

1] According to the Psalmist, the span of our life is seventy years, or perhaps eighty years if we have the strength, but they will be a burden, borne as a weariness of the flesh. The composer of Psalm 89(90) must have observed those in his own day attaining to a ripe old age. Yet in Psalm 91(92) he says of the righteous that they, 'Shall flourish like a palm tree... Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age.' [Ps.91:12-14] So perhaps, though the body of flesh will fade and be worn down by life, yet the righteous soul stands upright before God. As St Paul observes to the Corinthians, 'Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.' [2Cor.4:16-17]

2] But for most of human history very few have reached old age; it is only quite recently in the western world that we have so many people living to such a great age. The terrible scourges that carried off so many children in Britain, right up to the nineteen forties, may have largely disappeared through scientific medicine and a national health service. Yet we must now wrestle with the opposite problem, where our systems of medical and social care must provide for increasing numbers of elderly and frail people. Do you really think that those who advocate the legalisation of what they euphemistically call, euthanasia, are only concerned with the alleviation of suffering?

3] It has often been thought that people in the past invested less emotional attachment to their children, thinking that, should they die young, they would be less mournful. Well, that may be true of some cultures in history, but it was not true of God's old people, Israel, and it is possible to credit the Jewish and Christian traditions with revolutionising attitudes towards children, valuing them beyond their economic usefulness, working to support the family, or just in caring for the parents in due time.

4] We can imagine, then, the distress of Jairus and his house. This anxiety is not for an only son, one who would inherit and carry on the family name. It is for a daughter of Israel who is dying in what we would regard as childhood, although traditionally in Israel, girls attained adult responsibility at twelve years and boys at thirteen. Whatever Jairus, the ruler of the local synagogue, had heard about Jesus of Nazareth, he certainly demonstrates his faith, a belief that He has the power to heal and can prevent a tragedy.

5] There is a sense of urgency here; Christ must come quickly for time is short. Yet He stops! Suddenly Our Lord is aware that something of that power to heal has been drawn out of Him. You might form a picture in your mind of the father's frustration, Jairus' creeping feeling of panic at the unexpected delay. But all ends well! The faith of one daughter of Israel brings an end to a constant haemorrhage, and the spirit of another daughter of Israel is brought back by a father's belief in Christ.

6] It is intriguing to think of this episode in the life of Our Lord and to see it reflected in what happens at the Divine Liturgy. We have an ancient custom of writing down the names of those for whom we pray. Like Jairus pleading for his daughter, with the same faith as Jairus pleading for his daughter, the names of the living and dead are handed in before the liturgy, so that the priest preparing the bread and wine at the Proskomidia, can place a particle of bread for each name onto the diskos. Think of what happens to those particles of bread over which the names have been pronounced: They are offered up and consecrated, as the Lamb, the central portion of the prosphora is consecrated, becoming, in a mystery, the very body of Christ.

7] At the Great Entrance those 'names' are brought in the procession into the altar and placed on the Holy Table. But what happens before the procession reaches the altar? Like the women in the gospel with the issue of blood, the people stretch out their hands to touch the vestments of the clergy or the veils of the holy vessels. Or, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, 'They brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches,

that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them.' [Acts 5:15] Each one, by this action, asks the priests to carry a prayer into the altar, for offering up our prayers together in the great prayer of the Church, the Anaphora, we know that the Lord hears us, for where two or three are gathered together in His name, there He is in the midst of us. For together, as the body of Christ, we are assured that the Holy Spirit is with us even if, when alone, sinful and unrepentant, we have still to go on knocking at the door, asking and seeking the Holy Spirit from our heavenly Father (Lk.11:9-13)

8] Outside the Liturgy you may, of course, pray for whomsoever you will; we may pray for anyone. But in the Liturgy, in the names we write down for the preparation, or when we load our prayers onto the shoulder of the priests in the procession, we should only remember the Orthodox, for these are the prayers of those within the communion of the faithful, of those who rightly believe. Indeed, you might recall that, at the procession, we pray for the Queen as head of state, but not by name, as in the Great Litany at the beginning of the service.

9] So it is that, in coming to the Liturgy, each soul brings what he or she is able to bring, offering to God through the Church, up to three types of oblation. Firstly, we offer our liturgy, that is, our part, or service to the Lord through worship together, whatever our appointed office or ministry: the priests in offering up the holy sacrifice on behalf of all; the servers, ministering in the altar; the Readers in proclaiming the words of the Holy Scriptures; the chanters, in glorifying God in the hymns assigned for the day; the teachers, instructing the young ones; and, of course, there is the great body of the faithful, standing before the great mystery of the altar and affixing their amen to the great prayer. Secondly, we give of our own wealth, according to our own means. Some might say we should that we should give until it hurts. No! We should give until it feels good, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor.9:7) And finally but not least, we bring into the church our own prayers, anxieties, concerns, needs and prayers, all that concerns our life. As we say in the litanies, 'remembering the Theotokos and all the

saints, we commend ourselves and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.'

10] In the gospel story the child died and the people were weeping. But for Our Lord she is no more than sleeping and her spirit returns. So it is with those whose names we bring with us and offer up at the Liturgy. According to our faith, if we have the faith of Jairus, if we have the faith of the woman with the issue of blood, that faith will make all things well and we shall go in peace. (Lk.8:48)

11] If nothing else, we may always offer our prayer and always expect, at least, to receive a sense of peace. Then we know we have prayed well. We indeed pray offering up our whole life and the lives of others, living and departed, to the love God. But consider that word life. That was the spirit that returned to Jairus' daughter: 'And her spirit returned, and she got up at once.' That is in Hebrew, the word, nephesh, that is, the breath, the spirit that gives life; the same spirit that in the Genesis story God breathed into the clay of Adam to make him a living being, a person created in the image and likeness of God. We might say that the girl's soul had returned to her body. But we have to be careful here, as with our understanding of mind and heart that I spoke of two weeks ago, and wrote about in The Narthex. It is easy to impose another perception on the idea of the soul, other than that given to us in the Bible or in the Orthodox Christian Tradition.

12] Too often we might imagine the soul of man as something different from his flesh, his muscles, bones and sinews; a kind of immaterial ghost that departs with our last breath, to go elsewhere. Here, we are with the Greek philosopher Plato and the Greek word, psyche. The translators of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek in the third century before Christ, did indeed use the word psyche for the word nephesh; what in English is rendered as soul. But they understood it not according to the philosophers, but according to the word of God.

13] For the soul is not a ghost in the machine; it is not the cause of our life, as the ancient Greeks thought: it is the bearer of that life;

and the body is the symbol, the expression and manifestation of that life. The soul is not one 'part' of man, imprisoned in flesh for time, but is that whole person. Our shared human nature that we have from Adam, can only exist as the particular person that we are: the soul: the one who dies, as Jairus' daughter died, but is also raised up to receive again the resurrection body, of which Jairus' daughter became a sign; as did the son of the widow of Nain, and St Lazarus of the four days. So it is that we commend our departed loved ones also unto Christ in our liturgical prayer, for we believe, as the scriptures says that, the souls of the faithful are in the hands of God. (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1)