

The Betrayal and Passion of Our Lord

Holy Friday Matins

With the Passion Gospels and Royal Hours

Introduction by the Very Rev. Paul Lazor

**When the Lord was going to His voluntary Passion,
He said to the Apostles on the way,
"Behold, we go up to Jerusalem,
and the Son of Man shall be delivered up, as it is written of Him."
Come, therefore, let us also go with Him,
purified in mind.**

**Let us be crucified with Him and die through Him
to the pleasures of this life.**

**Then we shall live with Him and hear Him say:
"I go no more to the earthly Jerusalem to suffer,
but to my Father and your Father,
to my God and your God,**

**I shall raise you up to the Jerusalem on high
in the Kingdom of Heaven."**

(Matins of Great and Holy Monday)

This verse from the Matins of Great and Holy Monday serves as an excellent introduction to Holy Week, the high point in the yearly liturgical life of the Orthodox Christian. Beginning with the evening of Palm Sunday he is called upon to accompany Christ along the road of His voluntary passion and death. As a fellow traveler with Christ, a person, as the above verse indicated, must abandon the pleasures of this world. He must be purified in his entire being. He must fervently seek union with his Lord and Savior.

The life of the Church actualizes these necessities in the Sacraments of Confession and Communion. Only after being purified and forgiven in the Sacrament of Confession and firmly united with Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion can the Orthodox believer approach the hallowed ground of accompanying Christ in the great hour of His work for the redemption of all.

The Matins of Holy Friday, commonly celebrated on the evening of Holy Thursday and known as "The Order of the Holy Passions of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," or more popularly as "The Passions" or "Twelve Gospels," is a climactic point of the entire task set before us during Holy Week. During this wonderful Service we accompany Christ, step by step, from the time of His last discourse with His disciples to His being laid in a new tomb by the noble Joseph of Arimathea and the pious Nicodemus.

Each of the twelve Gospel sections read during the Service involves us in a new scene: the arrest and trial before Annas and Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priests; the threefold denial of Peter; the trial and other happenings before Pontius Pilate; the scourging and mocking by the soldiers; the carrying of the Cross; the engaging of Simon of Cyrene; the Crucifixion and the opposing fates of the two thieves hung with Christ; the loving tenderness of that moment when Jesus commits His Mother to the care of His faithful disciple, John; the Lord's final yielding up of the spirit and burial.

The twelve Gospel readings, however, are only a part of the Service. Another large part is composed of liturgical hymnography. This hymnography (the antiphons, verses and canons sung during the Service) sets the Gospel readings within the consciousness of the entire Church, with all of her history and people. The Gospel texts narrate the events. The hymnography gives the response of the Church, the community of true Christian believers from all ages, to these events.

The hymnography clarifies and gives deeper meaning as well as the proper sense of significance: to the narrations which the Gospel relates with such epic simplicity. We are confronted and perplexed by the horrid and the sobering:

**What caused you to betray the Savior, O Judas?
The bridegroom of the Church is fastened with nails.
He who clothes himself with light as with a garment
Stood naked for trial.
He was struck on the cheek by hands that He Himself had formed.
A people that transgressed the law
Nailed the Lord of Glory to the cross.
Then the curtain of the temple was torn in two.
Then the sun was darkened,
Unable to bear the sight of God outraged,
Before Whom all things tremble.
Let us worship Him. (*Antiphon 10*)**

We are comforted and uplifted by signs of hope for us:

But we, imitating the righteous thief, cry out in faith: Remember us also, O Savior, in Thy Kingdom. (*Beatitudes*)

**Thy Cross, O Lord,
Is life and resurrection for Thy people.
Trusting in it, we praise Thee, our crucified God.
Have mercy on us. (*Antiphon 15*)**

The total effect of this integration of the twelve Gospel sections and the responsorial hymnography is to uplift each participant of the Service into the total life of the Church. In this life, past, present and future are one, and our own accompanying of Christ is not merely a dramatic enactment of past and irrelevant events, but a reality. The entire spectrum of our Lord's saving Passions is opened before us, and we are placed within that spectrum.

