

The Confessor's Tongue for April 2, A. D. 2023

Fifth Sunday of Lent: St. Mary of Egypt

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 Commandments of Christ

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you. Matt 7:6 (52)

Through Jesus Christ, great gifts are bestowed upon the human race, both in actuality and in potential. Through His resurrection, every human who ever lived have his soul and body reunited to stand before His judgment seat. Every human being will have eternal life—either that of eternal well-being or of eternal being without Christ, described in Scripture as a "part in the lake of fire." Christ resurrection conquers death, the separation of soul from body, for everyone indiscriminately.

Christ's coming has also made it possible for every human being to be reconciled with God through repentance and faith in Him, to become adopted children of God, to enter His kingdom, and to have eternal well-being. Not all, however, will receive these good things which are theirs in potential.

Those who do not believe and repent are condemned already for their failure to acknowledge Christ the unique Godman and His great condescension for them. They are unholy. Christ here characterizes them as dogs and swine. Dogs in Christ's time were not cuddly household pets but wild, mangy, and dangerous beasts. Swine, of course, were unclean animals for the Jews which they were not even to touch let alone eat.

People unclean with sin, still languishing in unbelief without repentance cannot and should not receive holy things. They cannot even begin to appreciate them or understand them and know not what to do with them. Hence, the Christian is commanded not to give holy things to the unholy.

This is why all but the baptized are traditionally dismissed from the second half of the Divine Liturgy, the Liturgy of the Faithful. This is why none but the faithful who are properly prepared partake of the Holy Eucharist. This is why Jesus taught in parables, to hide the truths of His kingdom from those who were not genuinely seeking truth but to make the truth available to those who truly wanted it.

Our Orthodox precommunion prayers apply Christ's command when we say, "For I will not speak of Thy Mysteries to Thine enemies." We are not to discuss holy things of the Church with people who have no interest in Christ or who only wish to argue and criticize. The "holy things are for the holy." Offering holy things to the unholy harms us, for they treat the holy things with disdain and then turn to attack us.

We may love the beauty of the Christian faith and be so fully persuaded of its truth and benefit that we wish to tell others all about it. Others are not, and are

unfit to receive holy things because of their sinful way of life. We need discernment and discretion when we share the faith with such people. Of what may we speak, and of what should we remain silent? Certainly the details of the Church's faith in the holy Mysteries should not be discussed casually with unbelievers, but even less profound things should not be shared thoughtlessly with the scornful and with mockers. The focus of the preaching of the Gospel to unbelievers is the Person of Jesus Christ and His call to repentance, not the mysteries of Holy Communion or of noetic prayer. Only when a man acknowledges Christ as incarnate God does he have the basis to go deeper. May God grant us the wisdom and discernment to "give not that which is holy unto the dogs."

The Services of Great and Holy Week

While Holy Week is still a week off, we offer this a week early to encourage you to participate as fully in Holy Week as you possibly can that you may fittingly contemplate what Christ has done for you, worship Him, and return thanks. We owe Him all glory, all glory is due Him, everything good we have is from Him, but how often we larcenously appropriate His glory for ourselves!

Beginning with the evening of Palm Sunday, the Orthodox Christian is called upon to *accompany* Christ along the road of His voluntary passion and death. As a fellow traveller with Christ, a person must abandon the pleasures of this world. He must be purified in his entire being. He must fervently seek union with his Lord and Savior. The life of the Church actualizes these necessities in the Holy Mysteries of Confession and Communion. Only after being purified and forgiven in the Mystery of Confession and firmly united with Christ in the Mystery of Holy Communion can the Orthodox believer approach the hallowed ground of accompanying Christ in the great hour of His work for the redemption of all.

As we stand in church on the evening of Palm Sunday, we are sunk in darkness. This is the end. We have seen the light: Christ has triumphed over the darkness of death by raising His friend Lazarus. He has sought—and received—the acclamation of His Kingship by His people Israel: "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord." We have held high our palm branches and accepted His Kingdom. But now these palms lie at home, and we stand in darkness. The end has come.

The first three days of Holy Week are referred to in the Church as "the End." Jesus was walking in the very midst of those who sought to take His life. He experienced deep anguish within Himself (John 12:27). Despite the triumph of the Palm weekend, which had confirmed the outcome of His passion even before it

had taken place, the Lord had already told His disciples that "He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Mt 16:21).

