

On the Services of Passion Week

As we approach the great solemn days of Holy Week, we bring to mind how our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed and seized, tortured and crucified, died and was buried, and arose from the dead. The services of Holy Week, beginning with Lazarus Saturday, show us in symbols, readings and chants the account of our Savior's love and sacrifice 'unto death, even the death of the cross' for our sake (Phil. 2:8).

On Palm Sunday we shall stand with branches in our hands and listen to the 'Hosannas,' like the multitudes in Jerusalem, welcoming 'Him Who cometh in the Name of the Lord,' and, like the children, waving palms and shouting for joy. In the Gospels of the first three days of Passion Week we shall hear Christ's final teachings to his disciples and the people; His stern rebukes to the proud, self-righteous Pharisees and scribes; His prophecy of His resurrection and second coming. In the house of Simon the Leper, where Jesus was having a meal, we shall see the sinful woman enter to anoint His head and feet in love and repentance, and we shall contrast her to Judas, the disciple whose greed incited him to betray his Master for a paltry sum of money. Then we shall follow Jesus to the 'upper chamber' where He and his disciples partook of his Mystical Supper, that is, the first celebration of the Eucharist of his Most Holy Body and Blood, and then to the Garden of Gethsemane. There our Lord and God Jesus Christ prayed in agony.

Concerning our Savior's prayer before his Passion, Saint John Chrysostom says:

By saying, 'If it be possible, let it pass from me,' He showed His humanity; but by saying, 'Nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt,' He showed His virtue and self-command, teaching us even when nature pulls us back to follow God. (Homily 83 on the Gospel of Matthew)

Together with Christ's grieving Mother and John, the disciple He loved best, and with the other women, we shall stand watch by His Cross. We shall follow as His body is carried to the grave in the garden, and there leave his Body to rest till the Resurrection's glorious morning.

This is why through all Passion Week's mournful services there runs the strain of bright hope of forgiveness, of triumph over sin and death, and of our Savior's victory over Satan, Hades, and mortal corruption.

LAZARUS SATURDAY

On this Saturday we remember how our Lord Jesus Christ raised His friend Lazarus from the dead. He knew Lazarus was grievously ill, but He waited till he died before He answered Martha and Mary's call for Him. Jesus knew that His own death on the Cross was near. He knew how terrified and bewildered His disciples would be, how they might doubt that He was indeed the Christ. Only after four days did He bring Lazarus back to life, so that His disciples would see that He had power over life and death and was indeed 'the Resurrection and the Life.' It was this miracle that prepared Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem and gave us the certain assurance of the physical resurrection of all the dead.

ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM PALM SUNDAY

This day celebrates Christ's triumphal entry into the holy city of Jerusalem. When the people heard of His coming, great crowds rushed to the city gates to meet Him. They spread their cloaks on the road and strewed palm leaves in His path. Children waved green boughs and all sang, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!' At Palm Sunday Matins, after the Gospel lection about the entry into Jerusalem, the priest blesses palm leaves or other appropriate branches, which the people hold during the canon. Palm Sunday is one of the twelve great feasts of the Church.

GREAT AND HOLY MONDAY

The week of our Savior's Passion begins with Holy and Great Monday. The first three days of Holy Week recall Christ's last teachings with His disciples. These teachings inspire the readings and hymns. The services consist of Great Compline, Matins, Hours, and the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts with Vespers. Gospels are read at Matins and Liturgy. In addition, the whole Psalter is read in the services of the first three days of Holy Week; also, the four Gospels are read. The Psalms remind us how the coming and sufferings of Christ were awaited and foretold in the Old Testament. The Gospels tell of His life in the world; His teaching and miracles prove that He was indeed the Son of God, who of His own free will suffered for our sake though He was without guilt.

