

How the Orthodox Church views Holy Week

Many feel that the week preceding Pascha, known as Holy Week, is merely a Commemoration of a series of events straight out of ancient history. It is often said that Orthodox Holy Week Services are designed to "symbolize" various stages in the unfolding "drama" of Christ's suffering, death and Resurrection: a "Passion Play." To put it bluntly, this vision of Holy Week is incorrect.

The Orthodox Church does not try to "symbolize" these events, nor asking us to be casual observers. To the contrary, the Church invites us to actively participate in these events which are very, very "real" for us. Holy Week is not a time to merely remember or observe or symbolize. It is a challenge to experience that which Christ experienced, to participate in His sufferings, death and burial, and to be victorious with Him in the Resurrection. Each of us is asked to take up 'our cross' and follow Christ in a very real and literal way, enduring all that Christ endured so that we might likewise be victorious with Him.

LAZARUS SATURDAY

Just dying to live!

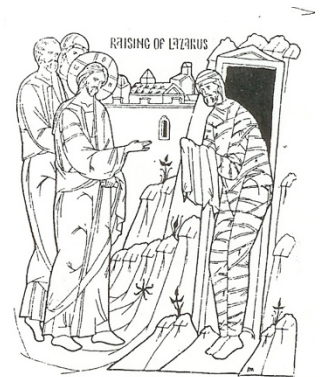
Before we leave on a trip, we ought to know exactly where we are going. Christ Himself knew that His journey to the Cross and Resurrection would be a difficult one, and especially so for His followers, since they had no idea of what awaited them in the end. Thus it is not strange that the road to the Cross begins with the joyful events of the raising of Jesus' friend Lazarus, and of Christ's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem.

"Lazarus, come forth" is the call of Christ to his friend. Jesus calls Lazarus – and all of us – to life! The end of our long journey will be only the beginning for us – the beginning of a life that will have no end. Christ's journey ends in His Resurrection from the dead. It announces the victory over death and the beginning of a new and glorious life – life everlasting.

It is this new life that Christ announces as He calls forth Lazarus from the dead. It is to obtain this new life for ourselves that we begin our journey with Christ to the Cross and to our glorious resurrection in Him. As the hymns for the day proclaim:

By raising Lazarus from the dead before Thy passion,
Thou didst confirm the universal Resurrection, O Christ God...

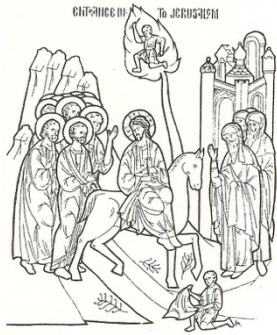
Christ – the Joy, the Truth, and the Light of all,
The Life of the world and the Resurrection
Has appeared in His goodness to those on earth.
He has become the Image of our Resurrection,
Granting divine forgiveness to all.



ENTRANCE OF THE LORD INTO JERUSALEM

Won't you join me?

The life of the True Kingdom is our destination and on this day, Christ the King enters into Jerusalem to announce His Kingdom to all men. The news of Lazarus' resurrection has preceded Him, and the streets are crowded with children and adults waving branches to the King of Glory. Yet, when Jesus drew near the city, He wept over it. He foresaw His own suffering and death at the hands of those who greeted Him with such joy.



To what then does Christ call us today as we wave our palms and branches? Is it to peace and joy, or suffering and death? We still live in a world of suffering, poverty, war and sickness. This is the world which killed the King of Glory. The joy and peace of His Kingdom do not rule this world even though He has entered into it and proclaimed it.

Christ asks us where our true allegiance lies. Are our palms of victory a sign of our allegiance to His Kingdom? If so, are we ready to follow Him all the way – even to the Cross – in order to enter the Kingdom with Him in His glory? Or will we drop our palms and branches, will we abandon and deny our allegiance to Him as the reality of the Cross, death, suffering, and weakness of faith confront us in our daily lives?

