

The Death of the Mother of Life

In a grave they laid Thee / O my Life and my Christ / and now also the Mother of Life / a strange sight both to angels and men.

—From the Lamentations at the Bier of the Mother of God

When our first parents were cast from paradise, immediately after the Man was cursed to die, he gave a name to the Woman: Life, for she is the mother of all the living (Genesis 3.19-20). What a strange juxtaposition! As we continue to read Genesis, we see that all of Eve's children are spiritually stillborn; the first genealogies tell the story of the physical death of the children of the mother of the living. 'And he died' is repeated eight times in the genealogy of the righteous Noah (Genesis 5). Death reigned from Adam until the coming of the Living One, Jesus Christ (Romans 5.17).

The Lamentations we sing tonight at the bier of the Mother of God open with this paradox. The Mother of Life (that is Jesus Christ, our God) has died and was laid in a grave. How can this be? Together we and the angels are confounded. These Lamentations mirror the ones we sing during Orthros of Great and Holy Saturday, where we stand at the bier of our God. They reveal a mystery to us; Christ entered into death in order to defeat it.

This mystery reveals that the Theotokos is the New Eve, for she gave birth to the only Living One. The Virgin Mother is mystically the Church. She heard the Word of God and kept it (Luke 11.27-28), enabling the creation of humanity with her 'Let it be' at the Annunciation (Luke 1.38). For while the rest of creation was created with 'Let there be...', for humanity God proclaimed 'Let us make man in our image' (Genesis 1.26-27). In each age, God persevered a remnant of righteous people, so that Christ would be born of the Virgin Mary, the apex and culmination of this righteous line. Christ lived a fully righteous life—he was fully alive—and, on the afternoon of the sixth day of the week, he created humanity upon the Cross proclaiming with his dying words, 'It is finished' (John 19.30). Creation and Redemption were accomplished in this act. Death has lost its sting in the Death and Resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15). We who are united to Christ through baptism do not fear Death as we did before we knew Christ. Death's power has been broken; along with its instruments, the passions—those 'death-dealing carnal desires'. As we live in light of our baptism, that is, in daily dying to our old self, we discover our death now is a transition to Paschal joy. The life of the age to come begins in this life.

The Virgin Mary most fully embraced this Life, for she kept the Word of God and carried Christ in her womb. Having completed her earthly life, she peacefully yields her soul to her Son, who comes to take her into Paradise. And Christ first comes to take her soul but also her body after three days, so they are reunited and she is refashioned. By her deathless death, she illustrates Death no longer has hold on those who call her the Mother of God and by faith embrace her Son. She prefigures all who live faithfully and die in Christ, for at our deaths we shall be received by the King, and at the last day our bodies shall be raised to be forever joined with Christ in his Kingdom alongside all the righteous. At this great mystery, let us join our voices with countless Christians throughout the ages, for 'every generation to [her] grave comes bringing its dirge of praises.'

For God made man in the image of God, and the image of God is the Son, according to whose image man was made; and for this reason, he appeared in the last times to render the image like himself.

—St Irenaeus, On the Apostolic Preaching 22

In that thou didst bear the Giver of Life, O Virgin, Thou didst redeem Adam from sin and didst give to Eve joy in place of sadness; and he who was incarnate of Thee, both God and man, hath restored to life those who had fallen therefrom.

—From the Orthros Benedictions (Evlogetaria)