

Services of the Bridegroom



Introduction

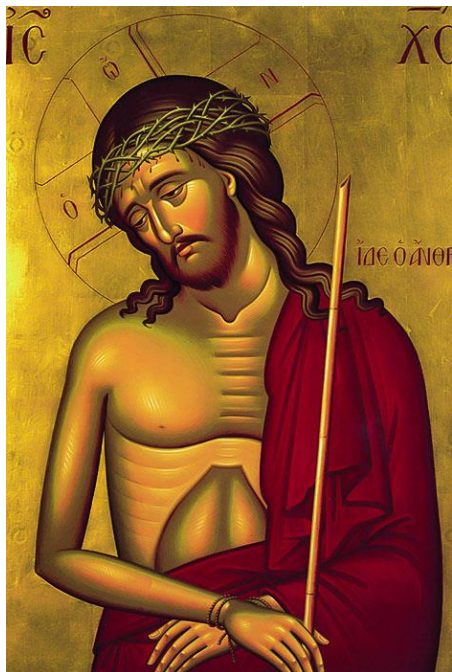
Beginning on the evening of Palm Sunday and continuing through the evening of Holy Tuesday, the Orthodox Church observes a special service known as the Service of the Bridegroom. Each evening service is the Matins or Orthros service of the following day (e.g. the service held on Sunday evening is the Orthros service for Holy Monday). The name of the service is from the figure of the Bridegroom in the parable of the Ten Virgins found in Matthew 25:1-13.

Background

The first part of Holy Week presents us with an array of themes based chiefly on the last days of Jesus' earthly life. The story of the Passion, as told and recorded by the Evangelists, is preceded by a series of incidents located in Jerusalem and a collection of parables, sayings and discourses centered on Jesus' divine sonship, the kingdom of God, the Parousia, and Jesus' castigation of the hypocrisy and dark motives of the religious leaders. The observances of the first three days of Great Week are rooted in these incidents and sayings. The three days constitute a single liturgical unit. They have the same cycle and system of daily prayer. The Scripture lessons, hymns, commemorations, and ceremonials that make up the festal elements in the respective services of the cycle highlight significant aspects of salvation history, by calling to mind the events that anticipated the Passion and by proclaiming the inevitability and significance of the Parousia.

The Orthros of each of these days is called the Service of the Bridegroom (Akolouthia tou Nimfiou). The name comes from the central figure in the well-known parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13). 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 connotes the final union of the Lover and the beloved. The title Bridegroom also suggests the Parousia. In the patristic tradition, the aforementioned parable is related to the Second Coming; and is associated with the need for spiritual vigilance and

preparedness, by which we are enabled to keep the divine commandments and receive the blessings of the age to come. The troparion "Behold the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night ...", which is sung at the beginning of the Orthros of Great Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, relates the worshiping community to that essential expectation: watching and waiting for the Lord, who will come again to judge the living and the dead.



Holy Monday

On Holy Monday we commemorate Joseph the Patriarch, the beloved son of Jacob. A major figure of the Old Testament, Joseph's story is told in the final section of the Book of Genesis (chs. 37-50). Because of his exceptional qualities and remarkable life, our patristic and liturgical tradition portrays Joseph as *tipos Christou*, i.e., as a prototype, prefigurement or image of Christ. The story of Joseph illustrates the mystery of God's providence, promise and redemption. Innocent, chaste and righteous, his life bears witness to the power of God's love and promise. The lesson to be learned from Joseph's life, as it bears upon the ultimate redemption wrought by the death and resurrection of Christ, is summed up in the words he addressed to his brothers who had previously betrayed him, "Fear not . . . As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little

ones.' Thus he reassured them and comforted them" (Genesis 50:19-21). The commemoration of the noble, blessed and saintly Joseph reminds us that in the great events of the Old Testament, the Church recognizes the realities of the New Testament.

Also, on Great and Holy Monday the Church commemorates the event of the cursing of the fig tree (Matthew 21:18-20). In the Gospel narrative this event is said to have occurred on the morrow of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:18 and Mark 11:12). For this reason it found its way into the liturgy of Great Monday. The episode is also quite relevant to Great Week. Together with the event of the cleansing of the Temple, this episode is another manifestation of Jesus' divine power and authority and a revelation as well of God's judgment upon the faithlessness of the Jewish religious classes. The fig tree is symbolic of Israel become barren by her failure to recognize and receive Christ and His teachings. The cursing of the fig tree is a parable in action, a symbolic gesture. Its meaning should not be lost on any one in any generation. Christ's judgment on the faithless, unbelieving, unrepentant and unloving will be certain and decisive on the Last Day. This episode makes it clear that nominal Christianity is not only inadequate, but it is also despicable and unworthy of God's kingdom. Genuine Christian faith is dynamic and fruitful. It permeates one's whole being and causes a change. Living true and unadulterated faith makes the Christian conscious of the fact that he is already a citizen of heaven. Therefore, his way of thinking, feeling, acting and being must reflect this reality. Those who belong to Christ ought to live and walk in the Spirit; and the Spirit will bear fruit in them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-25).

