

Orthodox View of Death

Our society is one that ignores and covers-over death, but the Orthodox Church has always approached it with the eternal perspective of God's love in Christ. We celebrate the death of a believer with sorrow because of the separation from the beloved; in thanksgiving because we were blessed by knowing the departed; in joy because we know that Christ has "trampled down death by death;" and finally in sobriety, knowing that our end is coming.

To clear up a few contemporary concerns, I would like to mention that we pray for the departed out of love for them, knowing that the mysterious journey of death does not separate those who are united in Christ. Likewise, we reject cremation because it disrespects the body, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) and we do not merely offer "celebration of life parties" because we know that prayer is effective because of God's love for us. Funerals are both prayers for the deceased and closure and instruction for the bereaved.

The Funeral Service, perhaps, is the best way to learn about death; therefore, I will highlight and explain a few key elements of this most beautiful offering to God.

Bosom of Abraham – we pray that God would give the newly departed rest "in the bosom of Abraham" because this a very strong Old Testament image of a blessed repose that Christ used in his parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. (Luke 16)

The Psalms – are prayed with the sick person at the death bed and over the body of the deceased because they are the "prayer book of the Church" as well as lifting up to God every human emotion. The particular funeral Psalms are 50, 90, and 118. These are instructive for God's care for us and the necessity of returning to God and keeping his commandments.

Gospel Reading – John 5:24-30 – Christ tells us plainly that he who "believes in Him who sent me has eternal life" and "passes from death to life;" later in the passage he says "those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." We hold these two seemingly paradoxical statements together by quoting St. James: "faith without works is dead" (2:20) – if we are to share the very life of Christ in heaven, we must share it with a living faith here on earth.

Epistle Reading – 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17 – St. Paul tells us not to mourn "as those who have no hope," since "Jesus died and rose again" and will come back to gather us to be always with the Lord.

The Beatitudes – This passage of Matthew 5 reminds the living of how to live in Christ.

The Prayer of Absolution – This prayer asks God to forgive all of the sins of the departed, as Christ gave the apostles the authority to bind and loose sins (John 20:23).

Boiled Wheat – As Moses was instructed to make offerings in Leviticus 2, we offer boiled wheat sweetened and prepared with various fruits and spices (Kollyva is the Greek word) to celebrate and remember our Lord's words, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." (John 12:24) Some may offer bread, fruit, wine, or oil along with the Kollyva.

Memory Eternal – We sing this most beautiful prayer that our beloved departed would be kept in God's mind continually and therefore have eternal life.