Are we truly ready today to declare our allegiance to Christ as our only King and God?
Like the children with palms of victory,
We cry out to Thee, O Vanquisher of death: 'Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord!'"

GREAT AND HOLY MONDAY

You are what you do!

Christ frequently spoke to His disciples about His Kingdom. He spoke of the end of time and how they should be prepared for the glory of the Kingdom to come. Once, as He talked with them, He was hungry and, seeing a fig tree, He went over to it, only to find it bare. He said to the tree, "May no fruit ever come from you again," and the fig tree died.

Later, after speaking several parables, Christ explained His action: "... The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it"

In all of Christ's teachings and parables about the Kingdom, He calls us to prepare for it, to be worthy of it by making good use of our talents, by producing fruit from our labor. He calls us to bear fruit as Christians, witnessing to Him and giving glory to His name.

The story of the withered fig tree tells us what happens if we do not bear fruit. We will wither up and die, and the Kingdom will be given to those who bear fruit. This is the theme of Holy Monday. In addition, the hymns caution us to be ready, to purify ourselves so that we may enter the Kingdom, the bridal hall of the Savior:

Come, therefore, and let us accompany Him,
With minds purified from the pleasures of this life.
Let us be crucified and die with him,
That we may live with Him and hear Him say:
"I go now, not to the earthly Jerusalem to suffer,
But unto My Father and your Father,
And My God and your God,
And I will gather you up into the Heavenly Jerusalem,
into the Kingdom of Heaven.

GREAT AND HOLY TUESDAY

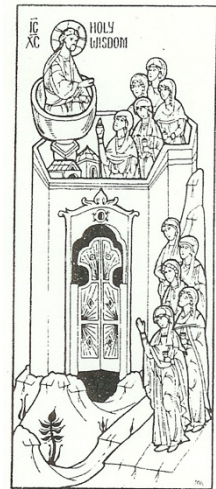
Get ready!

Getting ready for the journey to the Kingdom is the key to these first three days of Holy Week. The services of Holy Tuesday recall the parables of the talents and of the wise and foolish virgins. Ten virgins took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five prepared wisely by taking extra lamp oil. The bridegroom was delayed so they all slept for awhile. But, at midnight, there was a cry, "Behold the bridegroom! Come and meet him." "As they prepared their lamps, the foolish virgins realized they did not have enough oil and their lamps were going out. While they went to get more oil, the wise virgins entered the marriage feast with the bridegroom. When the others returned, the doors were shut.

Christ says to all of us: "Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour when I come to call you to My Kingdom." Are we ready for Christ's arrival? If He comes today, tonight or tomorrow, will we be spiritually prepared to enter into His marriage feast, or will we cry out: 'Wait! I need more time to get ready!' Will we enter into His joy or will the doors close in front of us?

Behold the Bridegroom comes at midnight,
And blessed is the servant whom He shall find heedless.
Beware, therefore, O my soul; Do not be weighed down with sleep,
Lest you be given over to death
and be shut out from the Kingdom.
But awake, crying: "Holy! Holy! Holy! Art Thou, O our God!"

And the parable of the talents cautions us today to make use of the gifts God has given us:
Let each of us, according to his ability, increase the talent of grace.
Let one grow in wisdom through good works.
Let another fashion works of beauty.
Let some communicate the word to those who ignore it.
Let others distribute their wealth to the poor.
And as faithful stewards of grace,
We shall be accounted worthy of the Master's joy!



GREAT AND HOLY WEDNESDAY

Time for a change!



Our preparation for the journey to the Kingdom concerns not only the things we say and do and believe, but the way we feel about ourselves and about our relationship with God. Part of our preparation is attaining the right attitude to accompany Christ. Repentance – the ability and willingness to acknowledge our sinful ways, to ask forgiveness and to desire a change in our lives – is a necessary step on the road to the Kingdom. And the love of Christ is the power that makes it possible for us to take that step.