Within this spectrum a judgment begins to come upon us. Where do we stand in reference to all those who are accompanying Christ on the road of His Passion? Do we share a common spirit with the treacherous Judas, the scheming priests, the fearful and abandoning disciples, or the denying Peter?

Do we in any way find ourselves among the fickle and unruly crowds, or the mocking and blasphemous groups of soldiers? Is the indifference of Pilate in any way indicative of our response to Christ? Hopefully, we perhaps see ourselves more clearly in the devotion of the disciple John, or in the confessing centurion, or the faithful Joseph of Arimathea, or, most of all, in the repentant thief. The words from the Gospel come to us as a concrete and present judgment:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

Judas

In making Her response, the Church places particular emphasis on certain of the events of the Passion. One such event, the betrayal of Christ by Judas, receives particularly concentrated attention. Even before any Gospel sections are read the nature of this act, as well as the person who committed it, are brought before us.

When the glorious disciples were enlightened at the washing of their feet before the supper, then the impious Judas was darkened, ailing with avarice, and to the lawless judges he betrays Thee, the righteous judge. Behold, O lover of money, this man who because of money hanged himself. Flee from the greedy soul which dared such things against the Master. O Lord Who art good towards all men, glory to Thee! (3) (Troparion)

The man who committed this terrible deed was no outsider or stranger. He was one of the original twelve. He, too, shared in the great moments of the Master's earthly ministry. He, too, had the full opportunity to learn at the feet of the Teacher. He, too, was there at the washing of the feet. But he refused to understand. We hear this same contrast repeated in rapid succession in the hymnography following the first Gospel reading.

**Because of the raising of Lazarus,
O Lord Who lovest mankind,
The Hebrew children cried "Hosanna" to Thee,
But Judas the Transgressor was unwilling to understand.
At Thy supper, O Christ God,
Thou didst announce to Thy disciples,
"One of you will betray me."
But Judas the Transgressor was unwilling to understand.
At the washing of their feet, O Christ God,
Thou didst command Thy disciples:
"Do as you have seen me do."
But Judas the Transgressor was unwilling to understand.
"Keep watch and pray,
Lest you be tempted,"
Thou didst say to Thy disciples, O our God,
But Judas the Transgressor was unwilling to understand.
(Antiphon 3)**

The Church stands in bewilderment before the evil of Judas' deed.

**How could Judas, who was once Thy disciple,
Plan to betray Thee?
That treacherous and unrighteous man deceitfully ate with Thee
And went to the priests and said:
"What will you give me if I deliver to you
Him who abolished the law and profaned the Sabbath?"
O long-suffering Lord, glory to Thee!
(Kathisma. Tone 8)**

We seek a motive for this outrageous act.

**What caused you to betray the Savior, O Judas?
Did He expel you from the ranks of the Apostles?
Did He take from you the gift of healing?
Did He send you from the table while taking supper with the others?
Did He wash their feet and pass you by?
How have you forgotten such good things?
Your ingratitude is notorious,
But His boundless long-suffering and great mercy are proclaimed to all.
(Kathisma. Tone 7)**

The motive is exposed in Judas' avarice, his greedy love of money. The opening Troparion speaks of his "ailing with avarice," and his "greedy soul." In a broader sense, however, the hymnography links Judas' avarice with a general love of the cares of this life and warns us not to follow his path.

