

‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon thee.’

1] On the evening of Great and Holy Friday we serve, by anticipation, the Matins of Holy Saturday; the Lamentations Service. Towards the end of the service we hear the reading from the prophet Ezekiel, concerning the valley of dry bones. It is a prophecy about the house of Israel, scattered and disjointed in exile from the promised land. But at another level it points to the rising of Christ Himself at Pascha: the first fruits of the universal resurrection.

2] Consider the parable of Our Lord that we have just heard. In the first place, in its original setting, it was addressed to Christ’s contemporaries and fellow Jews, the house of Israel that Ezekiel saw as dry and scattered bones. Jesus had been invited to eat at the house of a pharisee on the sabbath, during which He had cured a man of dropsy. One gets the impression the sick man is present on purpose, as far as the pharisees were concerned, to see if Jesus would heal on the sabbath: and, of course, He does, just as he cured the woman bound by Satan for eighteen years, as we heard last Sunday.

3] Reading the chapter in Luke, we might be forgiven for thinking that Christ had overstepped the bounds of politeness and abused the hospitality. The meal must have proceeded in an atmosphere of tension. But we can remember that Jesus has been invited disingenuously, to test his actions. In the course of making some uncomfortable and pointed remarks, which must have shocked and alarmed his hearers, Our Lord tells this parable of the great banquet.

4] The parable demands of the hearers that they consider the whole purpose of God’s relationship with his chosen people, the children of Abraham. Indeed, God’s relationship with all the Forefathers whom we commemorate on this Sunday: not just a

relationship with the Fathers but, since the incarnation of Christ, His relationship to them after the flesh.

5] The children of Israel had been redeemed from Egypt, given the holy commandments of Moses, and been brought to the promised land which they subdued. But proving often disloyal to the Lord God of Israel, they learnt to co-mingle their faith with that of the pagans in the land and fell into grave error. Even the kingdom they had established under the prophet king David and his son, Solomon the Wise, became divided. They were subject to the invasion of enemies. First, the Assyrians took the Northern kingdom of Israel, then Babylon took the land of Judah, destroying the temple, and taking the leading people of Judah into exile. Restored under Persian rule by Cyrus, they rebuilt the temple but then fell under the power of the Greeks, successors of Alexander the Great. Finally, they fell under the Roman yoke and became the province of Judea.

6] This is the theological history, the salvation-history of Israel, to whom belong, as St Paul says in his letter to the Romans, the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers [Rom.9:4-5]. But what was it all for, if it were just to end in subjugation? What was the Lord's purpose, if the holy nation was destined to come to an end in 70AD, with the second destruction of the temple and the scattering of the people once again?

7] What it was for was hidden in a mystery. Christ Himself says in St Matthew, 'Many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.' [Matt.13:17] All the faithful and great Forefathers of the old dispensation, from Adam, to Abraham, the Righteous Sarah, Isaac and Jacob; the holy prophets Elijah, Isaiah and Daniel, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joachim and Anna, the Forerunner and baptist John, and of course, the Theotokos herself: they all lived their lives in expectation of the final revelation and completion of the history of Israel, with the gathering-in of the gentiles.

8] In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes of, 'The mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.' [Col.1:26-27]

9] Moses had promised the coming of the Messiah, and the prophets had foreseen his arrival. It was nothing less than the coming of the kingdom of God. The Forerunner had been preparing the people, calling them to repentance but now, He was with them, the prophesied Immanuel of Isaiah: a name that means God-is-with-us. Paul had written of the mystery as, Christ in you, the hope of glory; and Our Lord Himself had said, 'Indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.' [Lk.17:21] And Our Lord had given a sign of the fulfilment of the coming kingdom, when he fed the five thousand: an icon on earth of the mystical supper of the lamb. (Apoc.19:9)

10] At that dinner in the pharisee's house, one of the guests had remarked, '*Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!*' [Lk.14:15] And so Christ told the parable we heard today; and so the invitation to eat that bread had come and was among them, there, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the incarnate God of Israel, the bread of life. 'Come; for all is now ready,' says the man in the parable who has prepared the feast.

11] But, as in the story, so with the pharisees, and the party of the sadducees, and those who ran the temple, and the Sahedrin, the council of the Jews under the Romans, they all *made their excuses*, to quote the parable. The pharisees could not stand Jesus' interpretation of the Law that revealed their hypocrisy. The sadducees would not accept His teaching on the Psalms and prophets, His knowledge of the existence of the holy Angels and His teaching on the resurrection. Those who controlled the temple feared the loss of their revenue with His talk of destroying the temple and building it again in three days. And the Sanhedrin needed no *Son of David* to upset the balance of power under the Romans, that they both enjoyed and profited from.

11] *'None of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.'* Thus comes the terrible judgement pronounced at the end of the parable. But what has this to do with us, the New Israel; we, who have accepted and follow Christ? We might, quite legitimately view this story at various levels, as with the holy scriptures generally. *'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,'* the blessed apostle tells Timothy [2 Tim.3:16]. At one level we can read this parable in its historical context: Christ's criticism of his contemporaries who rejected the call of the gospel when it came.

12] But as we approach the feast of the Nativity, we may address the story to ourselves. We can ask ourselves whether our feast will just revert to that social conviviality, that festival of commerce that slowly has subsumed the ancient pagan need for comfort and joy, lightening the darkness of a cold winter. Or, on the other hand, shall we be considering carefully those words we read in the letter to the Hebrews: *'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the... church of the firstborn... to God the Judge of all,'* [Heb.12:22-23] I have no need to remind you that we are all invited to a banquet, the liturgical feast of the Orthodox people of God, where the humble and the meek, the poor in spirit, are compelled by faith in the incarnation of God, to be gathered in from the highways and the hedges of this world, that the householder, Christ, may have His house filled.

13] But in another sense, even our keeping of the Nativity feast cannot be for this time alone. Let us prepare well in order to partake of the Holy Gifts in communion: through our prayers and attention to our souls where, by watchfulness and sobriety of spirit, we become, as the gospel says, like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately; through this fast which cuts us off from the distraction of that headlong indulgence, so sought after by the worldly-minded at this season. And through confession, especially where necessary, or if you have not approached the chalice for a long time through lack of zeal or repentance. *'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine upon thee.'* For by grace this

season can bear fruit in the age to come; what today's epistle calls the fruit of the Spirit in all goodness and righteousness and truth. Whether the Old Israel, or the New, this parable calls us to reflect on that invitation into the kingdom of God and to prepare ourselves. 'Come; for all is now ready.'