

The Confessor's Tongue for July 29, A. D. 2018

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost: Martyr Callinicus

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

The All-Night Vigil: Kathisma, Lord I Have Cried, Dogmaticon, Gladsome Light

After the Great Litany, comes the first kathisma from the Psalter, Psalms 1-8. The Psalter is divided into twenty parts called kathismata. The name comes from the Greek verb "to sit," and one may sit during the reading of the kathisma Psalms. (Note that the word Akathist comes from the same Greek root, but means "without sitting.")

Usually one kathisma is read at each daily Vespers except on Sunday evening, and two kathismata are read at each Matins service. Thus is the whole Psalter prescribed to be read in the Church each week.

Normally, the kathisma is chanted by the reader, but on festive occasions, such as the Resurrectional Vigil each Saturday evening, the vesperal kathisma is sung. Though the full first kathisma is appointed, typically only selected verses are sung, commonly known as "Blessed is the man".

From the beginning, the Psalter has been the Church's principal hymnal. It was so important, that a canon was established specifying that no one who did not know the whole Psalter by heart could be appointed bishop. Though it is not enforced today, the canon underlines the centrality of the Psalter to the worship of the early Church. Many hymns have been composed since then to supplement the Psalms, but the Psalter remains the foundation for both the prayer and worship of the Church.

The characteristic opening words of the first kathisma, "Blessed is the man, that walketh not in the counsel of the impious..." refer preeminently to Christ, the Godman, who is the exemplar for us of what it is to be a human being made in God's image.

When the kathisma, whether chanted or sung, is concluded, it is followed by a Little Litany. The Little Litany occurs frequently in the services of the Church. It comprises the first and last petitions of the Great Litany. Some may find its frequency repetitious or redundant, but, in fact, it is not so. Man is called to pray "without ceasing," and so the services of the Church train him to pray "again and again." Moreover, in Church man often struggles to give his full attention to God, to worship, and to prayer. He may come into the service from the world with a cold heart; it takes him time to thaw out and warm up. The recurrence of the Little Litany serves to call the faithful back to prayer and to give each one present another opportunity to enter into the prayer of the Church if he missed it the first time. Even, and especially, in Church, we need God to "help us, save us, have mercy on us, and keep us" by His grace. Offering fitting prayer and worship to God is beyond us in our own strength, and we need His help to pray as we should and to be saved from the multitude of distracting thoughts that crowd our minds in church.

Following the Little Litany and its exclamation, the vesperal Psalms (140, 141, 130, 117) are sung, which are best known by the opening line, "Lord, I have cried unto Thee, hear me!" Here, the second great theme of Vespers is announced. The Vigil began with the theme of creation and its glory, which was emphasized by the open Royal Doors, the lights, and the Priest wearing his phelonion. Now the service turns to the theme of repentance. The lighting has been decreased since the opening Psalm, the Royal Doors have been closed, and the Priest has removed his phelonion further to depict for us the darkness of our fallen state in the fallen world. And in our fallen state, our only hope is cry out to the Lord.

The first two verses of the set of Psalms are sung in the appointed tone, then the reader takes over, chanting the rest. (Sometimes, however, the verses between the first two and the last verse before hymns are inserted are omitted in the interest of time.) Towards the end, stichera, or composed verses from the Octoechos, Menaion, Triodion or Pentecostarion are inserted between verses of Psalms and sung. These stichera express the meaning of that particular day in the Church calendar. The greater the feast, the more stichera are sung. The tone of the first stichera sung determines the tone in which the first verses of "Lord I have cried" are sung. At the Resurrectional Vigil, ten stichera are sung. Usually seven are from the Octoechos (the book of the 8 tones) on the theme of the resurrection, and the remaining three are from the Menaion (the book containing all the daily services for the saints) for the saint of the day.

As the opening Psalm verses are sung, the Deacon (or Priest if he serves alone) takes the censer and performs a great censuring of the temple. The meaning of this censuring is expressed by the words "Let my prayer arise as incense before Thee." The true prayers of believers are likened to incense in God's nostrils (Revelation 8:3-4). In our darkened state, we cry out to God, and He hears us, and our prayers are pleasing to Him. Father Alexander Schmemmann expresses the contrast between the opening theme of Creation and the second theme of Repentance at the Vigil:

'Because we have first seen the beauty of the world, we can now see the ugliness, realize what we have lost, understand how our whole life (and not only some trespasses) has become sin, and can repent for it. The lights are now extinguished. The Royal Doors are closed. The celebrant has put off his vestments. It is the naked and suffering man outside of Paradise, who, in full awareness of his exile, of his betrayal, of his darkness, says to God: "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord." In the face of the glory of creation, there must be a tremendous sadness. God has give us another day; and we can just see how we have destroyed this gift of His.'

