

Magnificat

Volume XVIII
Number 1

News from
HOLY TRANSFIGURATION SKETE
Courtesy of Poorrock Abbey Publishing
Society of Saint John
Star Route 1, Box 226
Eagle Harbor, Michigan 49950
<http://www.societystjohn.com>

Holy Week
2002

Course Complete

It has been six weeks less two days since we began the Great Fast on the night of Forgiveness Sunday. We have stayed the course and now stand on the threshold of those awesome days wherein we relive liturgically the week that brought us salvation. Our fasting, penance, and compunction these past forty days have been in preparation for what is to come; we pray we have been made fit to celebrate the mysteries worthily.

The Great Fast, according to the Byzantine manner of counting the days, is now over, but it is not yet the time for feasting. The fast of Holy Week is even more severe than that which has prepared us for it. It is also more ancient, deriving ultimately from the Week of Unleavened Bread, prescribed by Moses for the Israelites in commemoration of their liberation from Egypt.

Slavery. Similarly, we have been freed from slavery to sin and death, and we solemnly commemorate the events that wrought our own Passover from death to life.

**Having come to the end
of the forty days,
we beseech You,
O Lord and lover of Mankind:
May we also behold
the holy week of your Passion,
and glorify in it your lofty deeds
and Your ineffable work of salvation,
as we sing with one voice:
O Lord, glory to you.**

From Vespers of Lazarus Saturday

Already, during the past week, the poetic texts of the Divine Office have begun to take on the character of an historic narrative. We are told of Lazarus' progressing illness, of his death and burial, of the mourning of his sisters, of Jesus' delay, and then of His coming to raise him from the dead, before making His own triumphal entry

into Jerusalem. We feel a climax approaching, and the texts draw us into the events. They are not just dead episodes of the past; they are vital moments in God's eternal Today and in the living memory of His Church. We live them again, in sacred, liturgical time, and apply their meaning to ourselves.

We are a Catholic Monastery of the Byzantine Rite, under the jurisdiction of the Eparchy of Chicago, and belonging to the Ukrainian Metropolis in the United States of America, which is in union with the Pope of Rome, supreme pastor of the universal Church. We embrace Evangelical poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability of life, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the traditions of the Christian East. In our skete at Jacob's Falls, on the shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula, we devote ourselves to a common life of prayer and work for the praise, love, and service of God and for the upbuilding of His Kingdom through the arts.

Prelude to Pascha

Between the intensity of Holy Week and the introspection and compunction of Lent, the Church gives us two days of rejoicing. The red and purple vestments that have marked the penitential tone of our celebrations during the past forty days now give way to the white and gold of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday. The texts sing of triumph and victory, and there is a general atmosphere of joy.

This is not the result of any psychological calculation; the two feasts are intimately bound by Scripture to one another and to the events of the coming week. St. Matthew places the Lord's Passion in the week immediately following His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and St. John (Jn. 12:17-19) cites the raising of Lazarus as the source of both the large crowds that welcomed Him and the confirmation of the Scribes and Pharisees in their implacable hatred for Him. The joyful feast of the Raising of Lazarus, then, leads us directly into the Passion.

Lazarus' return to life has been commemorated on the Saturday before Palm Sunday from very early times in the East. The fourth century pilgrim nun, Silvia Egeria, in the journal of her travels, describes how on this day there was a procession after the morning Liturgy in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. The Bishop, clergy, and people of the town took part, stopping for prayers, hymns, and scripture readings at the church erected on the spot where Martha, the sister of Lazarus had encountered Jesus; and then continuing on to the tomb, where a similar

service was conducted.

In present celebration, the Feast has something of the character of a "little Easter." Its Office has Resurrection texts at Matins such as are normally sung on Sundays, and the presence of the hymn, **All who have been baptized into Christ have put on the Person of Christ**, at Liturgy indicates that, like Pascha and Theophany, it was a special day for baptisms in the past. Since the forty day fast just completed originated as a preparation for Baptism, this would naturally follow.

**O Christ our God,
You confirmed the resurrection of all
before the time of Your Passion
by raising Lazarus from the dead.
Therefore, we as the children of Israel
carry the symbols of victory
and cry out to You:
Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is He who comes
in the name of the Lord.**

Troparion of Lazarus Saturday

Beyond all historical recollection, however, the significance of the feast lies in its definitive demonstration of Christ's power over death. It foreshadows not only Christ's own Resurrection after a three day sleep of death, but the General Resurrection of us all at the end of time, as well.