At Matins after the great litany we do not hear the usual joyous verses, 'God is the Lord, and hath appeared unto us.' Instead, a compunctionate 'Alleluia' is chanted. And to inspire us to watch and pray in these solemn days, this troparion is chanted:

Behold, the Bridegroom cometh in the middle of the night, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching; and again unworthy is he whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, lest thou be overcome with sleep, lest thou be given up to death, and be shut out from the Kingdom. But rouse thyself and cry: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God, through the Mother of God, have mercy on us.

After the canon, which speaks of Christ's coming Passion, another special hymn an Exapostilarion — is chanted. It is like a cry of our soul as if it saw from afar Christ's radiant mansions and felt how unworthy it was to enter them:

Thy bridal chamber, O my Saviour, do I behold all adorned, and a garment I have not that I may enter therein. Illumine the garment of my soul, O Giver of Light, and save me.

On Holy and Great Monday the Church tells us the parable of the barren fig tree. It is the symbol of those who think only of outward goodness which does not come from the heart. The Gospel also tells about Christ's prophecies about the fall of Jerusalem, wars and tribulations, and the end of the world.

GREAT AND HOLY TUESDAY

On Holy and Great Tuesday we listen to our Savior's replies to the wily questions of the Pharisees and scribes, who tried to trap Him; we hear His stern rebukes of their envy and deceit. The parables of the Ten Virgins and of the Talents remind us how we should always keep watch over our conscience and use in God's service any gift or talent we have received from Him. The Gospel then tells Christ's prophecy of His second coming and the Last Judgment. It ends with the awful warning: 'Ye know that after two days is the feast of the Passover, and the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified.'

GREAT AND HOLY WEDNESDAY

On Great Wednesday the Church commemorates the act of contrition and love of the sinful woman who poured precious myrrh-oil on our Savior's head, and, though she did not know it, 'prepared Him for burial.' And in contrast we hear of the dark act of Judas, whose greed led him to betray his Master. All the readings and hymns of the day warn us to beware of greed and love of money, which even tempted a disciple of Christ. We too can betray Him, if we let greed and selfishness get hold of us, while every deed of humility and love at once

On Holy Wednesday night the Orthodox Church administers the sacrament of Holy Unction for the bodily and spiritual health of the participants. At this sacrament, the oil is consecrated by prayer and the clergy anoint the people.

GREAT AND HOLY THURSDAY

The Gospels of Holy and Great Thursday tell how our Savior and His disciples came to Jerusalem to celebrate His last feast of the Passover, how He washed their feet. They tell the account of that Mystical Supper when our Lord ordained the Mystery of His Most Holy Body and Blood 'for the remission of sins and life everlasting.' They speak of Christ's instruction to the Apostles, and how He told them that they would all forsake Him that night; they speak of Peter's rash promise that he would always remain faithful; of Christ's vigil in the garden; of how He was seized and led away to the high priest's court; of the scene in the courtyard; of Peter's three-fold denial and his grief; of the high priest's mocking questions; and of how our Savior Christ God, wearing the crown of thorns, beaten and insulted by the soldiers, was led before Pilate.

The readings and hymns of Matins dwell on Judas' betrayal, on 'the dark night' which settled in his soul. We pray that we may keep ourselves from greed and deceit, and be made pure by partaking of the holy Mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood. The Troparion after the 'Alleluia' at Matins speaks of this:

When the glorious disciples were enlightened at the washing of the feet, then Judas the ungodly one was stricken and darkened with the love of silver. And unto the lawless judges did he deliver Thee, the righteous Judge. O thou lover of money, behold thou him that for the sake thereof did hang himself, flee from that insatiable soul that dared such things against the Master. O Thou Who art good unto all, Lord, glory be to Thee.

On this day the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great is celebrated together with Vespers.

