

Death and Burial

Great and Holy Friday Vespers

Introduction by the Very Rev. Paul Lazor

On Great and Holy Friday, Christ died on the Cross. He gave up His spirit with the words: "It is finished" (*John 19:30*). These words are better understood when rendered: "It is consummated." He had accomplished the work for which His heavenly Father had sent Him into the world. He became a man in the fullest sense of the word. He accepted the baptism of repentance from John in the Jordan River. He assumed the whole human condition, experiencing all its alienation, agony, and suffering, concluding with the lowly death on the Cross. He perfectly fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he has poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (*Isaiah 53:11*)

The Man of Sorrows

On the Cross Jesus thus became "the man of sorrows; acquainted with grief" whom the prophet Isaiah had foretold. He was "despised and forsaken by men" and "smitten by God, and afflicted" (*Isaiah 53:3-4*). He became the one with "no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (*Isaiah 53:2*).

His appearance was "marred beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men" (*Isaiah 52:14*). All these Messianic prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus as he hung from the Cross. As the end approached, He cried: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (*Matthew 27:46*).

This cry indicated His complete identification with the human condition. He had totally embraced the despised, forsaken and smitten condition of suffering and death - alienation from God. He was truly the man of sorrows.

Yet, it is important to note that Jesus' cry of anguish from the Cross was not a sign of His loss of faith in His Father. The words which He exclaimed are the first verse of Psalm 22, a messianic Psalm. The first part of the Psalm foretells the anguish, suffering and death of the Messiah. The second part is a song of praise to God. It predicts the final victory of the Messiah.

The Formal Charges

The death of Christ had been sought by the religious leaders in Jerusalem from the earliest days of His public ministry. The formal charges made against Him usually fell into the following two categories:

1. violation of the Law of the Old Testament, e.g., breaking the Sabbath rest;
2. blasphemy: making Himself equal with God.

Matters were hastened (consummated) by the moment of truth which followed His entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He had the people behind Him. He spoke plainly. He said that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. He chastised the scribes and Pharisees for reducing religion to a purely external affair;

"You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (*Matthew 13:17-18*)

It was the second formal charge, however, that became the basis for His conviction.

The Religious Trial

Christ's conviction and death sentence required two trials: religious and political. The religious trial was first and took place during the night immediately after His arrest. After considerable difficulty in finding witnesses for the prosecution who actually agreed in their testimony, Caiaphas, the high priest, asked Jesus the essential question: "Are you Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus, who had remained silent to this point, now responded directly:

"I am; and you will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (*Mark 14:61-61*).

Jesus' reply recalled the many other statements He had made beginning with the words, "I am." "I am the bread of life...I am the light of the world...I am the way, the truth, and the life...before Abraham was, I am." (*John 6 through 15*). The use of these words themselves was considered blasphemous by the religious leaders. The words were the Name of God. By using them as His own Name, Jesus positively identified Himself with God. From the burning bush the voice of God had disclosed these words to Moses as the Divine Name:

"Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'." (*Exodus 3:13-14*).

Now Jesus, as He had done on many other occasions, used them as His own Name. The high priest immediately tore his mantle and "they all condemned Him as deserving death" (*Mark 14:64*). In their view He had violated the Law of the Old Testament:

"He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death"
(*Leviticus 24:16*).

The Political Trial

The Jewish religious leaders lacked the actual authority to carry out the above law: to put a man to death. Such authority belonged to the Roman civil administration. Jesus had carefully kept His activity free of political implications. He refused the temptation of Satan to rule the kingdoms of the world by the sword (*Luke 4:1-12*).

He often charged His disciples and others to tell no one that He was the Christ, because of the political overtones that this title carried for many (*Matthew 16:13-20*). He rebuked Peter, calling him Satan, when the disciple hinted at His swerving from the true nature of His mission (*Matthew 16:23*). To Pilate, the spineless and indifferent Roman Governor, He said plainly: "My kingdom is not of this world" (*John 18:36*).

Jesus was not a political revolutionary who came to free the people from Roman control and establish a new kingdom based on worldly power. Nevertheless, the religious leaders, acting in agreement with the masses, devised political charges against Him in order to get their way. They presented Christ to the Romans as a political leader, the "King of the Jews" in a worldly sense, a threat to Roman rule and a challenge to Caesar.

Pilate became fearful of his own position as he heard the charges and saw the seething mobs. Therefore, despite his avowed testimony to Jesus' innocence, he passed formal sentence, "washed his hands" of the matter, and turned Jesus over to be crucified (*John 19:16*).

Crucifixion - The Triumph of Evil

Before succumbing to this cruel Roman method of executing political criminals, Jesus suffered still other injustices. He was stripped, mocked and beaten. He wore a "kingly" crown of thorns on His head. He carried His own cross. He was finally nailed to the cross between two thieves at a place called Golgotha (the place of the skull) outside Jerusalem. An inscription was placed above His head

on the Cross to indicate the nature of His crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

He yielded up His spirit at about the ninth hour (3 p.m.), after hanging on the Cross for about six hours. On Holy Friday evil triumphed. "It was night" (*John 13:30*) when Judas departed from the Last Supper to complete his act of betrayal, and "there was darkness over all the land" (*Matthew 27:45*) when Jesus was hanging on the Cross.

The evil forces of this world had been massed against Christ. Unjust trials convicted Him. A criminal was released to the people instead of Him. Nails and a spear pierced His body. Bitter vinegar was given to Him to quench His thirst. Only one disciple remained faithful to Him. Finally, the tomb of another man became His place of repose after death.

The innocent Jesus was put to death on the basis of both religious and political charges. Both Jews and Gentile Romans participated in His death sentence.