The poetic texts dwell on Jesus' human and divine natures. As a man He weeps, prays, and asks the location of Lazarus' tomb. As God He returns to life one who had been four days dead. Those Jesus had previously raised, and, indeed, those the prophets had raised before him, had been newly dead; life had not long abandoned them. Lazarus, on the other hand, was dead to the point of corruption. His being raised was an unmistakable demonstration of Divine Power. This fact will be kept before us throughout the coming week, especially on Good Friday, when we relive the sufferings of the God-Man, who was put to death for our many sins.





The King of Glory Enters

Palm Sunday is likewise a very ancient festival. It is attested in sources as early as the third century, and Silvia Egeria again gives a detailed account of how it was celebrated in Jerusalem at the time of her pilgrimage in the fourth century. She recounts a great procession forming in early afternoon on the Mount of Olives and making its way to the Church of the Resurrection (Holy Sepulcher) for the celebration of Vespers. The people, including small children, waved palms in the air and sang Psalms as they went, repeating the refrain: **Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.** The clergy followed at the end of the procession, the Bishop bringing up the rear, riding on a donkey.

The Byzantine tradition no longer knows such a procession with palms, although it remains a principal feature of Palm Sunday celebrations in the West. Currently in the East, palms are blessed at Matins on Palm Sunday after the pertinent Gospel reading and are distributed to the clergy and the people who hold them throughout the remainder of the service and through Divine Liturgy. In the Slav lands, where palms do not grow, willow branches – the first to bud in the Spring, and, therefore, symbolic of a return to life – are used instead. In any case, the memory and symbolism are the same.

In antiquity, palms were a symbol of victory and triumph. They were awarded to the victors at games and carried in the triumphal processions of kings and emperors. Coupled with the royal acclamation: **Hosanna!**, they

proclaimed Jesus as King, the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies we read at the Vespers of the Feast. The Romans, as the occupying power, could easily have taken offense at such a claimed usurpation of their power. The Scribes and Pharisees were alarmed and told Jesus to control His followers. The people shouted all the louder; having raised Lazarus from the dead, He was well deserving of their praise; this could be none other than the long awaited Messiah who would be their King.

But Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world; His power was no threat to the Roman State. His fulfillment of the prophecies came in a manner the people of His day did not expect. The donkey on which He rode, though mentioned in those prophecies, was a symbol of His humility, his assumption of all the infirmities of mankind. The sufferings He would bear in the coming days were the instruments of His triumph. But the people could not understand and would quickly turn against Him; many who shouted, **Hosanna!**, on Sunday would, on Friday, yell: **Crucify Him!**

Where, then, do we stand? Are we so different, after all, from them? By accepting the palms or willows in Church, we proclaim His lordship over us, acknowledge Him as our King. Is this mere lip service on our part? Do we truly live as His subjects, or, when some trial, difficulty, or inconvenience arises, do we turn aside or deny Him, or even crucify Him anew? God grant that we may always with sincerity shout: **Blessed is**

In Heaven
You are carried upon a throne;
on earth
You rode upon a colt,
O Christ our God.
You received the praise of angels
and the hymns of children
crying out to you:
Blessed is He
who comes to restore Adam.

Kontakion of Palm Sunday

Fountainhead of Salvation

This year, since the Feast of the Annunciation falls on Great Monday, we are granted another day of rejoicing before the intensity of the Passion. This is not so unusual; this Feast frequently falls within Great and Holy Week. The Feast is never transferred; the Typicon (Liturgical Directory) provides rubrics for its celebration even should it fall on Palm Sunday, Good Friday, or Pascha, itself.

The celebration of Christ's virginal conception in the Womb of Mary, its date of March twenty-fifth falls exactly nine months before Christmas. Curiously, there is an ancient tradition that this was also the date of the Crucifixion – and of the creation of the world, as well.

Annunciation is the pre-eminent feast of the Incarnation. It is one of the twelve Great Feasts of the Church year, and the first of many that concern Christ and His Blessed Mother. It marks the beginning of the New Covenant, the new dispensation of God's grace to mankind. God becomes Man, lowers Himself to share in our human condition. He takes flesh of the Virgin Mary and becomes one of us. This is the source and cause of the exalted status we accord Mary as Mother of God, and the root of our salvation, as well.

