commandments. For the Law of Moses was a covenant for *this* life; monitored them in

*this* life, rewarded the righteous in *this* life, punished the disobedient in *this* life. But for death to be declared a kind of sleeping, demanded the renewal of what it means to be human, and a recreation required a new beginning. This is what we see prefigured in today's feast.

12] So the bodies of the saints sleep in the Lord. That is you, my brothers and sisters in Christ. The holy ones of God in the New Israel: does that honour you too much; do you feel unworthy of that great dignity? If only we might live and think and act and speak as believing this! Yet call to mind your baptism into Christ: you were baptised into His death, as Paul tells us in Romans (Rom.6:3). As Christ himself tells Nicodemus by night in John's gospel, there is a rebirth, a new beginning (Jn.3:3).

13] Ever since we fell in Adam, death has entered our world, and because of death, alienated from the life of God, we sin. Even our very nature bears the fractures and fault lines that mark the broken relationship between mind and body, soul and flesh. This is what Paul explains to the Romans: *'I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.'* [Rom.7:21-23] So the mind, the highest faculty of the soul, knows the good, but the body has, as it were, has a mind of its own.

14] Therein lies our ascetic struggle in Christ; this is why we shall fast for two weeks from next Sunday. For whilst we are still in *this* life, though our souls stand risen with Christ, though our life be hidden with Christ in God (Col.3:3), we have still to drag around the old Adam, still be worn out by the natural laws of biology. Then it will be our turn to wait, as we do even now, the redemption of our bodies and, in the Last Judgement, be found worthy to attain to the resurrection, healed and restored in the spiritual body, of those who fall asleep in the Lord. If only we

might finally turn our mind around, if only we might acquire, fully, the mind of Christ, the Orthodox mind; see our life through His eyes: all that we mean by repentance, and thus, see our life anew. We would have attained to that wisdom that comes from above and be secure on the path that leads to eternal life.

15] Joachim and Anna are, of course, honoured as examples of parenting and guidance in the Lord, albeit their daughter, as the future God-bearer, was guarded from the temptations and fears that habitually wear down and confuse our personalities. Yet all who are parents here can learn what it is to bring up children in the Lord, and strengthen them, when the world around seeks to 'educate' them into what is false. As a prayer for the wedding couple in our Marriage Service says, *'Remember them, O Lord our God, and the parents who have nurtured them, for the prayers of parents make firm the foundations of houses.'* No wonder the intercession of Joachim and Anna are invoked at the end of liturgical blessings. May they both pray for us who seek to set our own young people on the only firm foundation, which is Christ.