The moment of truth had arrived. No longer did Jesus speak to the people from boats or in the countryside. He spoke openly in Jerusalem itself. He confronted His enemies and publicly refuted them. Addressing Himself to the religious leaders and students of the Divine Law, the Pharisees, scribes, and elders, Jesus called them hypocrites, blind guides, murderers, and liars.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in. (Mt 23:13)

He went directly to the Temple and cleansed it of the crooked moneychangers. He spoke to them sharply: "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers" (Mt 21:13). He refuted all the questions which the leaders put to Him in order to "entangle Him in His talk" (Mt 22:15 ff). He condemned the fig tree which had not brought forth fruit. He spoke and acted with great urgency: "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out" (John 12:31). The moment of truth revealed that even in the supposedly most religious and righteous places, the world was under the sway of evil. The Messiah came to inaugurate a New Age.

The Bridegroom Services

On Palm Sunday evening, the services of Holy Week begin. Long Gospel readings on the first three days divulge the entire content of the final discourses of Christ. In these discourses, He is far from the "sweet Jesus" of popular imagery. He speaks with clarity concerning the end of this age.

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only...

Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. (Mt. 24:36, 42)

Judgment and the End

We see the sin and darkness which triumph in "this world" loom before us as we follow Christ as He approaches the Cross. On the first three "great and holy" days of this week, it is the Gospel read at the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, the "end" of each liturgical day—when "the light of Christ illumines all"—that the "theme" of the whole day is revealed. On Monday, the theme is quite simply the End: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away" (Mt 24:3-35). On Tuesday, we are minded of the vigilance and care required of all Christians as we hear Christ's parables of the ten virgins and of the talents, and we are filled with "holy fear" as we listen to Him prophesy the Last Judgment (Mt 24:36-26:2). On Wednesday, we hear about the harlot who anoints Christ's feet to prepare Him for His burial, and of Judas who judges her, mercilessly condemning her act of mercy (Mt 26:6-16). Indeed,

"The Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). And this darkness brings judgment.

Judgment is the theme of the Gospel read in darkness each evening at Matins. On Monday, we hear of the barren fig tree which Christ curses and cause to be dried up (Mt 21:18-43); on Tuesday, of the blind and hypocritical Pharisees (Mt 22:15-23, 39); and on Wednesday, of the final rejection of Christ: "Now is the judgment of the world" (John 12:17-50).

The two themes of darkness and judgment are combined in the troparion sung at Matins on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday:

Behold! the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching; and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighted down with sleep, lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself, crying: "Holy! Holy! Holy! art Thou, O our God. Through the Theotokos, have mercy on us!"

Midnight is the time for us to keep vigil, to watch and pray. The night time of "this world" is when we look for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the ten wise and foolish virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom forms the basis of this special troparion sung at the beginning of Matins each day. Ten virgins went out to meet the bridegroom. They were not sure when He would come. Five took sufficient oil for their lamps, five did not. The five who came unprepared had to return to buy more oil. At midnight, while these are gone, the bridegroom came, and the virgins who were prepared entered the bridal hall with him to begin the marriage feast. The bridal hall is the Kingdom of Heaven. The Bridegroom is Christ. He comes at an hour when we least expect Him. We must "watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Mt. 25:13).

In view of this special troparion, the Matins of the first three days of Holy Week are commonly called "The Bridegroom Service." This service is customarily served in anticipation on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday evenings (instead of the time appointed in the wee hours of the morning). Throughout the services, we are never allowed to forget that Christ the Bridegroom who comes is God, the God who created man in the beginning and who now comes to do all things for his salvation in His love for mankind. He constantly demands that we return this love, and that we show to others the same mercy that He shows to us. On Great and Holy Thursday (Wednesday evening), the last of the Bridegroom Services is celebrated, and there we see this vital Christian requirement of love put to the ultimate test. For the last time, we sing the exapostilarion, which forms the only link between all of the services of the first four days of Holy Week:

Thy Bridal Chamber I see adorned, O my Savior, but I have no wedding garment that I may enter. O Giver of Light, enlighten the vesture of my soul, and save me.

This special hymn, sung near the end of the service, tells us, in effect, that in our present state we

are not ready to meet the Lord. There is no room for pride, callousness, or the recounting of our good deeds. We must repent, i.e., have an inner change of mind and heart, before we enter the Kingdom.

Betrayal

The first three days of Holy Week are concluded by the clandestine betrayal of Christ by one of His own disciples—Judas. Even after His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Christ continued to withdraw from the city at night. Out of fear of the masses, the leaders did not arrest Him, and He moved about the city during the day. It was necessary that one of His companions betray Him by revealing to the leaders the location of his nocturnal abode as well as His identity in the group. Judas filled this need.

