



Humility and Betrayal

**O Christ,
You girded Yourself with a linen cloth
and washed the feet of your Disciples;
wash also
that which is corrupt in our souls.
Surround us
with your spiritual brightness
so that we may observe
your commandments
and glorify Your goodness, O Lord.**

From the Office of Footwashing

The coming of Great and Holy Thursday brings us into the most solemn days of the year and the very heart of our faith. The poetic texts emphasize three principal themes: the institution of the Eucharist, Jesus' humility and example of service as He washes the feet of His disciples, and the betrayal of Judas.

The Gospel reading at Matins is taken from St. Luke's account (22:1-39) of the Last Supper. It recounts the priestly conspiracy against Jesus, the complicity of Judas, and Jesus' predictions of His being betrayed and of Peter's impending denial. In it Jesus also instructs the Disciples on how to behave in time of trial and how they are to imitate His example of humility in their dealings with one another. Embedded at the reading's heart is a brief description of the first Eucharist.

The reading of the First Hour (Jer. 11:18-23; 12:1-5, 9-11, 14-15) recounts a plot against the life of the Prophet Jeremiah, his complaint to the Lord about the seeming success and prosperity of evil doers, and God's promise of coming justice and mercy. We do not celebrate the remaining Little Hours in common today.

At the Vesperal Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, we read from Isaiah the first prophecy of the Suffering Servant, as well as selections from Exodus and Job. The Epistle reading contains St. Paul's account of the institution of the Eucharist. There

follows the Gospel reading, a long cento of texts drawn from Matthew, Luke, and John, narrating the Last Supper, the betrayal of Judas, and Jesus' arrest.

The Office of Footwashing follows immediately upon the Liturgy.

The day's liturgical poetry expounds the drama of Judas and his betrayal of Christ. Plotting treachery, he stretches out his foot for the Lord to wash, and his hand to receive His Body in the Eucharist. With lips stained by the sacrilege of that unworthy reception, he kisses his Lord and God in betrayal. Driven by his love for money and unable to seek forgiveness, he hangs himself in despair. **O Lord, keep our souls from falling like him!**

The vividness of the texts urges us to examine ourselves. How often have we played the Judas by receiving the Eucharist indifferently, while holding a grudge, or with anger in our hearts? Where does our real allegiance lie? How often and in how many ways do we continually betray the Lord?

Rather, let us make our own the text repeated so often in this evening's solemn Liturgy and recited before Communion each day:

**Accept me as a partaker
of Your Mystical Supper,
O Son of God,
for I will not reveal your mystery
to your enemies,
nor will I give you a Kiss
as did Judas,
but like the thief I confess to You:
Remember me, O Lord,
when You shall come
into Your Kingdom.**

Death and Burial

Good Friday is a day of total fast and abstinence. Divine Liturgy is not celebrated, nor is there a Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. Today we feel truly bereft of the Lord. We spend most of the day in church, reliving His saving suffering, death, and burial.

Matins is long and sober. It consists primarily of twelve readings, drawn from the four Gospels, excerpted and arranged so as to form a coherent and complete account of the Passion, beginning with Jesus' Last Supper discourses, and ending with the guard being posted at His tomb. Enshrining the readings are poetic texts expressing the shock and horror of the entire universe at seeing Christ, God the Son, being mocked, judged, and put to death.

The theme is carried into the Little Hours which today, as also on the Vigils of Christmas and Theophany, take the form known as Royal Hours. This expanded format includes Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings for each Hour and additional poetry, as well as the usual Psalmody and fixed prayers.

Silvia Egeria recounts a solemn veneration of the Cross as taking place in Jerusalem on Good Friday during the fourth century. Although this remains a principal feature of the Good Friday Service of the Western Church, it is not within the current Byzantine/Slav tradition. In modern Greek practice, a cross is erected in the church at a certain point in the Matins service, but the Cross is not solemnly venerated as on the third Sunday of Lent or on August first and September fourteenth. Another sort of solemn veneration will take place later.

At Vespers of the Entombment we hear an-

other Gospel cento of Passion narratives, along with a Suffering Servant prophecy from Isaiah and an exposition on the power of the Cross from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The poetic texts of the first part of the Service reiterate the theme of a universe shocked and in mourning at the suffering and death of the Son of God. The later ones meditate on the removal of His body from the Cross and His burial by Joseph of Arimathea. Near the end of the Service comes one of the most moving moments in the Byzantine liturgical tradition.

During the singing of the final chant of the day, **The Noble Joseph took down Your most pure Body** ..., the clergy come out from the Altar holding aloft the Holy Shroud. This is rectangular piece of cloth, often richly decorated, bearing a painted or embroidered image of the dead Christ laid out for burial. They solemnly carry it in

procession around the church, accompanied by the other ministers, the monks, and the faithful, and reverently lay it on the Bier which has previously been erected in the middle of the church.

The senior priest incenses the Shroud, sprinkles it with rose water, and scatters flowers over it. Approaching with great reverence, he then venerates it, as do all present, individually and in due order, kissing it at the marks of the Five Wounds - hands, feet, and side.

At Compline, standing before the Shroud, we sing the Canon of the Lamentations of the Blessed Virgin. Afterward we remain, freely keeping wake, in silence and private prayer.

**Seeing You crucified, O Christ,
the one who gave birth to you cried out:
What is this strange mystery
that I see, O my Son!
How can You die upon the Cross,
You, the Prince of Life,
crucified in the flesh?**

From Antiphon XV
Matins of Good Friday



Sabbath Rest

Today we commemorate the burial of Christ and His descent into Hell to free all those imprisoned there since Adam's expulsion from Paradise. We feel a sense of emptiness and loss; the tone of the Service, however, is not one of extreme sorrow, but rather of expectation. After all the intensity of Good Friday, today seems serene. On this day the Lord of Creation takes His Sabbath rest. Our vigil continues.

We gather before the Shroud in the early morning darkness to sing the beautiful Office of Jerusalem Matins. In this Service we chant Psalm 118 (119), the longest in the Psalter, an extended alphabetic composition meditating on the virtues of keeping God's law. We also chant this Psalm at services for the dead, so today's Matins does have some appearance of being a funeral for Christ. But it does not have the finality we usually associate with death; we know that this cannot be the end.

Today, alone, we sing the long Psalm with interverses following each of its 176 lines. These Praises continue yesterday's theme of shock at seeing what should have been impossible: Christ, the Giver of Life, now lying lifeless in the grave; He, whom the whole universe cannot contain, now enclosed within the narrow confines of a tomb; the Sun of Justice, who enlightens the whole world, now hidden in the earth. We examine the many aspects of this inscrutable conundrum. It begins to become clear. Slowly, as the long Service progresses, our conviction grows: All this could not have been in vain; there must truly be a divine purpose at work here.

Christ has willingly submitted to Death in order to conquer Death. Lifted up on the Cross,

He has drawn us to Himself, and His death has become the source of our life. He has gone down among the dead in order to free them from the grip of Death. Through His death He has despoiled the realm of Death, bursting its gates of bronze, shattering its iron bars. Death holds no more power over Him - nor, because of Him, over us.

The Shroud still lies before us. He appears as dead; we know He lives. Soon He must manifest His power. We wait in faith.

Near the end of Matins we begin singing the Trisagion in the funeral tone and again carry the Shroud in solemn procession. We go outside the church if the weather permits, singing "Holy God, Holy Mighty One..." and holding the Shroud aloft. The dawn is already far advanced. We go back into the church and lovingly enshrine the Shroud once more upon the Bier.

We listen to three further readings from Scripture. Ezekiel (37:1-14) recounts his vision of the dry bones coming back to life. Paul (I Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 3:13-14) tells us that Christ, our Paschal lamb has been sacrificed; He has redeemed us from the curse of the Law; we must purify ourselves. Matthew (27:62-66) tells how a guard was set at the tomb of Jesus.

We again reverently, and in solemn fashion, venerate the Shroud.

We do not say the Little Hours in church today. We pass the day in quiet expectation, calmly making the necessary preparations for the Great Day that is nearly upon us.

**When You descended to Death,
O Immortal Life,
You destroyed the Abyss
by the radiance of Your divinity.
And when You raised the dead
from the depths of the earth,
all the heavenly powers cried out:
O Giver of Life, Christ our God,
Glory to You.**

Troparion of Great and Holy Saturday





Trampling Death by Death

As on Holy Thursday and on the Vigils of Christmas and Theophany, we begin our Easter celebration in the late afternoon with the Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. The Service of Holy Saturday begins much as any other Sunday Vespers, with the usual Resurrection texts. Today, since Pascha renews all things, we sing the set in Tone One from the eight tone cycle. There follows a series of texts in which Hades laments the loss of the dead whom Christ has freed from their long imprisonment there. Then, after the ancient hymn, **Phos Hilarion**, which is sung every evening at Vespers, we begin the readings from Scripture.

Fifteen Old Testament readings are prescribed for this most solemn of services. These declare God's mighty deeds in the past on behalf of His people, His dramatic and decisive interventions to save them danger and win them their freedom. They celebrate His strength in canticles, and, in prophecy, they tell of wonders that were yet to come. They narrate certain foreshadowings of Christ's work of salvation.

During the readings, the clergy exchange their dark vestments for bright ones. We begin the Liturgy of St. Basil and, as on the previous Saturday, we sing, "**All who have been baptized...**". The Epistle and Gospel readings both speak of Baptism in the context of the Resurrection.

This is the ancient Byzantine Paschal baptismal liturgy. Corresponding to the Easter Vigil of the Western Church - but without the new fire, the Paschal Candle, or the water blessing - it was once the principal Eastern celebration of the Resurrection. It remains the most appropriate time to bring adult converts into the Church by Baptism and Chrismation.

Though not without its moments of drama, particularly at the singing of verses from Psalm 81 (82), "**Arise, O God, judge the earth...**," the service is long, solemn, sober, and reserved. The

use of the longer, and more ancient Liturgy of St. Basil heightens the solemnity. The Shroud is still enshrined on the Bier in the middle of the church. The exuberance is yet to come.

We gather again before the Shroud in the darkness, long before the dawn, to sing the Midnight Office. As we near the end of the Canon of Holy Saturday, the priests remove the Shroud from the Bier and return it to the Altar where it will lie on the Holy Table until the Leave-taking of Pascha, the day before the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord. The Royal Doors of the Iconostasis are closed, and all the lights are extinguished.

We wait expectantly in the darkness. Then all the doors of the Iconostasis are opened and a priest, brilliantly vested in Paschal garb, emerges from the Altar carrying a lighted candle. We all light our candles from his, and then, carrying them and striving to keep them lit, we - clergy, monks, and faithful - all leave the church in procession. Only a few remain behind to ready the church. We take with us the Gospel Book, the censer, the blessing cross, and the Icon of the Resurrection, singing as we go, the Troparion: "**O Christ our Savior, the Angels in heaven sing the praises of Your Resurrection...**"

Upon reaching the narthex, we gather in front of the main doors of the church. When all has been prepared, the priest incenses the doors, the Book of the Gospels, the Paschal Icon, and the assembled people. He knocks three times with the blessing cross upon the doors, and they open from within. He then sings for the first time this year the Paschal Troparion which will be so much a part of our worship for the next forty days: "**Christ is risen...**"

We all sing it after him twice. Then, repeating the Troparion again and again as a refrain to the jubilant and triumphant proclamation of verses from Psalm 67 (68): "**Let God arise, let His**

enemies be scattered,” we enter the brilliantly lit church.

For the next three or so hours, with incense, litanies, and song, we will exuberantly ring out our joy at Christ’s Resurrection. We chant the Resurrection Canon of St. John Damascene. We come forward to kiss the Cross during the singing of the Paschal Hymns. We listen to the Easter Homily of St. John Chrysostom, and we celebrate his Divine Liturgy.

During the Liturgy we begin the reading of the Acts of the Apostles which will occupy us for the next fifty days. We also begin the Gospel of St. John, reading his great hymn of praise to the pre-existent Son of God: **“In the beginning**

was the Word...” This last we read in as many different languages as the expertise of the community will allow. Throughout the Liturgy we again and again proclaim the Paschal Troparion: **“Christ is risen...”**

**Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling Death by death,
and to those in the grave,
bestowing life!**

Troparion of Pascha

After the Liturgy we bless baskets of Easter food – simple things, eggs, butter, cheese, prepared meats, that have been excluded from our diet during the long fast. In the brightness of the early morning sun, we sit down to a meal – a true break-fast – with community and friends. In the fellowship of the table we continue to share our joy at the wonder of Christ’s Resurrection.

Christ is Risen! He is Truly Risen!

HOLY TRANSFIGURATION SKETE

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