The whole narration of our Lord's Passion is given at the Matins of Holy and Great Thursday. It is commonly called 'the Service of the Twelve Gospels.' A tall Crucifix usually stands in the middle of the church with many candles lighted round it. After the Six Psalms and the Great Litany, the choir chants, 'Alleluia' and the Troparion of Holy and Great Thursday. The priest and deacon come out of the sanctuary carrying the Book of Gospels. It is placed on a podium and the priest begins the reading. The whole story of the Passion is read from the four evangelists and is divided into twelve parts. It begins with the 'Gospel of the Testament' and the prayer at the Mystical Supper, in Saint John's Gospel, and continues through the four Gospels to the burial of Christ by Joseph of Arimathea. After each reading the choir chants, 'Glory to Thy forbearance, O Lord, glory to Thee.' Between the readings special antiphons and hymns are chanted. They speak of Judas' betrayal; of the cruelty of the Jews; of our Savior's infinite patience and meekness; of the awe of all creation when the Lord of all was nailed to the Cross between two thieves. The canon has only three odes. All recount the Passion and foretell the glory of the Resurrection. Matins ends shortly after the twelfth Gospel.

HOLY AND GREAT FRIDAY

Great Friday is the most solemn day of Holy Week. In awe and trembling, we stand before the Cross on which our Savior died and we see the image of Him dead, lying in our midst, on the Epitaphios (the Winding Sheet).

During the Service of Matins, which by anticipation is chanted on Thursday evening, we will hear some of the most awe-inspiring hymns of the ecclesiastical year. The following is but a one example:

Today there is hung upon the Tree, He that suspended the earth upon the waters. A crown of thorns is placed upon Him Who is the King of the Angels. With false purple is He wrapped about, He that wrappeth the Heavens with clouds. Buffetings did He receive, Who freed Adam in the Jordan. With nails was He affixed, He that is the Bridegroom of the Church. With a lance was He pierced, He that is the Son of the Virgin. We venerate Thy Passion, O Christ. Show also unto us Thy glorious Resurrection.

The solemn Vespers of Great Friday is celebrated in the afternoon at the time of our Lord Jesus' death. Again all the readings remind us of the suffering Christ and His glory. After the entrance, lessons are read in which the Prophet Isaiah speaks of 'the Lamb led to the slaughter,' and an Epistle of Saint Paul on the power and wisdom of the Cross; again a Gospel is read describing our Lord's trial before Pilate, His Crucifixion and burial.

After the usual petitions, 'Let us all say ...,' 'Vouchsafe ...,' 'Let us complete ...,' etc., the choir slowly chants the Aposticha, during which the procession exits from the Sanctuary, with the priest and deacon bearing the Shroud of Christ, their heads uncovered, preceded by candles and censer. All kneel with head bowed low before the image of our dead Savior. A bier stands in the middle of the church, with candles lit round it. On it the Shroud is laid reverently and censed all round by the priest.

Then, after the Lord's Prayer, the dismissal hymns are chanted: 'The noble Joseph ...' and 'Unto the myrrh-bearing women ...' followed by the prayers of dismissal.

HOLY AND GREAT SATURDAY

Holy and Great Saturday is a reverent vigil at the tomb of the Son of God, slain for our sins. By anticipation, the Saturday Matins is held on Friday evening.

After the Six Psalms and the Great Litany, the Royal Doors are opened clergy come out with candles and censer. The choir sings 'The Lord is God and hath appeared unto us,' and then the appointed troparia:

In the meantime, the priest and deacon cense the Shroud, then stand in front of it. The priest and the choir then chant the 'Lamentations' with the verses of the 118th Psalm: 'Blessed are the blameless in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.' Each verse of the Psalm is followed by a verse of the Lamentations. It is like a long poem depicting the Angels in Heaven and all creatures on earth overwhelmed by the death of their Creator, and their gratitude at being freed from death's power by Christ.