On this day, the beginning of Great and Holy Thursday, as we enter Christ's chamber together with the glorious apostles to partake of His table, we see the impious traitor Judas sitting indeed at the table with no wedding garment. This day's troparion says:

When the glorious disciples were enlightened at the washing of their feet before the supper, then the impious Judas was darkened, ailing with avarice, and to the lawless judges he betrays Thee, the righteous Judge. Behold, O lover of money, this man who because of money hanged himself. Flee from the greedy soul which dared such things against the Master. O Lord, who art good towards all men, glory to Thee!

We realize that all of the things we have heard about and experienced this week, all the things we have been called to do and to be in order to partake worthily of the Master's table, are impossible without Christ's mercy and help. And now we stand in the lengthening shadow of Calvary. Judas has made his choice. He has hanged himself in remorse, and Christ is in the hands of lawless men.

What motivated Judas to commit this terrible act? In the mind of the Church, the motive is the greed for money and a general love for the choking pleasures of this world. Judas had the same opportunity to be with Jesus and to learn at His feet, but he "refused to understand," as the Church hymns say. He exchanged all this for thirty pieces of silver. The question remaining to be answered by us is this: What is Christ worth in our lives? Do we take proper advantage of all the opportunity given to us to live in Him and learn of Him in the Church?

The End becomes our "end" if we, too, join in rejecting the Light and Life of the world, or share in selling the Master of all in order to satisfy our own, self-centered motivations.

Holy Friday Matins—the 12 Gospels

The Matins of Holy Friday commonly celebrated on the evening of Holy Thursday and known as "The Order of the Holy Passions of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," or, more popularly, as "The Passions" or "Twelve Gospels," is a climactic point of the entire task set before us during Holy Week. During this wonderful service, we accompany Christ, step by step, from the time of His last discourse with His disciples to His being laid in a new tomb by the noble Joseph

of Arimathea and the pious Nicodemus. Each of the twelve Gospel sections read during the service involves us in a new scene: the arrest and trial before Annas and Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priests; the threefold denial of Peter; the trial and other happenings before Pontius Pilate; the scourging and mocking by the soldiers; the carrying of the Cross; the engaging of Simon of Cyrene; the Crucifixion and the opposing fates of the two thieves hung with Christ; the loving tenderness of that moment when Jesus commits His Mother to the care of His faithful disciple John; the Lord's final yielding up of the spirit, and burial.

The twelve Gospel readings, however, are only a part of the service. The Gospel texts narrate the events. The hymnography gives the *response of the Church*, the community of true Christian believers from all ages, to these events. The hymnography clarifies and gives deeper meaning as well as the proper sense of significance to the narrations which the Gospel relates with such epic simplicity. We are confronted and perplexed by the horrid and sobering question of what caused Judas to betray his Master, and the Master's own people to crucify Him. We are comforted and uplifted by signs of hope for us in the repentance of the thief and the Cross as life and resurrection for us.

The total effect of this integration of the twelve Gospels and the responsorial hymnography is to uplift each participant of the service into the total life of the Church. In this life, past, present, and future are one, and our own accompanying of Christ is not merely a dramatic enactment of past and irrelevant events, but a *reality*. The entire spectrum of our Lord's saving Passions is opened before us, and we are placed *within that spectrum*. With it, a judgment begins to come upon us. Where do we stand in reference to all those who are accompanying Christ on the road of His Passion? Do we share a common spirit with the treacherous Judas, the scheming priests, the fearful and abandoning disciples, or the denying Peter? Do we in any way find ourselves among the fickle and unruly crowds, or the mocking and blasphemous groups of soldiers? Is the indifference of Pilate in any way indicative of our response to Christ? Hopefully, we perhaps see ourselves more clearly in the devotion of the disciple John, or in the confessing centurion, or the faithful Joseph of Arimathea, or, most of all, in the repentant thief.

Vespers of Holy Friday

On Great and Holy Friday, Christ died on the Cross. He gave up His spirit with the words: "It is finished." These words are better understood when rendered: "It is consummated." He had accomplished the work for which His heavenly Father had sent Him into the world. He became a man in the fullest sense of the word. He accepted the baptism of repentance from John in the Jordan River. He assumed the whole human condition, experiencing all its alienation, agony, and suffering, concluding with the lowly death on the Cross.