At the "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit" of Lord, I have cried, the priest,

having already vested himself in the phelonian, prepares for the entrance. The Royal Doors are opened as the lights are turned up. (Traditionally, the people offered unlit candles at the start of the service which were then lit by a candlelighter in preparation for the entrance and “Gladsome Light.”) At “Now and ever...” the clergy and servers make the entrance. The Deacon carries the censer “on high” (upraised), the servers bear candles, and the Priest follows, quietly [‘mystically’] praying the prayer of the entrance. The Deacon censers, and the Priest blesses the entrance and then they stand in their places waiting for the conclusion of the singing of the last sticheron.

The last hymn sung at “Lord, I have cried” is a special Theotokion (a hymn in honor of the Theotokos) called the Dogmaticon. The Dogmaticon expresses the Dogma of the Word of God’s incarnation through the Theotokos, which is the heart of the Christian faith. The “theandric principle,” that Christ is both God (Theos) and man (anthropos)— defined at the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon in 451—is now expressed and proclaimed in a hymn. Each of the eight tones has its own Dogmaticon to hymn majestically the Mystery of the Incarnation of Christ and the role of the Ever-Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, or Theotokos. Many of the faithful know these Dogmatica by heart. For example, the Dogmaticon for tone 8 reads:

The King of Heaven, because of His love for man, appeared on earth and dwelt with men. He took flesh from the pure Virgin; and after assuming it, he came forth from her. The Son is one: in two natures, yet one person. Proclaiming Him as perfect God and perfect man, we confess Christ our God! Entreat Him, O unwedded mother, to have mercy on our souls.

Consider the teaching of this hymn. Christ is the King of Heaven, his proper place. Because of His love for man, he humbled himself to come earth and be Emmanuel, “God with us.” He took on His humanity in the Virgin Mary’s womb and was then born into the world as every other human child. He is one person, not two, but possesses two complete natures, one human, one divine (the teaching of the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon). As Christians, we confess Jesus Christ to be the God-man, perfect God and perfect man in one person. He is not a mere prophet or good teacher, but the eternal God made man for us. We ask His mother to pray to Him for us. Here is the essence of the Christian faith contained in one short hymn.

The Dogmaticon illustrates the general didactic character of Orthodox worship. Worship is not divorced from dogma or basic belief. True worship must be ‘in spirit’, but it also must be ‘in truth.’ The Church’s hymns teach the faith, expressing it in vivid, poetical language set to music. Presented in this way, the Church’s teaching is more easily accessible to the majority of the faithful than it would be in the form of an academic lecture. The striking figures of speech give material for meditation on God and what He has done for our salvation and union with Him, and, as

the hymns are sung, they are more easily remembered. Of course, to gain the benefit from the hymns, one has to attend the service to hear them.

At the conclusion of the Dogmaticon, the Deacon raises the censer yet higher and traces the sign of the cross with it directly before the Royal Doors as he intones, “Wisdom! Stand upright!” Then he and the Priest enter the sanctuary through the Royal Doors and the choir sings the evening hymn “Gladsome Light.”

“Gladsome Light”, or the lamplighting hymn, is mentioned as early as the third century in Christian documents, but it may be still older. The hymn proclaims Christ’s coming as the Light of the world and introduces a third theme to Vespers. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann writes:

Now comes the third theme of Vespers, that of Redemption. Into this world of sin and darkness, light has come: “O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the immortal Father, heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ!” The world is at its evening because the One bringing the final meaning to the world has come; in the darkness of this world, the light of Christ reveals again the true nature of things. This is not the world it was before Christ came: His coming now belongs to the world. The decisive event of the cosmos has taken place. We know now that the event of Christ must transform everything to do with our lives. It was only because of Christ that we had the heart to glory in the creation at the beginning of Vespers, only because He gave us the eyes to “behold God’s gracious hand in all His works.”

Now in the time in which we can thank God for Christ, we begin to understand that everything is transformed in Christ into its true wonder. In the radiance of His light, the world is not commonplace. The very floor we stand on is a miracle of atoms whizzing about in space. The darkness of sin is clarified, and its burden shouldered. Death is robbed of its finality, trampled down by Christ’s death. In a world where everything that seems to be present is immediately past, all is in Christ able to participate in the eternal present of God. This very evening is the real time of our life.

It is difficult for us who live in a world artificially lighted around the clock to appreciate how precious light was to man in earlier times. Night was an effective cover for evil deeds, and no light available then to man could do much to dispel it. It was at this point in the service, after sunset, that the candles were lit and the connection is drawn between the light of the candles and the light of Christ coming into the world to dispel the night of sin and evil. This light is indeed cause for rejoicing!

Upcoming Events 2018

28 July: 17- year anniversary of parish founding
1-14 August: Dormition Fast
30 September: Annual Meeting

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!