

Holy Week

In the Orthodox Church the last week of Christ's life is officially called **Passion Week**. In popular terminology it is called **Holy Week**. Each day is designated in the service books as "great and holy." There are special services every day of the week which are fulfilled in all churches. Earthly life ceases for the faithful as they "go up with the Lord to Jerusalem." (Matins of Great and Holy Monday)

Each day of Holy Week has its own particular theme. The theme of Monday is that of the sterile **fig tree** which yields no fruit and is condemned. Tuesday the accent is on the vigilance of the **wise virgins** who, unlike their foolish sisters, were ready when the Lord came to them. Wednesday the focus is on the **fallen woman** who repents. Great emphasis is made in the liturgical services to compare the woman, a sinful harlot who is saved, to Judas, a chosen apostle who is lost. The one gives her wealth to Christ and kisses his feet; the other betrays Christ for money with a kiss.

On each of these three days the Gospel is read at the Hours, as well as at the Vespers when the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is served. The Old Testament readings are from Exodus, Job and the Prophets. The Gospel is also read at the Matins services which are traditionally called the "**Bridegroom**" services because the general theme of each of these days is the **end of the world and the judgment of Christ**. It is the common practice to serve the **Bridegroom** services at night.

Behold, the bridegroom comes in the middle of the night and blessed is the servant whom he shall find watching, and unworthy the servant whom he shall find heedless. Take care then, O my soul, and be not weighed down by sleep that you will not be given over unto death and be excluded from the Kingdom. But rise up and call out: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou O God, by the

Theotokos have mercy on us. (Troparion of the First Three Days)

During the first three days of Holy Week, the Church prescribes that the entire Four Gospels be read at the Hours up to the point in each where the passion of Christ begins. Although this is not usually possible in parish churches, an attempt is sometimes made to read at least one complete Gospel, privately or in common, before Holy Thursday.



Holy Thursday

The vigil on the eve of **Holy Thursday** is dedicated exclusively to the **Passover Supper** which Christ celebrated with his twelve apostles. The main theme of the day is the meal itself at which Christ commanded that the Passover of the New Covenant be eaten in remembrance of himself, of his body broken and his blood shed for the remission of sins. In addition, Judas' betrayal and Christ's washing of his disciples' feet is also central to the liturgical commemoration of the day. In cathedral churches it is the custom for the bishop to re-enact the footwashing in a special ceremony following the Divine Liturgy.

At the vigil of Holy Thursday, the Gospel of St. Luke about the Lord's Supper is read. At the Divine Liturgy the Gospel is a composite of all the evangelists' accounts of the same event. The hymns and the readings of the day also all refer to the same central mystery.

When Thy glorious disciples were enlightened at the washing of their feet before the supper, then the impious Judas was darkened by the disease of avarice, and to the lawless judges he betrayed Thee, the Righteous Judge. Behold, O lover of money, this man because of avarice hanged himself. Flee from the insatiable desire which dared such things against the Master! O Lord who deals righteously with all, glory to Thee. (Troparion of Holy Thursday)

In the regions of the Master, at the Table of Immortality, in the high place, with minds lifted up, come, O ye faithful, let us eat with delight.... (Ninth Ode of the Canon of Matins)

The Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil is served on Holy Thursday in connection with Vespers. The long gospel of the Last Supper is read following the readings from **Exodus, Job, Isaiah** and the first letter of the Apostle Paul to the **Corinthians** (Chapter 11). The following

hymn replaces the Cherubic Hymn of the offertory of the liturgy, and serves as well as the Communion and Post-Communion Hymns.

Of Thy mystical supper, O Son of God, accept me today a communicant, for I will not speak of Thy mystery to thine enemies, neither like Judas will I give Thee a kiss, but like the thief will I confess Thee: Remember me, O Lord, in Thy kingdom.

The liturgical celebration of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday is not merely the annual remembrance of the "institution" of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Indeed the very event of the Passover Meal itself was not merely the last-minute action by the Lord to "institute" the central sacrament of the Christian Faith before his passion and death. On the contrary, the entire mission of Christ, and indeed the very purpose for the creation of the world in the first place, is so that God's beloved creature, made in his own divine image and likeness, could be in the most intimate communion with him for eternity, sitting at table with him, eating and drinking in his unending kingdom.

Thus, Christ the Son of God speaks to his apostles at the supper, and to all men who hear his words and believe in him and the Father who sent him:

Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a Kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom.... (Luke 22:28-31)

In a real sense, therefore, it is true to say that the **body broken** and the **blood spilled** spoken of by Christ at his last supper with the disciples was not

merely an anticipation and preview of what was yet to come; but that what was yet to come—the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven—came to pass precisely so that men could be blessed by God to be in **holy communion** with him forever, eating and drinking at the mystical table of his kingdom of which there will be no end.

Thus the “**Mystical Supper of the Son of God**” which is continually celebrated in the Divine Liturgy of the Christian Church, is the very essence of what life in God’s Kingdom will be for eternity.

Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God. (Luke 14:15)

Blessed are those who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. (Revelation 19:9)



Holy Friday

Matins of Holy Friday are generally celebrated on Thursday night. The main feature of this service is the reading of **twelve selections from the Gospels**, all of which are accounts of the passion of Christ. The first of these twelve readings is John 13:31-18:1. It is Christ's long discourse with his apostles that ends with the so-called **high priestly prayer**. The final gospel tells of the sealing of the tomb and the setting of the watch. (Matthew 27:62-66)

The twelve Gospel readings of Christ's passion are placed between the various parts of the service. The hymnology is all related to the sufferings of the Saviour and borrows heavily from the Gospels and the prophetic scriptures and psalms. The Lord's beatitudes are added to the service after the sixth gospel reading, and there is special emphasis given to the salvation of the thief who acknowledged Christ's Kingdom.

The Hours of Holy Friday repeat the Gospels of Christ's passion with the addition at each Hour of readings from Old Testament prophecies concerning men's redemption, and from letters of Saint Paul relative to man's salvation through the sufferings of Christ. The psalms used are also of a special prophetic character, e.g., Psalms 2, 5, 22, 109, 139, et al.

There is no Divine Liturgy on Good Friday for the same obvious reason that forbids the celebration of the eucharist on the fasting days of lent. (See above pp. 77)

Holy Saturday

The first service belonging to **Holy Saturday**, called in the Church the **Blessed Sabbath**, is the Vespers of Good Friday. It is usually celebrated in the mid-afternoon to commemorate the burial of Jesus.

Before the service begins, a “tomb” is erected in the middle of the church building and is decorated with flowers. Also a special icon which is painted on cloth (in Greek, **epitaphios**; in Slavonic, **plaschanitsa**) depicting the dead Saviour is placed on the altar table. In English this icon is often called the **winding-sheet**.

Vespers begin as usual with hymns about the suffering and death of Christ. After the entrance with the Gospel Book and the singing of **Gladsome Light**, selections from **Exodus**, **Job**, and **Isaiah 52** are read. An epistle reading from **First Corinthians (1:18-31)** is added, and the Gospel is read once more with selections from each of the four accounts of Christ's crucifixion and burial. The prokeimena and alleluia verses are psalm lines, heard often already in the Good Friday services, prophetic in their meaning:

They divided my garments among them and for my raiment they cast lots. (Psalm 22:18)

My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me. (Psalm 22:1)

Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep. (Psalm 88:6)

After more hymns glorifying the death of Christ, while the choir sings the dismissal song of St. Simeon, the priest vests fully in his dark-colored robes and incenses the winding-sheet which still lies upon the altar table. Then, after the **Our Father**, while the people sing the troparion of the day, the priest circles the altar table with the winding-sheet carried above his head and places it into the tomb for veneration by the faithful.

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. (Troparion of Holy Saturday)

The Matins of Holy Saturday are usually celebrated on Friday night. They begin in the normal way with the singing of **God is the Lord**, the troparion **The Noble Joseph**, and the following troparia:

When Thou didst descend to death O Life Immortal, Thou didst slay hell with the splendor of Thy Godhead! And when from the depths Thou didst raise the dead, all the powers of heaven cried out: O Giver of Life! Christ our God! Glory to Thee!

The angel standing by the grave cried out to the women: Myrrh is proper for the dead, but Christ has shown himself a stranger to corruption.

In place of the regular psalm reading the entire **Psalm 119** is read with a verse praising the dead Saviour chanted between each of its lines. This particular psalm is the verbal icon of Jesus, the righteous man whose life is in the hands of God and who, therefore, cannot remain dead. The **Praises**, as the verses are called, glorify God as “the Resurrection and the Life,” and marvel at his humble condescension into death.

There is in the person of Jesus Christ the perfect unification of the perfect love of man toward God and the perfect love of God toward man. It is this divine-human love which is contemplated and praised over the tomb of the Saviour. As the reading progresses the **Praises** become shorter, and gradually more concentrated on the final victory of the Lord, thus coming to their proper conclusion:

I long for Thy salvation, O Lord, Thy law is my delight. (Psalm 119:174)

The mind is affrighted at Thy dread and strange burial.

Let me live, that I may praise Thee, and let Thy ordinances help me. (119:175)

The women with spices came early at dawn to anoint Thee.

I have gone astray like a lost sheep, seek Thy servant, for I do not forget Thy commandments. (119:176)

By Thy resurrection grant peace to the Church and salvation to Thy people!

After the final glorification of the Trinity, the church building is lighted and the first announcement of the women coming to the tomb resounds through the congregation as the celebrant censens the entire church. Here for the first time comes the clear proclamation of the good news of salvation in Christ's resurrection. The canon song of Matins continues to praise Christ's victory over death by his own death, and uses each of the Old Testament canticles as a prefigurative image of man's final salvation through Jesus. Here for the first time there emerges the indication that this Sabbath—this particular Saturday on which Christ lay dead—is truly the most **blessed seventh day** that ever existed. This is the day when Christ rests from his work of recreating the world. This is the day when the Word of God **“through whom all things were made”** (John 1:3) rests as a dead man in the grave, saving the world of his own creation and opening the graves:

This is the most blessed Sabbath on which Christ sleeps, but to rise again on the third day. (Kontakion and Oikos)

Again, the canon ends on the final note of the victory of Christ.

Lament not for me, Mother, beholding me in the grave, the son whom you have born in seedless conception, for I will arise and be glorified, and will exalt with glory, unceasingly as God, all those who with faith and love glorify you. (Ninth Ode of the Canon)

As more verses of praise are sung, the celebrant again vests fully in his somber vestments and, as the great doxology is chanted, he once more censes the tomb of the Saviour. Then, while the congregation with lighted candles continually repeats the song of the Thrice-Holy, the faithful—led by their pastor carrying the Gospel Book with the winding-sheet of Christ held over his head—go in procession around the outside of the church building. This procession bears witness to the total victory of Christ over the powers of darkness and death. The whole universe is cleansed, redeemed and restored by the entrance of the Life of the World into death.

As the procession returns to the church building, the troparia are sung once again, and the prophecy of Ezekiel about the “dry bones” of Israel is chanted with great solemnity:

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, O my people. And I will put my spirit within you and you shall live. . . .
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

With the victorious lines of the psalms calling God to arise, to lift up his hands, to scatter his enemies and to let the righteous rejoice; and with the repeated singing of Alleluia, the letter of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians is read: “**Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed.**” (I Corinthians 5:6-8) The Gospel about the sealing of the tomb is read once more, and the service is ended with intercession and benediction. The Vespers and Matins of the **Blessed Sabbath**, together with the Divine Liturgy which follows, form a masterpiece of the Orthodox liturgical tradition. These services are not at all a dramatic re-enactment of the historical death and burial of Christ. Neither are they a kind of ritual reproduction of scenes of the Gospel. They are, rather, the deepest spiritual and liturgical penetration into the eternal meaning of the saving

events of Christ, viewed and praised already with the full knowledge of their divine significance and power.

The Church does not pretend, as it were, that it does not know what will happen with the crucified Jesus. It does not sorrow and mourn over the Lord as if the Church itself were not the very creation which has been produced from his wounded sides and from the depths of his tomb. All through the services the victory of Christ is contemplated and the resurrection is proclaimed. For it is indeed only in the light of the victorious resurrection that the deepest divine and eternal meaning of the events of Christ's passion and death can be genuinely grasped, adequately appreciated and properly glorified and praised.

On Holy Saturday itself, Vespers are served with the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. This service already belongs to the Passover Sunday. It begins in the normal way with the evening psalm, the litany, the hymns following the evening Psalm 141 and the entrance with the singing of the vesperal hymn, **Glad-some Light**. The celebrant stands at the tomb in which lies the winding-sheet with the image of the Saviour in the sleep of death.

Following the evening entrance which is made with the Book of the Gospels, fifteen readings from the Old Testament scriptures are read, all of which relate to God's work of creation and salvation which has been summed up and fulfilled in the coming of the predicted Messiah. Besides the readings in **Genesis** about creation, and the passover-exodus of the Israelites in the days of Moses in **Exodus**, there are selections from the prophecies of **Isaiah**, **Ezekiel**, **Jeremiah**, **Daniel**, **Zephaniah**, and **Jonah** as well as from **Joshua** and the **Books of Kings**. The **Canticles of Moses**, and of the **Three Youths** found in **Daniel** are chanted as well.

After the Old Testament readings, the celebrant intones the normal liturgical exclamation for the singing of the

Thrice-Holy Hymn, but in its place the baptismal verse from **Galatians** is sung: **As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Alleluia. (Galatians 3:27)**

As usual in the Divine Liturgy the epistle reading follows at this point. It is the normal baptismal selection of the Orthodox Church (Romans 6:3-11). **If we have been united with him in a death like his we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:5)**

At this time the royal gates are closed, and the celebrants and altar servers change their robes from the dark vestments of the passion into the bright vestments of Christ’s victory over death. At this time all vestings of the church appointments are also changed into the color signifying Christ’s triumph over sin, the devil and death. This revesting takes place while the people sing the verses of Psalm 82: **Arise O Lord and judge the earth, for to Thee belong all the nations.**

After the solemn chanting of the psalm verses, to which are often added the hymn glorifying Christ as the **New Passover, the Living Sacrifice** who is slain, the **Lamb of God** who takes away the sins of the world; the celebrants emerge from the altar to announce over the tomb of Christ the glad tidings of his victorious triumph over death and his command to the apostles: **“Make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded....” (Matthew 28:1-20)** This Gospel text is also the reading of the baptismal ceremony of the Orthodox Church.

The Divine Liturgy then continues in the brilliance of Christ’s destruction of death. The following song replaces the Cherubic Hymn of the offertory:

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.

Before him go the ranks of angels: all the principalities and powers, the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim, covering their faces, singing the hymn: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

In place of the Hymn to the Theotokos, the ninth ode of the matinal canon is sung once again: **“Lament not for me, Mother . . . for I will arise.”** (see above) The communion hymn is the line of the psalm: **The Lord awoke as one asleep, and arose saving us. (Psalm 78-65)** The Divine Liturgy is fulfilled in the communion with him who lies dead in his human body, and yet is enthroned eternally with God the Father; the one who, as the Creator and Life of the World, destroys death by his life-creating death. His tomb—which still stands in the center of the church—is shown to be, as the Liturgy calls it: **the fountain of our resurrection.**

Originally this Liturgy was the Easter baptismal liturgy of Christians. It remains today as the annual experience for every Christian of his own dying and rising with the Lord.

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. (Romans 6:8-9)

Christ lies dead, yet he is alive. He is in the tomb, but already he is **“trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”** There is nothing more to do now but to live through the evening of the Blessed Sabbath on which Christ sleeps, awaiting the midnight hour when the **Day of our Lord** will begin to dawn upon us, and the night full of light will come when we will proclaim with the angel: **“He is risen, he is not here; see the tomb where they laid him.” (Mark 16:6)**