

The Bridegroom Services of Holy Week

Matins of Great and Holy Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday

With the First Hour, Vespers and Divine Liturgy of Holy Thursday

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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 comes 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

The first three days of Holy Week are referred to in the Church as "The End." Jesus was walking into 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. (*Matthew 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. (*Matthew 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" (*Matthew 21:13*). He refuted all the questions which the leaders put to Him in order to "entangle him in his talk" (*Matthew 22: 15ff.*) 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 Services of the Bridegroom

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. (*Matthew 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" (*Matthew 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 (*Matthew 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 (*Matthew 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 lessons read in darkness each evening at Matins.

On Monday we hear of the barren fig tree which Christ curses and causes to be dried up (*Matthew 21:18-43*); on Tuesday, of the blind and hypocritical Pharisees (*Matthew 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 weighed 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 nighttime of "this world" is when we look for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The parable of the 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" (*Matthew 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. 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 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 *exapostellarion* 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 can enter the Kingdom.

The Supper and the 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 indeed sitting at the table with no wedding garment. The troparion of this day 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.