

The Byzantine Liturgical Theology of Great and Holy Week

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Introduction

The Paschal Mystery is the center of the Christian life, and must never be far from our consciousness. We particularly celebrate the Paschal Mystery every Sunday at the Divine Liturgy.

But every year the Church sets aside the seven days of Holy Week to make the final preparations to celebrate the Paschal Mystery in an all-pervading, all-absorbing way. When we pray with the Church in these unparalleled services, we begin to see *with the eyes of the Gospel*. The Paschal Mystery appears in all its eternal reality, and the distractions that occupy us most of the time fade into shadowy illusions.

The divine services of Holy Week discussed in this study come to us from the Great Church of Christ in Constantinople, and hence are called "Byzantine." But in great part they originate in Jerusalem, where Christian pilgrims visit all year round, but where pilgrims especially go for Holy Week and Pascha.

Ever since the fourth century, Holy Week services in Jerusalem are offered in the specific places where the events that are commemorated actually occurred. Throughout the history of the Church, the services acquired dramatic elements to recall to our minds the salvific events of the Paschal Mystery. According to Alexander Schmemmann,

It is the worship of the Church that was from the very beginning and still is our entrance into, our communion with, the new life of the Kingdom. It is through her liturgical life that the Church reveals to us something of that which 'the ear has not heard, the eye has not seen, and what has not yet entered the heart of man, but which God has prepared for those who love Him.'

And in the center of that liturgical life, as its heart and climax,
as the sun whose rays penetrate everywhere, stands Pascha.¹

Great and Holy Week liturgical services provide the preparation time for this significant event. We find symbols, rituals, and poetry that prepare our body, mind and soul to receive the eternal salvation that Christ's passion, death and resurrection promise.

Lazarus Saturday

The first event of this final week of preparation is known as Lazarus Saturday. It commemorates the visit of Jesus to his friends in Bethany, outside of Jerusalem when he raises Lazarus from the dead. The Great Fast ends on the day before, Friday of the Sixth Week.² Lazarus Saturday begins the "days of tears"³ that lead up to the glorious resurrection on Pascha. At the tomb of Lazarus, Christ weeps (Jn 11:53) at the death of his friend Lazarus, and in Luke we read that "when He drew near and saw the city, He wept over it" (Lk 19:41). Likewise, we are brought to tears when we recall the suffering that our Lord endured for our sake.

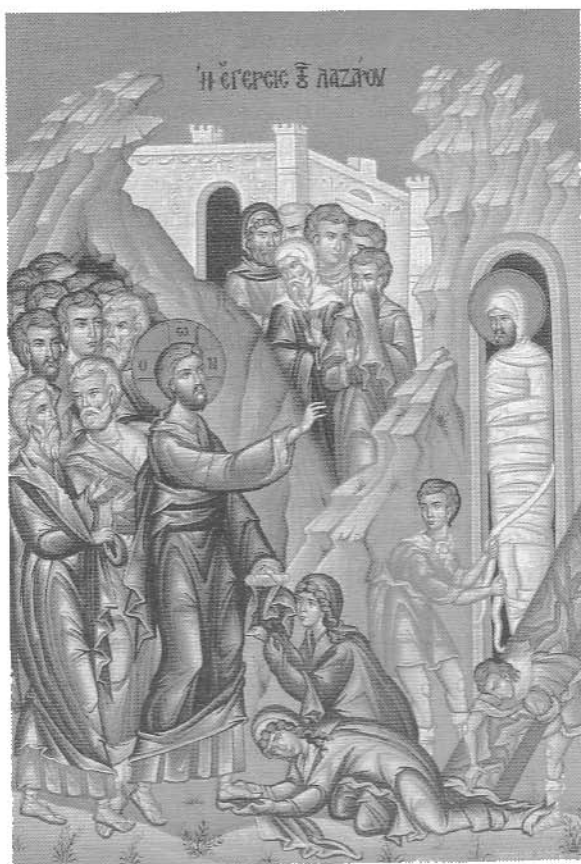
The raising of Lazarus also provides a precursor for Christ's own resurrection. In the Gospel of John, the seven miracles of the Lord culminate in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This demonstration gives us hope that we all will be raised from the dead ourselves and united with Christ, the Holy Spirit, and our Heavenly Father on the Last Judgement Day.

[1] Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY: 1969), p. 13.

[2] Cf. Bishop Basil Losten, *Our Paschal Pilgrimage* (Eastern Christian Publications, Fairfax, VA: 1996), p. 53. We are reminded of this fact in the text of the Presanctified Liturgy for Friday evening: "Having come to the end of the forty days " Liturgical Commission of the Sisters of Saint Basil, *Lenten Triodion*, (Sisters of Saint Basil, Uniontown, PA: 1995), p. 492.