On Holy Wednesday, the Church gives us the example of the harlot (this is not Mary Magdalene) who anointed Christ as an image of true repentance.

The hymns tell of the harlot's repentant attitude and compare it to the sinful attitude of Judas:

While the harlot poured the oil,
The disciple schemed with lawless men.
She rejoiced in pouring costly oil,
He hurried to sell the Priceless One.

She recognized the Master;
But he left His Company.
She was set free,
But Judas became a slave to the enemy.
How great her repentance! How cruel his apathy!
Grant us repentance, O Savior; and save us.

Whose attitude do we possess – that of the harlot or Judas? Will we accompany Christ to the Cross as loving and faithful companions, or as lying and deceitful traitors?

HOLY UNCTION

Healing Soul and Body

Into the flow of Holy Week, some Orthodox Churches, particularly those who found themselves under the Turkish yoke interject the beautiful service of Holy Unction. Under the Islamic Legal System, clergy are considered the legal (civil) authority: consider the ‘mullahs’ in the Islamic states of today – they hold political authority over their faithful. For the Orthodox, this System placed the Sacrament of Confession in jeopardy – for if a person confessed to a crime, the priest legally had to report it. If not, the priest received the same punishment as the perpetrator, for he was considered to be an accessory to the crime.

As an alternative to the Sacrament of Holy Confession, the “Byzantine,” or the “Mediterranean,” Orthodox began using Holy Unction as a means of restoring themselves to the Church.

While Holy Unction clearly speaks to the healing of soul and body, it should not be seen as replacing Holy Confession. Many of those whose ancestry comes from those areas ruled by the Turks, while maintaining Holy Unction as part of their Holy Week structure are also returning to what Christ encouraged his followers to do as He said: “if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” – and are also coming to Holy Confession.

GREAT AND HOLY THURSDAY

Take! Eat and drink!

The Cross is approaching and Jesus has His final meal with His disciples, during which He shows His love for His friends by humbling Himself as a servant and washing their feet. He does this as an example for them, saying that men would know that they are His disciples by their love for one another. As He breaks bread and shares His cup with them, He says: "I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's Kingdom."



Christ shares His love, His food, His very life with us. He gives Himself totally to us even to death so that we might share in His newness of life. The hymns for today warn us that we too can follow Christ but still betray Him as did Judas.

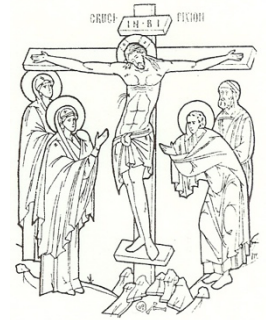
We too can receive and yet kill the Bread of Life by our sins. Even the loyal Peter is warned by Christ that he will deny Him! How faithful will we be today? Will we remain with the Lord, will we betray Him, will we deny Him, or will we scatter when danger threatens?

Let no one be ignorant at the Lord's Supper!
Let no one, like Judas, approach the banquet with lies!
For he received, yet he killed the Bread of Life.
He looked like a disciple, but was really a murderer!
He rejoiced with the apostles, yet with murderers he made his home!
He kissed with hatred, with a kiss he sold our God.

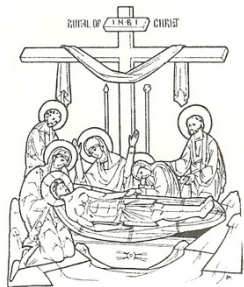
GREAT AND HOLY FRIDAY

The darkest day of the year

Holy Friday is the day in which evil appears to be victorious, for it is by evil that the Son of God is crucified on the Cross and buried in the tomb. It is the ultimate sign of defeat. Christ's journey has taken us to the Cross, and it is there that Christ dies.