"The rulers of the people have assembled against the Lord and His Christ." (*Psalms 2 - the Prokeimenon of the Holy Thursday Vespers Liturgy*)

We, also, in many ways continue to participate in the death sentence given to Christ. The formal charges outlined above do not exhaust the reasons for the crucifixion. Behind the formal charges lay a host of injustices brought on by hidden and personal motivations.

Jesus openly spoke the truth about God and man. He thereby exposed the false character of the righteousness and smug security, both religious and material, claimed by many especially those in high places. The constantly occurring expositions of such smugness in our own day teach us the truly illusory nature of much so-called righteousness and security. In the deepest sense, the death of Christ was brought about by hardened, personal sin - the refusal of people to change themselves in the light of reality, which is Christ.

"He came to His very own, and His own received Him not" (*John 1:11*).

Especially we, the Christian people, are Christ's very own. He continues to come to us in His Church. Each time we attempt to make the Church into something other than the eternal coming of Christ into our midst, each time we refuse to repent for our wrongs; we, too, reject Christ and participate in His death sentence.

The Vespers Service

The Vespers, celebrated in the Church on Holy Friday afternoon, brings to mind all of the final events of the life of Christ as mentioned above: the trial, the sentence, the scourging and mocking, the crucifixion, the death, the taking down of His body from the Cross, and the burial. As the hymnography indicates, these events remain ever-present in the Church; they constitute the today of its life.

The service is replete with readings from Scripture: three from the Old Testament and two from the New. The first of the Old Testament readings, from Exodus, speaks of Moses beholding the "back" of the glory of God—for no man can see the glory of God face to face and live.

The Church uses this reading to emphasize that now, in the crucifixion and death of Christ, God is making the ultimate condescension to reveal His glory to man—from within man himself.

The death of Christ was of a wholly voluntary character. He dies not because of some necessity in His being: as the Son of God He has life in Himself! Yet, He voluntarily gave up His life as the greatest sign of God's love for man, as the ultimate revelation of the Divine glory:

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends". (*John 15:1.3*).

The vesperal hymnography further develops the fact that God reveals His glory to us in this condescending love. The Crucifixion is the heart of such love, for the One being crucified is none other than He through whom all things have been created:

Today the Master of creation stands before Pilate.

Today the Creator of all is condemned to die on the cross . . .

The Redeemer of the world is slapped on the face.

The Maker of all is mocked by His own servants.

Glory to Thy condescension, O Lover of man!

(Verse V on "Lord I call", and the Aposticha)

The verses also underscore the cosmic dimensions of the event taking place on the Cross. Just as God who revealed Himself to Moses is not a god, but the God of "heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible," so the death of Jesus is not the culmination of a petty struggle in the domestic life of Palestine. Rather, it

is the very center of the epic struggle between God and the Evil One, involving the whole universe:

**All creation was changed by fear when it saw Thee hanging on the cross,
O Christ!**

**The sun was darkened, and the foundations of the earth were shaken.
All things suffered with the Creator of all.**

O Lord, who didst willingly endure this for us, glory to Thee!

(Verse I on "Lord I call.")

The second Reading from the Old Testament (*Job 42:12 to the end*) manifests Job as a prophetic figure of the Messiah Himself. The plight of Job is followed in the services throughout Holy Week, and is concluded with this reading. Job is the righteous servant who remains faithful to God despite trial, humiliation, and the loss of all his possessions and family. Because of his faithfulness, however, "**The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning**" (*Job 42:12*)

The third of the Old Testamental readings is by far the most substantial (*Isaiah 52:13 to 54:1*). It is a prototype of the Gospel itself. Read at this moment, it positively identifies Jesus of Nazareth as the Suffering Servant, the Man of Sorrows; the Messiah of Israel.

The Epistle Reading (*I Corinthians 1:18 to 2:2*) speaks of Jesus crucified, a folly for the world, as the real center of our Faith. The Gospel reading, a lengthy composite taken from Matthew, Luke and John, simply narrates all the events associated with the crucifixion and burial of Christ.

All the readings obviously focus on the theme of hope. As the Lord of Glory, the fulfillment of the righteous Job, and the Messiah Himself, humiliation and death will have no final hold over Jesus. Even the parental mourning of Mary is transformed in the light of this hope:

**When she who bore Thee without seed saw Thee suspended upon the
Tree,**

O Christ, the Creator and God of all, she cried bitterly:

"Where is the beauty of Thy countenance, my Son?

I cannot bear to see Thee unjustly crucified.

Hasten and arise,

that I too may see Thy resurrection from the dead on the third day!

(Verse IV on "Lord I call.")

Near the end of the Vespers, the priest vests fully in dark vestments. At the appointed time he lifts the Holy Shroud, a large icon depicting Christ lying in the tomb, from the altar table. Together with selected laymen and servers, a procession is formed and the Holy Shroud is carried to a specially prepared tomb in the center of the church. As the procession moves, the troparion is sung:

The Noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in fine linen and anointed it with spices, and placed it in a new tomb.

At this ultimate solemn moment of Vespers, the theme of hope once again occurs—this time more strongly and clearly than ever. As knees are bent and heads are bowed, and often tears are shed, another troparion is sung which penetrates through this triumph of evil, to the new day that is contained in its very midst:

The Angel came to the myrrh-bearing women at the tomb and said: "Myrrh is fitting for the dead, but Christ has shown Himself a stranger to corruption.

A new Age is dawning. Our salvation is taking place. The One who died is the same One who will rise on the third day, to "trample down death by death," and to free us from corruption.

Therefore, at the conclusion of Holy Friday Vespers, at the end of this long day of darkness, when all things are apparently ended, our eternal hope for salvation springs forth. For Christ is indeed a stranger to corruption:

"As by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." (1 Cor.15:21-32)

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:35)