[3] Basil Shereghy, *The Liturgical Year of the Byzantine-Slavonic Rite* (Byzantine Seminary Press, Pittsburgh, PA: 1968), p. 24.

It was also a public expression of the power and knowledge of Jesus. Although there are other occasions when Christ raises someone from the dead, He deliberately chose to raise Lazarus in order to reveal the glory of God (Jn 11:40). “When He cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth,’ His words were addressed to *all* people.”⁴ Christ invites us to join Him through our faith, strength and conviction in Him as the Son of God.



Icon of the Raising of Lazarus

[4] *Ibid.*

Although we are about to enter a very solemn and serious time, there are some joyous aspects to this day. It is sometimes called a *joyous fast*, and in some parishes Lazarus Saturday is celebrated with a communion breakfast for children after the Divine Liturgy.⁵

The Entrance into Jerusalem

On Palm Sunday, we welcome Christ the King as He enters Jerusalem and we pass almost at once to the Passion as we welcome Christ, the Suffering Servant and Bridegroom of the Church. We go to Jerusalem to die with Christ that we may live with Christ, Who will take us to the Jerusalem on high in the Kingdom of heaven. On Palm Sunday, Jerusalem received Jesus Christ as the Messianic King.⁶

However, His entry is a joy and a sorrow. Our joy is Christ's triumphal entry to the sounds of "hosanna" from the people of Jerusalem, while our sorrow is our anticipation of his passion and suffering during the days to come.

Today, we welcome Jesus into our churches and our lives with the same praises, and we wave palm branches and pussy willows.⁷ Many local customs have developed including children's processions, gathering around the priest or deacon during the proclamation of the Holy Gospel for the day, taking blessed branches home and displaying them prominently, or placing them under our mattresses to protect us each night as we sleep.

[5] Losten, p. 56. Bishop Losten also reports this is the only place when the Slavonic Typicon specifically mentions the eating of caviar!

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[7] Palm branches are typically not available in Eastern Europe, so these naturally occurring branches of pussy willows were used instead, and the custom continues in the U.S. among Slav churches.

By accepting these branches and treating them with honor and respect we renew our allegiance to Jesus Christ as King. They are like a flag honoring His Kingship and His Law, the Holy Gospel. They are a reminder to us every day when we see them in our homes of our loyalty to Christ the King and to His Gospel.⁸

The public celebration of Palm Sunday began in Jerusalem after the Christian persecutions. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, bishop in the fourth century, tells us that the same palm tree used on the first Palm Sunday was still standing in the valley of Cedron outside the city. The ceremony spread to Egypt and Syria in the next century and then to other regions as the Christian Church spread throughout the Roman and Byzantine Empire. This day may also be called "Flowery Sunday" because of the usage of willows among the Slavs.⁹

Holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

From Great Monday through Great Saturday, we read two books at Vespers: Exodus and Job.¹⁰ Exodus will lead us to the Crossing of the Red Sea, the Old Testament Passover, which we shall join on Great Saturday. Job is an Old Testament icon of Christ, Who suffered for us, and Who reminds us that ultimately God and His will are deep in the Mystery of Redemption, not to be comprehended by our human minds.

We also remember that the Lord gives Himself in the Paschal Mystery *for sinners* – in other words, for ourselves. In the Gospel lesson, we hear of the sinful woman who poured the precious ointment on the Feet of Our Lord and gives us the example of love and repentance which will unite us to Christ.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[9] Shereghy, p. 26.

[10] The final reading from Job is on Good Friday.

At Matins on all three days, we repeat the Troparion:

Behold, the bridegroom is coming in the middle of the night. Blesses is the servant He shall find awake. But the one He shall find neglectful will not be worthy of Him. Beware, therefore, O my soul! Do not fall into a deep slumber, lest you be delivered to death and the door of the Kingdom be closed to you. Watch instead, and cry out: Holy, Holy, Holy are You O God. Through the intercession of the Mother of God, have mercy on us.¹¹

Not only is this repeated three times at each service, we sing it on all three days. The Church warns us to pay attention to the events that are about to unfold during the week. The Gospel and Old Testament readings, and the propers for Matins and Vespers each day, provide us with many reminders of Christ's passion, the coming end of the world, and various connections between the Old and New Testament.

We hear of Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, and how he was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, but then attained a high rank and received honor worthy of kings.¹² Joseph is a precursor of Christ, first ridiculed and then exalted.