How do His followers react? Judas, as we know, was the one who betrayed Him. Peter denies knowing Him. All the disciples scatter out of fear. Who remains? Who continues with the Lord on His final journey to Golgotha? The followers are reduced to John, the beloved disciple, and to Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of Jesus: few remain to witness the end.



Where do we stand among Christ's followers? Are we the first to run if danger threatens? Do we follow at a distance? But deny our involvement or knowledge of the Lord? Do we pretend sometimes that we do not know Him? Or do we openly betray Him?

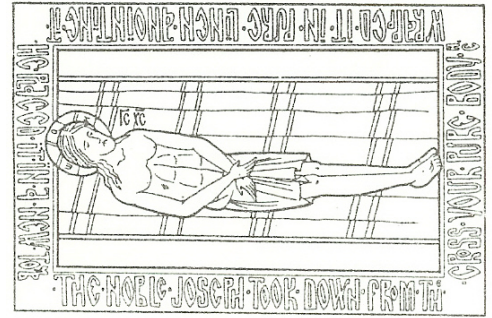
Friday is the day of witness, the day on which the strength of our faithfulness to the Lord is tested. Each year on this day we should examine ourselves and our lives to see how we have betrayed Christ, denied Him and abandoned Him during the past year. . Each year on this day, we should repent sincerely and pledge ourselves anew to His Kingdom, renew our hope and commit ourselves to follow in His steps to the end: If any man would come after Me, Let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.

GREAT AND HOLY SATURDAY

Silence!

Let all mortal flesh keep silent
And in fear and trembling stand,
Pondering nothing earthly-minded.
For the King of Kings. And the Lord of Lords, comes to be slain
To give Himself as food to the faithful.

The special hymn that replaces the familiar “Cherubic Hymn” for Holy Saturday calls us to silence as we contemplate the tomb of the Lord. What has happened to that glorious journey that began in Jerusalem amid the songs and branches? What has happened to the "Hosannas" to the King of Glory?



The King of Glory lies dead in a tomb. It is only in fear and trembling – in silence – that we can behold the source of life held captive by death! But Christ is life! He is the Giver of Life! His tomb is a life-giving tomb, and it is precisely that mystery that we celebrate today – the mystery of Christ's victory over Death itself as the hymns exclaim: Today hell cries out groaning:
"I should not have accepted the man born of Mary.
He came and destroyed my power.
He shattered the gates of brass.
As God, He raised the souls I had held captive."

And finally, the service of Holy Saturday anticipates the final victory, crying out to Christ: Arise, O God, judge the earth, for to Thee belong all the nations!

In our silence, our waiting, our hope of His promise, we already anticipate the victory. Let us spend this day in that silent waiting and joy, confident in the glorious Resurrection which awaits us all in the new and blessed Pascha!

PASCHA **You made it!**

This is the day which the Lord has made!
Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Can any other words be uttered? Can any joy be more complete than that which we experience on the Feast of Feasts, the Resurrection of the Lord? Now is the time to enter the joy of the Lord! The journey has ended!

This is not some “Rite of Spring” – Aestre (the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring whose name forms the core word for Easter) is not the one whom we celebrate.

As the Jews were set free from slavery in Egypt, and after 40 years journey enter the Promised Land – a journey they called Passover, now we, the New Israel, following the 40 days of Lent, and then Holy Week celebrate “our” Passover – Pascha! We are enabled to enter the bridal chamber which is prepared for the faithful – to feast at the Lord’s Table.

Coming full circle, we act in imitation of the wise virgins chanted/sung of in the hymns of the first part of Holy Week as we come to the Church in the darkness of midnight: there Christ, the Bridegroom awaits us all!

It is the day of Resurrection! Be illumined, O people. .

Pascha, the Pascha of the Lord,

From death unto life,

From earth to heaven has Christ our God led us,

As we sing the song of victory:

"Christ is risen from the dead,

Trampling down death by death,

And upon those in the tombs bestowing life!"

