

Holy Week and Us

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

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Tomorrow, according to the liturgical calendar, and tonight, according to the customary timing, we embark on our journey into the Holy Week. We will walk alongside our Lord Jesus Christ step by step in His final days on earth. We will witness his ascent to Golgotha and His resurrection from the dead. But before that, we will immerse ourselves in every detail of the events leading up to his trial.

Through meditation on gospel events that instill humility in our souls, we will prepare ourselves to accompany Christ through the steps of His suffering, leading to His resurrection. We seek to participate fully in these events, growing in piety and spiritual struggle. We will reflect on the fig tree that withered at His command, the repentance of the adulteress juxtaposed with Judas' betrayal, and the parable of the ten virgins that warns us against negligence and sloth. We will heed the Lord's stern rebukes of the Pharisees and those like them who outwardly observe the commandments and teachings of the divine law but do not let them touch their hearts and change their souls. We will contemplate Peter's denial, contrasting it with Judas' despair and subsequent suicide.

We will also contemplate the Mystical Supper and the profound mystery of the Eucharist, as well as the humbling act of foot washing, the Lord's teachings on servanthood and His words about the first among us, and the manner of how we become first in our servanthood (Mark 10:42-43).

Following this, we will recount the journey of Christ's Passion, culminating in His crucifixion, burial, and the sealing of his tomb. And on Holy Saturday, we will await in reverent silence his glorious resurrection. More specifically, in this blessed Archdiocese, we will rejoice in welcoming many new brothers and sisters (via baptism and chrismation) into our holy apostolic Church.

We will also read chapters from the Book of Job, seeing in his suffering a reflection of the suffering Christ. Job found solace only in patience and

complete submission to God's will. Yet, in Christ, we find hope that our suffering leads to resurrection and new life. For our Lord suffered and died so that He may rise. These phrases will echo often in our hymns during this week: "...O Thou Who was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead, O Lord, glory be to Thee" and, "O compassionate Lord, I magnify Thy passion and glorify Thy three-day burial and resurrection, saying: O Lord, glory be to Thee."

This week is intense. Believers spend half their day in church if they attend all the liturgical services, especially in the last three days. Orthodox Christians participate fervently, carrying their books to follow every word spoken and every hymn sung. They observe personal rituals regarding food, fasting, and abstaining from worldly distractions. Some of them put bitter herbs and vinegar in their salad on Holy Friday and eat sweets after the Funeral (Lamentations) service. Some of them abstain completely from food for the last three days before the Sunday of Pascha. Some of them fast from oil throughout the week, refrain from television and music, and greatly reduce their use of social media. They do this to fully engage in the salvific events that we remember during this holy week. That is why many of them read the four gospels (at home) and, as they drive in their cars to and from work, listen to the recitation of the gospel texts that speak of these salvific events.

Believers participate in this week according to their spiritual ability and life circumstances. Yet, the most crucial question remains: How do I allow these salvific events to shape my life as a believer? The prayers, hymns and Scriptures of this week call us to reflect deeply on our own lives and actions. And so, we see in ourselves the fig tree that must always bear fruit, the sinner who repents fervently, Judas who falls into betrayal and despair of God's mercy, Peter who denies out of fear but repents with bitter tears, the woman who washes the Lord's feet, and the disciple who is presented the body and blood of his Lord as food and drink to be united with him spiritually, in order to become the beloved for whom Christ dies to give him the power of life that triumphs over death. "Yoking love to compassion, let us be diligent to send forth entreaty unto Christ, O ye faithful, that He may raise us up from the tomb of our hidden passions." – Orthros of the Thursday before Palm Sunday

Great Lent is a season of repentance and inner renewal par excellence. In the past six weeks, the hymns and prayers have called us to combine contemplation with application and action in our lives. Now, in Holy Week, we are called to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. We die with Christ and rise with Him when we put to death all evil and vice within us. We rise with Him when we cultivate all goodness and virtue.

As we enter today into this splendid season, let us contemplate with deep devotion some of its beautiful hymns, and let us demand of ourselves to live them.

“Every member of Thy holy Flesh endured dishonor for us; Thy head, the thorns; Thy face, the spittings; Thy cheeks, the smittings; Thy mouth, the taste of vinegar mingled with gall; Thine ears, the impious blasphemies; Thy back, the lash; Thy hand, the reed; the whole length of Thy body, the stretching upon the Cross; Thy joints, the nails; and Thy side, the spear. O Thou Who didst endure the Passion for us, and from the passions didst set us free; Who didst condescend to us in Thy love for man, and didst raise us up: O almighty Savior, have mercy on us.” – Orthros of Holy Friday (the Twelve Passion Gospels)

“Thou hadst been bodily enclosed in a tomb as Thou hadst so willed it, Who in Thy nature as God dost abide uncircumscribable and infinite, Thou didst close off the vaults of death, O Christ, and didst empty all of Hades' dark dominions, leaving nothing there. Then Thou also madest this Sabbath worthy of divine benediction and Thy glory and far-shining radiance.” – Great Vespers of Holy Saturday (the Unnailing of Christ from the Cross)