

Between worlds, at a traditional Greek-Orthodox funeral service.

When you go into a Greek church, you find inside the entrance deep trays of sand where candles burn, placed there by worshippers before they enter the main body of the church. By the time close relatives arrive for the funeral service, the trays are full of candles and many a worshipper has placed a wad of bills into the poor-box. Although the church is packed, Rectors ensure that a passageway is free for the immediate relatives to pass through into their reserved areas; before them, is a wide and deep stage, the area in which the Reverend Father and his assistants perform their hallowed work.

Along the back wall are numerous depictions of the heavenly hosts in rich gold and red; all the disciples, saints, and spiritual warriors of the church, at the point of intersection between our world and the next.

The coffin will be covered in a red velvet sheet with perhaps a huge arrangement of multicoloured roses. At the back of the stage are three doors, the largest in the middle. When open you will see the giant marble altar with a fresco behind it representing the figure of God. He is on a cloud looking down upon us all with a mixture of pity, and what I interpret as frustration.

I usually feel discomfort as I gaze upwards at the figure of God and wonder if He has had enough of our human imperfection and is weighing up alternatives in His divine mind.

Inside the church is an ethereal microcosm where the material world is held at bay. In this demilitarised zone between worlds fundamentally in conflict - the spiritual and the mundane - death is a transition to another world, and we are at the service merely to witness the rites of passage.

A cantor in a high pulpit and lectern on the right of the church chants in a deep bass voice. Centuries-old chants which celebrate the cycle of life and death, that curious detour in reality which returns us all to the divine presence. Even agnostics and atheists can find the whole process strangely moving.

From behind the frame of the central arch the Father makes his appearance murmuring incantations and swinging an incense-filled brazier on a long chain. In his white and gold gown and high hat, he is an orthodox version of the tribal shaman flinging the smoky incense to all points on the platform around the coffin, driving away demons and confirming the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then he stands over the coffin and begins the formal ritual song-prayers for the soul of the dead. The cantor's chanting now accommodates itself to the incantations of the Father. According to the church, we are all conceived in sin and our lives become further tainted by any morally dubious actions we engage in while we live. Perhaps the notion of sin is just a metaphor for human imperfection, in which case we are full of it.

In the church, at the moment of a funeral service, the history of a great ongoing war is being told. It is not all failure at the human level or unending trench warfare on the cosmic battlefield. There have been many heroes such as the Son of God, Jesus of the Divine Essence; Saints and other worthy individuals, all fighting on the same side, our side, our cause. Some of them were genuine warriors who knew how to swing a sword or fire a missile in the name of God. There were victories. The signs, we are told, are good.

It's a tale we tell ourselves in words we can understand, making the abstract into solid flesh.

The prayers reach heavenward through roof and skylight. There is golden light and incense haze. As the service comes to a close I note that the array of holy warriors gazing down upon us now have a more militant look.