We hear of the fig tree that Jesus curses for its lack of fruit. This is a symbol of the Jewish synagogue of the time that did not demonstrate the fruits of virtue and righteousness for the people of God.¹³

We hear of the parable of the ten virgins which instructs us to always be ready to meet and welcome Christ the bridegroom so that we may be worthy to enter the heavenly chamber.¹⁴

[11] *Lenten Triodion*, p. 531, 542, and 551.

[12] Shereghy, p. 27.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

We hear of the story of the anointing of our Lord in Bethany on Holy Wednesday at the home of Simon the leper. The account in the Gospel of Matthew (26:6-16) is read, but other stichera verses rely on similar accounts in Luke (7:36-50) and John (12:3-8).¹⁵

In many parishes, the Mystery of Holy Anointing of the Sick is performed for all the faithful after the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts. It commemorates the anointing of Jesus, and gives us an annual "healing of the soul" as we prepare for the final days of Holy Week.

Holy Thursday

As Bishop Losten points out, Holy Thursday has its problems, liturgically speaking, with too many events to commemorate.¹⁶ The Washing of the Feet is of great importance, but since it is not often done outside cathedrals and large monasteries, many people never experience this service. The same is also true for the Consecration of the Holy Myron (Chrism), which very few will be able to attend.¹⁷

Two other long services typically occur on this day – Vespers and the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil and Orthos of the Passion, known as the "Twelve Gospels."

Normally Vespers is served in the evening, but since Good Friday Matins and the reading of the Twelve Gospels has become very popular, it is usually scheduled for Thursday evening when working people can attend. This means that the Liturgy of Saint Basil is moved to Thursday morning when many miss receiving the Eucharist.

[15] Losten, p. 61.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[17] Many Orthodox hierarchs were invited to Constantinople in the year 2002 to attend this service which was celebrated by Patriarch Bartholomew for only the seventh time in the last 100 years.

This Liturgy also includes three Old Testament readings, Exodus, Job (as at previous Liturgies of the Presanctified Gifts), and also from the prophecy of Isaiah (50:4-11). Here we hear of the Suffering Servant, which is referenced in the Epistle reading from Paul to the Church at Corinth (I Cor 11:23-32). The Gospel reading is the longest of the liturgical year, combining passages from Matthew, John and Luke¹⁸ that describe the Last Supper, the betrayal of Judas, and the arrest of our Lord.¹⁹

On Holy Thursday night the faithful come to Church in great numbers for Good Friday Matins, or the "Twelve Gospels" as the service is popularly known, since there are twelve readings from the Gospels about the events of the Passion. In Jerusalem, this is a processional service, and it lasts all night as the procession winds around the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Resurrection.

In parish churches the service does not last all night; it usually takes a bit less than three hours. During the Gospel lessons the faithful normally hold candles, or 12 men of the parish hold a symbolic candle. After each reading, a candle is snuffed out and the man sits down while the others remain standing. In other parishes, the 12 candles are in a candlestand and one is put out as the reading ends.

Great Friday

On Good Friday, there is no Eucharist at all.²⁰ This is a day of absolute, total fast. This is the day when the Church "strives to express

[18] Matthew 26:2-20; John 13:3-17; Matthew 26:21-39; Luke 22:43-45; Matthew 26:40-27:2. When possible, this reading is proclaimed by multiple priests or deacons because of its length.

[19] Losten, p. 64.

[20] The only possible exception occurs when the Feast of the Annunciation falls on Good Friday, in which case the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is joined to Vespers (Cf. Shereghy, p. 32). In earlier centuries it appears that there was a celebration of the Divine Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts on Good Friday, especially

her mourning over the passion and death of Jesus in every possible way.”²¹ The Royal Hours take their name from the fact that the Emperor or King would usually attend the Hours on Good Friday.²² Today there is no Emperor, but the Royal Hours are still very solemn. The time of the service varies: in some parishes they are done in the morning; in other parishes they are done at midday, and in others immediately before Vespers later in the day.

According to the Typicon,²³ Vespers on Good Friday afternoon should begin at 4:00 PM. In some countries, especially where Byzantine Churches are in the majority, it is necessary to serve Vespers earlier in the day, even in the late morning, because of the crowds who come to venerate the Holy Shroud. However, in the U.S. today, many businesses do not close for Good Friday any longer, and so Vespers is typically scheduled in the evening to facilitate full attendance by the faithful. The service is restrained and beautiful, culminating in the bringing of the Holy Shroud²⁴ from the Altar to a place outside the iconostasis where a special “Tomb” has been placed. Here the faithful will adorn the Holy Shroud with votive candles and flowers. Parish organizations, youth groups, and individual families will take turns holding a vigil at the Holy Shroud, usually scheduled throughout the night.