On Holy Friday, evil triumphed. "It was night" when Judas departed from the Last Supper to complete his act of betrayal, and "there was darkness over all the land" when Jesus was hanging on the Cross. The evil forces of this world had been massed against Christ. Unjust trials convicted Him. A criminal was released to the people instead of Him. Nails and a spear pierced His body. Bitter vinegar was given to Him to quench His thirst. Only one disciple remained faithful to Him. Finally, the tomb of another man became His place of repose after death. The innocent Jesus was put to death on the basis of both religious (breaking the Law, blasphemy) and political charges (claim to be king in place of Caesar). Both Jews and Gentile Romans participated in His death sentence.

We, also, in many ways, continue to participate in the death sentence given to Christ. The formal charges against Him do not exhaust the reasons for the crucifixion. Behind the formal charges lay a host of injustices brought on by hidden and personal motivations. Jesus openly spoke the truth about God and man. He thereby exposed the false character of the righteousness and smug security, both religious and material, claimed by many—especially those in high places. The constantly occurring expositions of such smugness in our own day teach us the truly illusory nature of much so-called righteousness and security. In the deepest sense, the death of Christ was brought about by hardened, personal sin—the refusal of people to change themselves in the light of *reality*, which is Christ. "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." Especially we, the Christian people, are Christ's very own. He continues to come to us in His Church. Each time we attempt to make the Church into something other than the eternal coming of Christ into our midst, each time we refuse to repent for our wrongs, we, too, reject Christ and participate in His death sentence.

The Vespers, celebrated in the Church on Holy Friday afternoon, brings to mind all of the final events of the life of Christ as mentioned above: the trial, the sentence, the scourging and mocking, the crucifixion, the death, the taking down of His body from the Cross, and the burial. As the hymnography indicates, these events remain ever-present in the Church; they constitute the *today* of its life.

The death of Christ was of a wholly voluntary character. He dies not become of some necessity in His being; as the Son of God, He has life in Himself! Yet, He voluntarily gave up His life as the greatest sign of God's love for man, as the ultimate revelation of the Divine glory.

Near the end of the Vespers, the priest vests fully in dark vestments. At the appointed time, he lifts the Holy Shroud, a large icon depicting Christ lying in the tomb, from the altar table. A procession is formed and the Holy Shroud is carried to a specially prepared tomb in the center of the church. As the procession moves, the troparion is sung:

The noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in fine linen and anointed it with spices, and placed it in a new tomb.

At this ultimate solemn moment of Vespers, the theme of hope once again occurs—this time more strongly and clearly than ever. As knees are bent and heads bowed, and often tears are shed, another troparion is sung which penetrates through this triumph of evil to the new day which is contained in its very midst:

The Angel came to the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb and said: "Myrrh is fitting for the dead, but Christ has shown Himself a stranger to corruption.

A new age is dawning. Our salvation is taking place. The One who died is the same One who will rise on the third day to "trample down death by death" and to free us from corruption.

Therefore, at the conclusion of Holy Friday Vespers, at the end of this long day of darkness when all things are apparently ended, our eternal hope for salvation springs forth. For Christ is indeed a stranger to corruption.

Matins of Holy Saturday—the Lamentations

The "Great and Holy Sabbath" is the day which connects Holy Friday, the commemoration of the Cross, with Pascha, the day of the Resurrection. In this service, normally served Friday evening, we initially stand before Christ's tomb as mourners. Yet we do not stop with the mere mourning of a loss. We recognize that Christ has descended into Hades to confront Death and to break his hold over the human race. Life confronts Death and prevails. This victory is portrayed in the dramatic reading of Ezekiel's prophecy of the dry bones returning to life as living men. Already we begin to anticipate the Resurrection.

Vespertine Liturgy of Holy Saturday—15 OT Readings

At the Liturgy of Holy Saturday, 15 texts from the Old Testament are read, each of them centered on the promise of the Resurrection and glorifying the ultimate victory of God. The Epistle, Romans 6:3-11 connects our Baptism to Christ's death and Resurrection. During the special verse "Arise, O God, and judge the earth" after the Epistle, the dark lenten vestments of the clergy and church are put aside and replaced with bright white ones to make present the light of the Resurrection when the Gospel proclaiming Christ's resurrection is read. In Fr. Schmemmann's words, "One can and must say that of all services of the Church that are inspiring, meaningful, revealing, this one—the Vespertine Liturgy of St. Basil on the Great & Holy Saturday is truly the liturgical climax of the Church."

Compiled from various articles by Frs. P. Lazar & A. Schmemmann

Upcoming Events 2023

9-15 April Holy Week
15 April Holy Saturday: Baptisms 10:00 a.m.
16 April Great & Holy Pascha

GLORY BE TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS!