

# Great and Holy Week

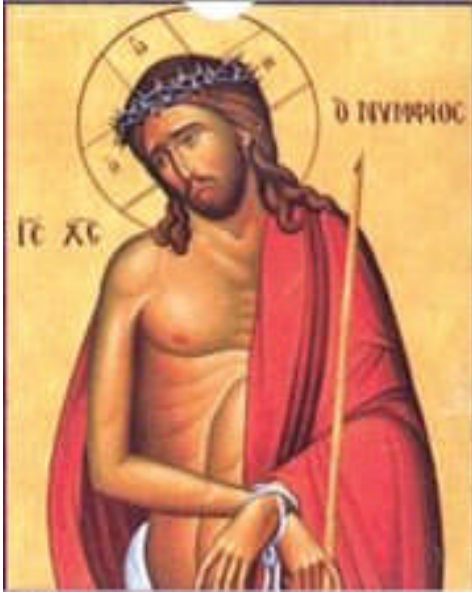
Lazarus Saturday concludes Great Lent. On this day we remember Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead and the promise of universal resurrection for us all. Lazarus Saturday provides a bridge to Holy Week during which the Church services remember Christ's Passion, the last week before His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Technically, in the Eastern Church, Holy Week is a separate season from The Great Fast. Its services mirror those of The Great Fast and are contained in the same book, the *Lenten Triodion*. Whereas, during The Great Fast each week has its own theme, during Holy Week each day has its own theme, based on the Gospel readings of the day.

## Great and Holy Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday

The theme of the first three days of Holy Week is that of Christ as Bridegroom, and the days are therefore referred to as the Bridegroom Days. The Bridegroom services are derived from the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which calls for preparedness at the Second Coming, for the "thief comes in the middle of the night". The title Bridegroom suggests the intimacy of love. It is not without significance that the Kingdom of God is compared to a bridal feast and a bridal chamber. The Christ of the Passion is the Divine Bridegroom of the Church. The imagery suggests the final union of the Lover with the beloved.

The main emphasis of the Bridegroom Service is *metonoia* (*change of heart*) and each service has its own particular theme on repentance and watchfulness. One of its primary features is its troparion:

***"Behold, the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, and blessed is the servant He shall find vigilant; but unworthy is he whom he shall find neglectful. Beware therefore, O my soul, lest you be weighed down by sleep, lest you be given over to death and be closed out from the kingdom; but rise up crying out: "Holy! Holy! Holy are You our God; through the intercessions of the Theotokos, have mercy on us."***



The icon depicts Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, bearing the marks of His suffering, yet preparing the way for a marriage feast in His Kingdom. He is dressed in a cloak which the Roman soldiers put on Him, mocking Him as "King".

The Crown – is a symbol of His marriage to the Church

The rope – is a symbol of bondage to sin, death and corruption which was loosed with Christ's death on the Cross.

The reed – is a symbol of His humility; God rules His Kingdom with humility.

This icon is also known as the Icon of Extreme Humility: To know what humility is we must look to Christ; to know how we gain humility, again we look to Christ. What is the ultimate humility according to this icon?

***"At the arrival of unjust persecution, bow your head. At the jeers of false accusations, cross your arms over your heart, whether physically or interiorly, and gratefully receive what is spitefully offered. And when faced with the question, 'How far, how far do I tolerate this shame, this injustice, remember the answer is the grave. This is what the icon labels 'Extreme Humility', and it is humility that we must strive to emulate each day."***

***Hieromonk Irenaeus***

## **Great and Holy Wednesday**

During the Presanctified Liturgy on this day a gospel reading (Matthew 26: 6-16) is included. Within the past two centuries, the practice has developed to include the mystery of the Anointing of the Sick, commemorating Christ's anointing with myrrh. The service includes the priest anointing the faithful with holy oil, the visible carrier of the grace of God. The mystery of the Anointing of the Sick provides both physical and spiritual healing with the holy oil blessed by the Holy Spirit.

## **Holy Thursday**

On Holy Thursday, the Liturgy of St. Basil is celebrated with Vespers. Jesus drew His last breath of freedom on this Thursday night. Christ knew all the events which were about to take place. He gathered His apostles in order to institute the Holy Eucharist for them and for the Church forever. Christ presented Bread and Wine as the Elements of His very Body and His very Blood; they are the Precious Gifts which have been left as His Perpetual Presence in the Church. The institution of the Holy Eucharist and its re-enactment throughout the centuries, both as a sacrifice and sacred ceremony, is the life giving remembrance which, along with the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, constitutes the basis of salvation for the Christian.

