

Sergei Bulgakov, 1938

An Easter sermon:

All the twelve great Feasts make known to us the Kingdom of God in the works of God within events of this world. But Easter is not the commemoration of such an event; it is directed rather to the age to come. Easter is the forecourt on earth on the manifestation of glory for which Christ prayed to the Father in His high-priestly prayer, the forecourt of the heavenly Jerusalem which at the end of time will come down from heaven to earth, according to the vision of the prophet: "Rise, shine, O thou new Jerusalem, for the glory of the Lord has shone upon you." Easter is indeed eternal life, the knowledge of God and communion with God. It is the truth, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit.

The life of the age to come is not a simple negation of this age, not its annihilation, but the making eternal of everything in it worthy of such a transformation, just as eternity is not the forgetting or abolition of time, but the establishing of its unchanging course.

(Bulgakov was a prominent Russian philosopher and theologian. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he was forced to leave Russia. He eventually emigrated to France and taught at a theological institute in Paris.)

But I have been asked about the possibilities of the *church* in a totalitarian state—and we could immediately add, in a totalitarian society, in a totalitarian world. I would like to say one thing above all: one should not speak of possibilities in the plural. For the church in a totalitarian world and in a totalitarian state there is only *one* possibility—one alone, but it is a genuine possibility. And I would now like to describe it simply with the word in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel: "And Jesus looked around him at those who were around him" (Mk. 3:34). The Latin text of the New Testament puts it in a remarkable way: "circumspiciens ad eos, qui erant in circuitu." I believe that this word "circuitus" is actually the original word for "church." The church—is those who are around Jesus and whom he looks at around him. And that the church be this "circuitus," and so simply be *church* in the totalitarian world—that is its "possibility."

And now I could continue with another word of the Bible from the beginning of the Book of Jeremiah, where it says: "I have made you a fortified wall" (Jer. 1:18, 15:20). Did you notice? It's not that *others* have built a wall, and we now stand before the wall and make lament. Rather, the church *itself* is the wall that *God* has built. And that is its "possibility," namely, that it itself be the wall (and a completely different one from the Berlin Wall) and maintain itself as such. That the church [is that and] does that will simply consist in the church being the "circle" [around Jesus, and so the flock] of those who in a totalitarian world and also a totalitarian state simply nourish themselves from the Word of God and take joy in their faith in the Word of God and live in this faith. And the more totalitarian the world behaves, and the more it comes forward with its own claim to divinity, all the more joyful and all the freer they are permitted to believe and be obedient, because Jesus is there and the church is around Jesus. It is the circle around him, and he is the middle—that is its "possibility." When it does that, [namely, flocks around him], then its existence is possible (the word *möglich* ["possible"] actually is derived from the word *Macht* ["power"], and then the church is [strong], no matter how powerless and even when it is oppressed and forbidden and when its children are taken away from it and when it is no longer permitted to print church newsletters and when the bookstores are subject to shenanigans and whatever else! [But when it is that "circle" around him, then] the church is the safe place for freedom. And freedom means full of power. In that case [?] the church is powerful and perhaps the only powerful thing in a world that is powerless insofar as it has been overwhelmed and is ruled by the powers . . . [?] The

church has the wonderful possibility over and against the totalitarian state and the totalitarian world to act peaceably and joyfully—and not always with a clenched fist—for the long haul. The church is also able to wait. And it knows that it does not wait in vain. The church knows that all the totalitarianisms of the world and society and also the state are actually false gods and therefore lies. In the end you don't have to be afraid of lies. "Lies don't have any legs to stand on." And in the church one can know that. Whenever the church takes these lies seriously, then it has lost. It must with all calmness and in all peace treat them as lies. And the more that the church lives in humility and knows that "we too are only human, and there are also many lies in us," then it will also know all the more surely that "God sits in governance" over and against the lies that are in us and over and against the lies in the world and in the state and wherever else they may be. And in that case the church, regardless of the circumstances and no matter how pressed and difficult the situation, remains at its task and knows itself to be forbidden to fear for its future. Its future in the Lord. *He*, not the totalitarian state, is coming to the church.

But, of course, the church must *believe* that. The church must be in its place. The church must get serious about what it proclaims. If everything that the church has gotten out of the Bible for centuries [was] only a bunch of rubbish—things like, "What can we humans do?" (Ps. 56:12; 118:6), and "All things work for the best for those whom God loves" (Rom. 8:28), and all the rest—if all of that was just empty chatter, then everything collapses when the totalitarianisms come. And it is better for it to collapse. It was nothing but a house of cards anyway. But does it really have to collapse? For we can remain calm and say with confidence: we know of something better; we look beyond this totalitarianism business to the first glow of the dawn (cp. Hos. 6:3) and to the coming of the bright "son of righteousness" (Mal. 3:20). That is what we care about. And in the meantime, it is our task to give witness to it to the people around us—whether with words or without—simply through our existence as a Christian fellowship. It will never be easy. . . . Do we really *believe* what we confess—whether from Luther or from Calvin, whether Catholic or Protestant [evangelisch], do we *believe* it? Further, do we believe it with heart and deed? That is the question that stands before us wherever we are. And wherever we are, it is difficult to say "yes" to this question. But at the same time wherever we are, it is as easy as it is for a child to play. . . . Perhaps the church only learns to *live* when it comes under a little pressure. We will not wish to come under pressure. But perhaps life is so ordered that only when things get serious do we also get serious about our faith and serious about the existence of the church.