The Procession with the Holy Shroud around the inside or outside of the church, or through the streets²⁵ is an essential feature of this service. In this Procession, we remember the Descent into Hell, as

in the Latin Church.

[21] Shereghy, p. 31.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] David Petras, *The 2002 Typicon* (Eastern Christian Publications, Fairfax, VA: 2001), p. 37.

[24] *Plashchanitsa* in Slavonic, or *Epitaphios* in Greek.

[25] As I witnessed and was amazed by in Athens a few years ago.

the Lord challenges death and the devil "on their own ground", so to speak, to bring to all the message of Uncreated Light and Eternal Life.

In the dioceses which derive from the Eparchy of Mukachevo²⁶ there is a custom of the pious faithful to remain in the temple after Vespers on Good Friday and chant the Canon from Compline.

On Good Friday night (in most places) there is the remarkable Orthros of Great Saturday, known popularly as "the Funeral of Christ" or the "Jerusalem Matins." This service is incredibly rich, with splendid music and wonderful liturgical poetry. Psalm 118 is the centerpiece of the service, and gives the service the popular name of the "Funeral of Christ."²⁷ Alexander Schmemmann suggests that the Church "considers the words of the Psalm to be as the words of Christ himself, spoken to His Father during the Passion, Death, and Descent into Hell."²⁸ Towards the end of the "Praises" of Psalm 118, the priests sprinkle first the Holy Shroud and then the entire assembly with rose water or rose perfume. This enjoyable feature reminds us of an important teaching: *we are the Body of Christ*.

Great Saturday

The last liturgical service of Holy Week proper²⁹ is Vespers with the Liturgy of Saint Basil which remembers our Savior's entombment and His descent into Hell.³⁰ This is a most curious service in that

[26] In present day Ukraine and which is thought to have been founded by Saints Cyril and Methodius.

[27] Losten, p. 72.

[28] Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgical Explanation for the Days of Holy Week*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, pp. 34-40.

[29] The scope of this study excludes Matins of the Resurrection since it is properly the beginning of the Paschal Season and not part of Holy Week.

[30] Shereghy, p. 34.

the clergy begin in dark vestments and in the middle, change into bright vestments, "because in the Gospel of the day, Christ's resurrection is already mentioned."³¹ This service is also noteworthy by the 15 Old Testament readings prescribed. In earlier centuries, it was during these readings that the catechumens were baptized and chrismated by the bishop while the faithful remained in the church. The readings cover the "high points" of salvation history – creation, Moses, Jonah and the sea, and the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. By hearing this account, the first pascha, deliverance of God's people from slavery, is joined to the new pascha, the Resurrection of Our Lord. Additional readings include Elias, Abraham and Isaac, Eliseus, Isaiah, and finally the story of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the three youths in the furnace.³² During this reading, at the Song of the Three Youths, the refrain "Sing praise to the Lord, and exalt Him above all forever" is repeated. After the epistle reading and during the singing of the refrain "Arise, O God, and judge the earth, for all nations belong to You!" the clergy change vestments.³³

However, this Vigil Liturgy is sadly neglected in parish practice with very poor attendance. If held at midday, everyone is home preparing foods and other activities for Pascha later in the day. If held in the evening, it greatly lengthens the service with Resurrection Matins following. In practice, one seems to go straight from Good Friday to Pascha, and Holy Saturday is "that in-between day."

In the nineteen-fifties, a magnificent fresco of the Descent into Hell was discovered in Constantinople, in the parecclesion of the Monastery of Our Savior in Chora.³⁴ This magnificent icon has been

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] In many parochial settings, only two readings are taken, one from Exodus and this one from the Book of Daniel. The story of the three youths in the furnace is one of my favorite readings to chant in church.

[33] Cf. Losten, pp. 79-82.

[34] Illustrated in *The Oecumenical Patriarchate: the Great Church of Christ*, Orthodox Centre of the Oecumenical Patriarchate, Geneva, Switzerland – E.

the standard against which all other icons of the Descent into Hell are measured, and is frequently used as the Icon of the Resurrection. Its reappearance after being hidden under plaster and whitewash for five hundred years is a symbolic representation of the culmination of Holy Week, when "Christ is risen from the dead, by death he conquered death, and to those in the graves He granted life!"



The Descent into Hell from the Monastery of Our Savior, Chora, Constantinople

Tzaferis S.A., Athens, Greece, 1989, pp. 253-254, plates 325 and 326.