**Let us offer our pure senses to Christ.
As His friends let us sacrifice our lives for His sake.
Let us not be weighed down by earthly cares like Judas,
But let us cry in the hidden chambers of our heart:
"Our Father, who art in heaven, deliver us from evil."
(Antiphon 1)**

Judas is not alone in his treacherous act of betraying the Master. He conspires with the lawless council of the priests and leaders of the people. Immediately after the first Gospel, we sing:

**The rulers of the people have assembled against the Lord and His Christ.
Judas hastened to the lawless scribes and said:
What will you give me to betray Him to you.
For thirty pieces of silver
And a treacherous kiss, O Lord, The Jews sought to kill Thee,
But Judas the Transgressor was unwilling to understand.
(Antiphons 1, 2, 3)**

Again, utilizing the technique of contrast, the hymnography compares the wonderful works of Christ with the evil of His people:

**Thus says the Lord to the Jews:
My people, what have I done to you,
Or how have I offended you?
To your blind, I gave sight, your lepers I cleansed,
The paralytic I raised from his bed.
My people, what have I done to you,
And how have you repaid me?
Instead of manna, gall; instead of water, vinegar:
Instead of loving me, you nail me to the cross. I can bear no more.
I shall call the Gentiles mine.
They will glorify me with the Father and the Spirit,
And I shall give them life eternal.
(Antiphon 12)**

The betrayal is the deed of Judas and those with whom he conspired. The love of money and the pleasures of this world are exposed as the motive behind this terrible deed. A judgment stands before us: how deep is our own attachment to the things of this world, and how willing are we to sacrifice them in the name of Christ?

The Repentant Thief

Having shown us the hopeless and evil path of Judas and the lawless leaders of the people, the hymnography of the Service begins to direct our attention to something more hopeful—the way of the repentant thief. According to his own words, this thief, unlike Christ, was justly placed upon the cross.

He was a criminal—but his repentance at the final hour of his life was deep and sincere. In humbly recognizing his own evil and unworthiness, but in confidently asking Christ to remember him, he shows us the way to our own salvation.

**The thief, whose hands were defiled with blood,
Thou didst accept as Thy fellow-traveler.
With him, number us also, O Lord,
For Thou art good and lovest mankind.**
(Antiphon 14)

His is the way we must follow:

**But we, imitating the righteous thief, cry out in faith:
Remember us also, O Savior, in Thy Kingdom!**
(Beatitudes)

Even though the foundations of the very earth might shake, the example of the thief shows us that the man who confesses Christ as his Savior and sets his hope in Him will never perish.

**When it beheld Thee crucified, O Christ, all creation trembled.
The foundations of the earth shook for fear of Thy might.
The lights of heaven hid themselves, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.
The mountains quaked, and the rocks were split,
and with us the believing thief cried out to Thee,
O Savior: Remember me in Thy Kingdom!**
(Beatitudes)

The final judgment is whether or not we can be enlightened, as was the thief, by the presence before us of the Lord upon the Cross.

**The wise thief Thou didst make worthy of paradise in a single moment, O Lord;
By the wood of Thy cross illumine me also, and save me.**
(Hymn of Light)

Those Who Surrounded Christ

The human, personal reactions of those who surrounded Christ at the time of His Passions were, like our own, many and varied. The Service deals with these reactions in much detail, particularly the agony experienced by Mary the Theotokos. Her initial reaction before the Passion of her Divine Son is one of disbelief:

...Where goest Thou, my child? Why dost Thou run so swift a course? Surely there is not another wedding in Cana to which Thou now dost hasten to change water into wine?

...Do not pass me by in silence...Thou art my son and my God.

(Ikos)

Her final agony is a compassionate co-suffering with her Son:

Today the blameless virgin

Saw Thee suspended upon the cross, O Word.

She mourned within herself and was sorely pierced in her heart.

She groaned in agony from the depth of her soul...

(Aposticha)

With Mary at the time of the crucifixion was John. He alone among the disciples did not abandon the Lord. He remained faithful to the very end, and was present to accept Jesus' last command: "Woman, behold your son! ...Behold your mother" (*John 19:26-27*).

Simon Peter sought to remain with Christ at least initially. But his faith grew weak, and he denied the Lord three times, even as the Lord had said:

"You will deny your convictions as soon as the question is put to you, O Simon Peter, and the sudden approach of a servant girl will terrify you," said the Lord.