Holy Tuesday

On Holy Tuesday the Church calls to remembrance two parables, which are related to the Second Coming. The one is the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-3); the other the parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). These parables point to the inevitability of the Parousia and deal with such subjects as spiritual vigilance, stewardship, accountability and judgment.

From these parables we learn at least two basic things. First, Judgment Day will be like the situation in which the bridesmaids (or virgins) of the parable found themselves: some ready for it, some not ready. The time one decides for God is now and not at some undefined point in the future. If "time and tide waits for no man," certainly the Parousia is no exception. The tragedy of the closed door is that individuals close it, not God. The exclusion from the marriage feast, the kingdom, is of our own making. Second, we are reminded that watchfulness and readiness do not mean a wearisome, spiritless performance of formal and empty obligations. Most certainly it does not mean inactivity and slothfulness. Watchfulness signifies inner stability, soberness, tranquility and joy. It means spiritual alertness, attentiveness and vigilance. Watchfulness is the deep personal resolve to find and do the will of God, embrace every commandment and every virtue, and guard the intellect and heart from evil thoughts and actions. Watchfulness is the intense love of God.

Holy Wednesday

On Holy Wednesday the Church invites the faithful to focus their attention on two figures: the sinful woman who anointed the head of Jesus shortly before the passion (Matthew 26:6-13), and Judas, the disciple who betrayed the Lord. The former acknowledged Jesus as Lord, while the latter severed himself from the Master. The one was set free, while the other became a slave. The one inherited the kingdom, while the other fell into perdition. These two people bring before us concerns and issues related to freedom, sin, hell and repentance.

The repentance of the sinful harlot is contrasted with the tragic fall of the chosen disciple. The Triodion makes it clear that Judas perished, not simply because he betrayed his Master, but because, having fallen into the sin of betrayal, he then refused to believe in the possibility of forgiveness. If we deplore the actions of Judas, we do so not with vindictive self-righteousness but conscious always of our own guilt. In general, all the passages in the Triodion that seem to be directed against the Jews should be understood in this same way. When the Triodion denounces those who rejected Christ and delivered Him to death, we recognize that these words apply not only to others, but to ourselves: for have we not betrayed the Savior many times in our hearts and crucified Him anew?

I have transgressed more than the harlot, O loving Lord, yet never have I offered You my flowing tears. But in silence I fall down before You and with love I kiss Your most pure feet, beseeching You as Master to grant me remission of sins; and I cry to You, O Savior: Deliver me from the filth of my works. While the sinful woman brought oil of myrrh, the disciple came to an agreement with the transgressors. She rejoiced to pour out what was very precious, he made haste to sell the One who is above all price. She acknowledged Christ as Lord, he severed himself from the Master. She was set free, but Judas became the slave of the enemy. Grievous was his lack of love. Great was her repentance. Grant such repentance also unto me, O Savior who has suffered for our sake, and save us.

Icon of the Bridegroom

"The Bridegroom" Icon portrays Christ during His Passion, particularly during the period when our Lord was mocked and tortured by the soldiers who crowned Him with thorns, dressed Him in purple and placed a reed in His Hands, jeering Him as the "King of the Jews."



Orthodox Christian Celebration of the Bridegroom Service

The services conducted on Palm Sunday evening and on the evenings of Holy Monday and Tuesday are the Matins or Orthros services of the following day. After the reading of the Psalms at the beginning of the service the Troparion of the Bridegroom Service is chanted three times. On Palm Sunday evening as this hymn is being chanted, the priest carries the icon of Christ as Bridegroom in procession. The icon is placed in the middle of the solea of the church and remains there until Holy Thursday.

The Matins Gospel readings for each of the Bridegroom Services are: Holy Monday – Matthew 21:18-43; Holy Tuesday – Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39; and Holy Wednesday – John 12:17-50.

In most parishes a Presanctified Liturgy will be conducted on the mornings of Holy Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. The Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts has a distinct character and order. It is comprised of three major parts or components: a) the service of Great Vespers peculiar to this Liturgy; b) the solemn transfer of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts to the Holy Table; and c) the preparation for and the distribution of Holy Communion. The Liturgy does not contain the Anaphora, the Gifts of the bread and wine having been consecrated at the Divine Liturgy on the previous Sunday or Saturday. The Scripture readings for each of the Presanctified Liturgies are: Holy Monday – Exodus 1:1-21, Job 1:1-12, [Matthew 24:3-35](#); Holy Tuesday – Exodus 2:5-10, Job 1:13-22, [Matthew 24:36-26:2](#); Holy Wednesday – Exodus 2:11-23, Job 2:1-10, [Matthew 26:6-16](#).

Hymns of the Bridegroom Service

Troparion

Behold, the Bridegroom cometh in the middle of the night, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching; and again unworthy is he whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, lest thou be overcome with sleep, lest thou be given up to death, and be shut out from the Kingdom. But rouse thyself and cry: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God, through the Mother of God, have mercy on us.

Exapostelaron

Thy bridal chamber, O my Saviour, do I behold all adorned, and a garment I have not that I may enter therein. Illumine the garment of my soul, O Giver of Light, and save me.