The saving events we commemorate during this week, the suffering that wipes away our sins, the death that destroys Death, and the Resurrection that restores us to life, would not be possible without the Incarnation. God is pure spirit; in His Divine Nature, He is incapable of suffering. Only by becoming man, by taking on a human body, by uniting a human nature to His own

Divine Nature, could He undergo the Passion that expresses His ineffable love for us and accomplishes our salvation. It is perhaps fitting, then, that from time to time we find ourselves celebrating the Annunciation in conjunction with the Passion.

Worthy celebration of this Feast is particularly important for our times. Today life in the womb is threatened on all sides, often being destroyed merely because it seems inconvenient. It is salutary for us to recall that God, Himself, lived in a human womb for nine months and that He was human as well as divine from the first instant of His conception. Celebrating this Feast, we acknowledge the sacredness of life in the womb. May we never consent to its wanton destruction.

Annunciation is a truly joyous Feast; in it heaven and earth rejoice at the redemption of mankind and the wondrous manner in which our human nature became wedded to the Divine. We rejoice in its celebration. But at this evening's Vespertal Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom we read St. Matthew's description (24: 3-35) of the Second Coming as well as St. Luke's (1:24-38) account of the Annunciation, and the Canon at Great Compline challenges us to keep watch with Christ on the Mount of Olives. Holy Week is still very much with us.

Following monastic custom, during the Little Hours of the first three days of Holy week, we also read the Gospels in continuous fashion, so that we hear all four – except for the last chapters of John, which we will encounter later in the week – as a whole.

**Today is the fountainhead
of our salvation
and the revelation
of an eternal mystery:
the Son of God becomes a virgin's Son,
and Gabriel announces this grace.
Therefore, let us exclaim with him
to the Mother of God:
Hail, O woman full of grace:
the Lord is with you!**

Troparion of the Feast



The Bridegroom is Coming

The theme of eschatological expectation begun with Monday night's reading from St. Matthew dominates the first three days of the of Holy Week. At Matins and the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts on Tuesday, we listen to the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel. Hearing Jesus', scathing denunciation of the hypocritical and faithless religious leaders of His own day and His chilling depiction of the End Times and the Last Judgment, we cannot help but feel uncomfortable. Examining ourselves in the light of His teaching, inevitably we find ourselves wanting.

The parables in Tuesday's Gospel readings inspire much of the liturgical poetry we chant at the Services during this time. Themes drawn from the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Mt. 25:1-13), and of the Faithful Servant (Mt. 24:45-51) mingle in the hauntingly beautiful Song of the Bridegroom which begins Matins each of these three days and sets the tone for the period. We must be watchful and awake so as to enter into His Kingdom, for He is coming soon.

Christ is the Bridegroom whose coming we eagerly await. We do not know the day or the hour, but He has assured that He will come again. We must live each moment in the expectation of His immanent return. Moreover, we must be continually prepared for Him to come into our hearts at any time. We must remain vigilant

and wait.

The Western Church emphasizes this sense of watching and waiting during its pre-Christmas season of Advent. In the East, because of the appointed Gospel readings, we observe it during the Week of the Passion. Although the time devoted to it is much more brief, the reinforcement offered by the exquisite poetic texts and the beautiful icon depicting the Suffering Christ as the Bridegroom make the sense of longing all the more poignant.

**O Bridegroom,
whose grace surpasses
all human beauty,
You invite us to the spiritual feast
in Your palace.
Strip me of my coarse garment of sin,
and make me a partaker of Your Passion.
Clothe me in the glorious adornment
of Your beauty.
In Your mercy, accept me
as a luminous guest
at the banquet in Your Kingdom.**

From the Aposticha of Matins
Great and Holy Tuesday

The historical narrative resumes on Wednesday as we hear about Jesus' anointing at Bethany and Judas' betrayal of his Master. Meditation on these two events and the motives and actions of the two principals pervades the day's chants. The harlot who lavishly anointed Jesus and repented of her sins is contrasted with the disciple who betrayed His Master for money and perished unrepentant.

Judas and his fate will loom large in the poetic texts during the coming days: **O Lord, keep our souls from falling like him.**

Throughout this Week we are confronted with people and situations depicted in the chants – and, indeed, in the Scriptures, themselves – in a less than favorable light. It is important that we always see them in reference to our selves. They are presented for our edification that we might learn from them. We must not feel superior to them or develop a hatred for them, but, rather, that we must see ourselves in them and repent. It is our sins that bring Jesus to His Cross.