After the Lamentations, the Resurrection hymns are sung. Then, following the customary litanies, the choir chants the canon, where the note of joy and triumph is heard more and more clearly. At the end of the Great Doxology of Matins, the priest raises the Shroud, which is then taken by four pall-bearers, the deacon walks in front, the people follow, all carrying candles, accompanied by the choir chanting, 'Holy God, Holy and Strong, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us.' This represents the burial of Christ. Then, the prokeimenon is chanted, and the glorious prophecy of Ezekiel is read about the dry bones of Israel, out of which arose 'an exceeding great host' quickened to life by the breath of God. Then follows Saint Paul's Epistle about Christ our Passover, and the Gospel about the sealing of Jesus' tomb. Matins then ends as usual.

The Liturgy of Holy and Great Saturday is that of Saint Basil the Great. It begins with Vespers. After the entrance, the evening hymn 'O Gentle Light' is chanted as usual. Then the Old Testament readings are recited. They tell of the most striking events and prophecies of the salvation of mankind by the death of the Son of God. The account of creation in Genesis is the first reading. The sixth reading is the story of Israel's crossing of the Red Sea and Moses' song of victory - over Pharaoh, with its refrain: 'For gloriously is He glorified'. The last reading is about the Three Children in the fiery furnace of Babylon, and their song of praise with its repeated refrain: 'O praise ye the Lord and supremely exalt Him unto the ages.' In the ancient church the catechumens were baptized during the time of these readings. The Epistle which follows speaks of how, through the death of Christ, we too shall rise to a new life. After the Epistle, the choir chants, like a call to the sleeping Christ: 'Arise, O Lord, Judge the earth, for Thou shalt have an inheritance among all the nations... The deacon carries out the Book of the Gospels, and reads the first message of the resurrection from Saint Matthew. Because the Vespers portion of the service belongs to the next day (Pascha) the burial hymns of Saturday are mingled with those of the resurrection, so that this service is already full of the coming Paschal joy.

After the Gospel the Liturgy proceeds as usual. Instead of the Cherubic Hymn, a special Great Entrance Hymn is chanted:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence and stand with fear and trembling, and take no thought for any earthly thing, for the King of kings and Lord of lords cometh to be slain and given as food for the faithful. Before Him go the choirs of the angels with all sovereignty and power: the many-eyed Cherubim and six-winged Seraphim, covering their faces and crying out the hymn: Alleluia, Alleluia, .Alleluia.

After the Liturgy the faithful take their meal, observing the strict fast, to strengthen them to keep watch the rest of the day and evening. This is the only Saturday of the year on which a strict fast is kept. In the monasteries and convents, the refectory meal is taken in complete silence, out of reverence for the burial of Christ. The world awaits the proclamation of His Resurrection.

SYNAXARION OF THE GREAT FEAST OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

On the Great and Holy Sunday of Pascha, we celebrate the Life-giving Resurrection of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ: Pascha, which, translated from the Hebrew, means Passover.

For this is the day on which God created the world from nothingness. On this day, He delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh's hands and led them through the Red Sea. On this day, he descended from heaven and took His dwelling in the Virgin's womb; now drawing forth mankind held in Hades, He raised them to heaven and brought them to the first-created honour of incorruption. ...While the soldiers guarded the tomb, at midnight the earth quaked, for the angel of the Lord had descended and rolled the stone from the entrance of the tomb, and the soldiers [set to guard the tomb] were so frightened that they fled. The women came to the tomb very early in the morning on the day following the Sabbath — that is to say at midnight on Saturday. Therefore, late on the first day of the Resurrection, the Mother of God was there together with St Mary Magdalene, who was sitting near the tomb according to St Matthew. The Evangelists say that He first appeared to St Mary Magdalene [rather than His Mother]...so that there would be no doubts or suspicions concerning the truth of the Resurrection.

It was St Mary Magdalene who saw the angel upon the stone; then bowing down, she saw the other angels inside. The angels announced the Lord's Resurrection to her and said, 'He is risen! He is not here! Behold the place where they laid Him' (Mark 16:6). Hearing this, the women turned to run and announce the Resurrection to the most fervent of the Apostles, that is, to St Peter and St John. But when they returned, they met Christ Himself, Who said to them, 'Rejoice' (Matthew 28:9).

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