After supper on this Thursday evening, the dramatic closing moments of Christ's life followed. After, the washing of the feet, He pointed to the betrayer, inaugurated the Eucharist, and pronounced the new commandment of love for one another. He spoke words of comfort to them, promising the descent of the Holy Spirit to complete man's union with Christ. His departure, Christ said, would bring joy to them and to the world. Christ took His apostles out into the night where He could see face-to-face His coworkers in the bright light of the full moon. He then withdrew to pray. After the agony of the "bloody sweat", came the kiss of Judas and His arrest. Thus Jesus became the source of spiritual and physical freedom of mankind.

On this day, with greater feeling than ever, Christians come for Holy Communion singing: "Accept me this day, O Son of God, as a partaker of your mystical supper. I will not tell the mystery to Your enemies, nor will I give a kiss as did Judas, but like the thief, I confess to You. Remember me, O Lord, when You come into Your Kingdom."

## **Great and Holy Friday**

The Matins of the Passion of Jesus which include the reading of the Twelve Gospels may be conducted on Friday morning or Thursday evening. This service celebrates the holy, saving and awesome Passion of Christ. To take away our sins, Christ willingly endured spitting, scourging, buffeting, scorn, mocking, the purple robe, the reed, sponge, vinegar, nails, spear, and above all, death on the Cross.

This service is long, but its content is dramatic and deeply moving. Participation in the prayers and historical sequence of events, as related in the Gospels and hymns, provides a foundation for the great events yet to come.

The readings relate to the last instructions of Christ to His disciples, the prophecy of the drama of the Cross, the dramatic prayer of Christ and His new commandment.

The twelve readings at this service are:

John 13:31-18:1  
John 18:1-29  
Matthew 26:57-75  
John 18:28-19:16  
Matthew 27:3-32  
Mark 15:16-32  
Matthew 27:33-54  
Luke 23:32-49  
John 19:19-37  
Mark 15:43-47  
John 19:38-42  
Matthew 27:62-66

**Great and Holy Friday** continues with **Vespers** on Friday afternoon. During this service, the removal of the Body of Christ from the Cross is commemorated with a sense of mourning for the terrible events which took place. Once more, excerpts from the Old Testament are read together with hymns, and again the entire story is related. Apostle Paul, interpreting the dreadful event, exhorts the Church: *"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... we preach Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God"* (1 Cor. 1: 18f).

The Gospel reading, a combination from all four Gospels, mentions Joseph of Arimathea, who took charge of Jesus' body, wrapped it in a shroud and placed it in a new tomb. Near the end of the service a shroud or plashchanytsia is carried in procession. The shroud itself represents the body of Jesus wrapped in a burial shroud, and is a roughly full-size cloth icon of the body of Christ. It is carried to a spot near the front of the Church, which represents the tomb of Christ and is often decorated with an abundance of flowers. We are reminded that during Christ's entombment He descends into Hades to free the dead of the ages before His Incarnation. The mournful, ***"The noble Joseph took down your most pure body from the tree. He wrapped it with a clean shroud, and, with aromatic spices, placed it in a new tomb."*** is sung. At the end of the service everyone comes forward to venerate the Shroud.

On Friday night, the Matins of Holy and Great Saturday, a unique service known as **The Lamentation at the Tomb** is celebrated. This service is also sometimes called **Jerusalem Matins**. Much of the service takes place around the tomb of Christ. A unique feature of the service is the chanting of the Lamentations or Praises, which consist of verses chanted by the clergy interspersed between the verses of Psalm 119. The shroud or plashchanytsia will lay in the tomb until the Paschal Service early Sunday morning. In most churches, the shroud is never left alone, but is accompanied 24 hours a day by someone holding a vigil and praying before it.



## Holy Saturday

On Great and Holy Saturday afternoon, Vespers and a Divine Liturgy of St. Basil are served, marked with readings of Psalms and Resurrection hymns that tell of Christ's descent into Hades. The "first resurrection of Adam" and the conquering of Death are celebrated.

This service comes from the ancient liturgical tradition of the Church of Constantinople and was its primary Paschal service. It is only at this service that the resurrection Gospel is read. The hymn "Arise O God" from the Psalms was the original primary Paschal hymn before "Christ is Risen" took its place. Because of its place as the ancient Paschal celebration, the service has a bright and resurrectional character.