"But after weeping bitterly you will have great mercy from Me., whom all creation blesses and glorifies throughout all ages."

(Canon, Ode 8)

Most noteworthy is the pagan centurion who fell in awe before the torn body yet unshaken majesty of Christ and exclaimed: "Truly, this was the Son of God" (*Matthew 27:54*).

In sharp contrast with the centurion is the other thief who was crucified with Christ. His reaction to Christ was the same as those to whom both the Gospel and liturgical texts refer as "the crowds." He mocked Christ and demanded a miraculous sign before he would believe. "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us" (*Luke 23:39*). He says that 'He is the King of Israel;' let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him" (*Matthew 27:42*).

The Universal Significance of the Passions of Christ

The Orthodox Church never loses sight of the universal significance of the Passions of Christ. The glorification of the wounds, the bloodshed, and the torturing agony experienced by Christ does not find its origin in a simple awe before human suffering. Beyond the scene of the human suffering of Christ is the reality of His work for the redemption of all men. He is the God-man.

He does what no human being alone can do. He takes upon Himself the sin of all and shatters its power. He suffers and dies for all in order that all might be able to pass through and find new hope in the agonies of suffering and death. The hymnography enumerates each aspect of the human suffering of Christ:

**Every member of Thy holy flesh endured dishonor for us.
Thy head—the thorns, Thy face—the spitting,
Thy cheeks—the buffeting, Thy mouth— the taste of vinegar mingled with gall,
Thine ears—the impious blasphemies, Thy back—the scourge,
Thy hand—the reed, Thy whole body—extension upon the cross,
Thy joints—the nails, Thy side—the spear.**

But the verse does not stop here. It links all this human suffering with the Divine plan for the restoration of all men:

**By Thy sufferings Thou hast set us free from suffering.
In Thy love for man Thou didst stoop down to raise us up.
O Almighty Savior, have mercy on us.**
(Ideomela. Tone 3)

Even Christ's pierced side is seen as a source of spiritual strength for the whole Church:

**From thy life-bearing side, O Christ, a fountain flows forth as from Eden, giving
drink to Thy Church as to a living paradise. From there it divided to become the
four rivers of the Gospels, watering the world, gladdening creation, and
teaching the nations to worship Thy Kingdom in faith.**
(Beatitudes)

Finally, the hymnography has Christ Himself exclaiming the true purpose of His Passions:

**I gave my back to scourging.
I did not turn my face from spittings.
I stood before the judgment seat of Pilate
And endured the cross,
For the salvation of the world.**
(Ideomela, Tone 6)

In concluding this section, we must move from the universal to the specific. Christ suffered and died not for the sake of some vague "human mass," but for unique human persons -for you and me. In this fact lies the hope and joy of each Christian.

Thou wast crucified for my sake, in order to pour forth forgiveness for me. Thy side was pierced so that streams of life might flow for me. Thy hands were transfixed by nails so that, convinced of the height of Thy power by the depth of Thy sufferings, I might cry out to Thee, O Christ, Thou giver of life: Glory to Thy cross and to Thy passion, O Savior!

(Beatitudes)

Conclusions

The following points can serve as a summary to this brief introduction to the Matins of Great and Holy Friday.

- 1) The Passions of Jesus Christ can never be viewed by the Orthodox Christian as but past events having no bearing on his life today. Each year the liturgical experience of the Matins of Holy Friday has us actually accompanying Christ along the road of His Passion.
- 2) This experience puts us within the personalities and events of the Passions and confronts us with moment after moment of judgment upon ourselves.
- 3) We are also called upon to clearly understand the nature and ultimate purpose of the Passions. Through them salvation becomes a real possibility for us. Moreover, the example of the agony experienced by Christ in this world shows us most clearly that "for him, who above all things seeks the Kingdom of Heaven, transfiguration begins in this life on earth."*

*Dimitri Obolensky, *The Diary of a Russian Priest*, Faber and Faber, London, 1967, p. 7.