

## CELEBRATING DEATH – THE STING REMOVED

By Fr. Michael Harper

Late last month the Antiochian Deanery in Britain lost its first Priest, when Father John Nield passed away after a long illness. Within a few days we were remembering the centenary of the death of Queen Victoria, and much was written and said about the Victorian age. One commentator said that the Victorians learned to ‘celebrate death’. If that is true, then it is a lesson we could well re-discover in the new millennium.

In October a train travelling from London to Leeds was de-railed near Hatfield. Sadly four people were killed. Politicians joined others in throwing their brickbats, and the word ‘unacceptable’ was used ad nauseam by all and sundry. For several months the railways suffered almost rigor mortis. Fear of another accident spread through the system, and trains were reduced to crawling from station to station. It was an extraordinary response.

Of course, there was some substance in the fact that the rail track had deteriorated and needed a great deal of repairing. But at the back of the whole experience was the unacceptability of accidents or the taking of risks, in case of death.

In the same period we have read a lot about the newly discovered dangers of flying. I don’t mean the weather, human error or metal fatigue. I mean so called DVT, or deep vein thrombosis. We learned of all the people being taken off planes at Heathrow and dying quickly of a blood clot to the brain. Having myself travelled a great deal over the years, with some flights lasting over 24 hours, I wonder from what have I been spared! A cartoon appeared in the Evening Standard at the time of a rear gunner in a Lancaster bomber flying over Germany during World War 2. Lines of German fighters are queuing up to shoot at it, and tracer bullets streak across the night sky. He speaks to a colleague gunner: ‘of course what really scares me is DVT’.

Which leads me on to the Kosovo conflict. One was amazed to read of the fear the Americans had of casualties. It was reliably reported that the American public would only accept five or six body bags. Their Air Force would have to be withdrawn if there were more. Last year we remembered the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain. No fighter pilot went into action in the summer of 1940 without being very clear that death was a likely possibility.

So in travelling by train or by air, and fighting in a war, death is unacceptable.

What a contrast with the message of Christ, the apostles and the example of the martyrs! In the Divine Liturgy there is a moment when the Priest draws the curtain, opens the royal doors and sings the initial blessing. It is this moment that the philosopher, Prince Evgeny Trubetskoy remembered as he lay dying. Just as he died he cried out: ‘The royal doors are opening! The Great Liturgy is about to begin’. ..That is a true celebration of

death! Bishop Kallistos in his article about death ('Go joyfully') quotes from the British composer of the last century Ralph Vaughan Williams. When asked 'what does the future life mean to you?' he replied: 'Music. But in the next world I shan't be doing music..I shall be being it.' The Bishop adds the words of T.S.Eliot, 'you are the music while the music lasts' and concludes 'in heaven the music lasts for ever.'

Another well known 20<sup>th</sup> century artist, who, like the composer, had his roots in Victorian Britain, the writer Rudyard Kipling, wrote a poem about death which includes these lines:

'And only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame; and no one will work for money, and no one shall work for fame.'

There he hits on our modern problem – money and fame. Maybe one of the major reasons why death is not mentioned, let alone celebrated in our modern western world, is that so many seem to live for money and fame – and you can't take any of that with you.

St Maximos the Confessor put it well when he wrote, 'for every humble person is gentle, and every gentle person is invariably humble. A person is humble when he knows that his very being is on loan to him'. There it is in a nutshell. It is true that life is a gift of God, but it is also his loan to us. We should never think of it as a permanent state.

Certainly St.Paul didn't. He describes vividly in his epistles the risks he took in proclaiming the Gospel. He knew that the loan of his life might be claimed by God at any moment. He does write of death as an enemy (1 Corinthians 15 vs55-57). It was not God's original plan for mankind. He quotes the questions of the prophet Hosea about death- 'where is your victory...where is your sting?' Hosea has no answers but St. Paul did – 'the sting of death is sin' he explains, 'and the power of sin is the law.' Then comes the words which have reverberated at thousands of funerals, 'Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!'