

Pastoral letter

Easter 2009

by His Eminence Metropolitan John (Yazigi)



To our beloved Antiochian Sons and Daughters
In Western and Central Europe,

Great and Holy Week is the liturgical period which brings us into the life of the Lord Jesus, who approaches the Passion and undergoes the cross and death for our sake, then rises glorious and triumphantly, trampling down death. The rites and prayers of Great Week represent for us the events of the Passion of the Lord Jesus, and bring us into the sacrament of the Cross and the Resurrection.

On Palm Sunday, we see the Lord Jesus entering Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. The Gospel says: When the Lord mounted the donkey and entered Jerusalem with the apostles were around Him, the crowds and the children welcomed Him with joy, and they carried palm branches as the welcome for conquerors. On this day we sing:

“O Christ God, When Thou raised Lazarus from the dead before Thy passion, Thou didst confirm the universal resurrection; therefore like the children, (and we apply here the theological meaning) we bear the symbols of victory and triumph, crying out to Thee, O Conqueror of Death, Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!”

The crowds and the children welcomed Him with hymns and palm branches because the victorious in war were welcomed in that manner, and they were foretelling thereby that He whom they welcome is the King who will be victorious on the day of the Resurrection and who will be triumphant. This is a revelation in advance of the victory and triumph of Christ.

On Sunday evening we perform the Bridegroom Prayer and we call it the Bridegroom Prayer in reference to the hymn:

“Behold, the Bridegroom cometh in the middle of the night, and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching; and 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 rather rouse thyself and cry: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God, through the Theotokos and all the saints have mercy on us.”

On Monday the Church commemorates the blessed Joseph, about whom we know that in ancient times he was sold by his brothers into Egypt, and there became a governor and was charitable to the brothers who had sold him. The wife of the king wanted to seduce him, but he did not agree, tore off his shirt and fled, in order to preserve his chastity. We also commemorate the fig tree which the Lord cursed because it bore no fruit. Thus from the beginning of Passion Week we remember the commandment of the Lord that we be arrayed in chastity and virtue so that we are ranked on the right-hand side and not the left, and that we be fruitful branches on the tree of life and not branches on which there are no fruit.

On Tuesday we commemorate the foolish and the wise virgins. By means of this parable the Lord calls upon us to be like the wise virgins, always ready to welcome the bridegroom, the true groom, with good works and arrayed with watchfulness and vigilance.

On Wednesday, we commemorate the harlot who anointed the feet of the Lord with ointment in the house of Simon the Leper before the Passover. This woman broke a jar of perfume and poured the perfume over the head and feet of the Lord. Some people

complained because this perfume was very expensive, and they said that it would be better for it to have been sold and the price given to the poor. Thereupon the Lord told them to leave her alone, because “the poor are always with you, but I shall not always be with you, she did this for the sake of preparing me for the grave.” Thus we commemorate this woman who poured perfume on the head and feet of the Lord on this day, and also on which Judas conspired with the Jews to hand over the Lord, agreeing with them that they would give him thirty pieces of silver as the price for delivering Him to them.

After this we reach the climax of Passion Week, Great Thursday, when we proceed to commemorate:

1. The washing of feet, that is when the Lord washed the feet of His disciples.
2. The Last Supper, that is when the Lord Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples, and established the sacrament of the Eucharist (“Take, eat and drink of it, all of you”, and “This you have done in commemoration of Me.”)
3. The prayer of the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane (“O Father, take this cup from Me”, and His direction to His disciples that they stay awake and pray).
4. The handing over, where Judas comes, with the police and a large group of the Jews in order to arrest the Lord and deliver Him for trial. Judas gave them the sign: “The one whom I kiss is He.” He kisses the Lord, and the Lord says to him: “Is it with a kiss that you hand over the Teacher?”

Thus on Thursday evening we perform the Passion Service (the Cross), where we commemorate the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. We would mention here the well-known hymn:

“Today is hung upon the Tree, He Who hung the land upon the waters. A crown of thorns is placed upon Him the head of the King of Angels. Wrapped about with the purple of mockery is He Who wrapped the Heavens with clouds. He received buffetings Who freed Adam in Paradise. He was transfixed with nails Who is the Bridegroom of the Church. He was pierced with a spear Who is the Son of the Virgin. We worship Thy Passion, O Christ. Show unto us thy glorious Resurrection.”

It is worthy of mention here that we use the word “today”, despite the fact that the crucifixion happened two thousand years ago in history, and that the feast of the Passover is changeable and not fixed, and now we say: “Today He is hung!” The liturgy transcends time and place, which truly brings the event before our eyes. We are carried through time, and brought into the events of the redeeming cross, so that henceforth it does not remain merely a symbol or a story in history, but a redeeming sacrament which bestows life upon us.

Christ, who was crucified on Thursday evening, is taken down from the cross on Friday morning, so we hold the funeral and burial service on Friday evening. Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and requested the body of the Lord from him. Joseph went with the women and they took Lord Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in linen and placed him in a new tomb. This what we do on Friday morning where we take Christ down from the cross, and then in the evening we perform the funeral service of the Lord, and therefore we sing on Friday morning:

“O He who is clothed with light like a garment, when Joseph with Nicodemus took you down from the tree, and saw you dead, naked and unburied, he began to weep and lament, saying, ‘Great is my sorrow, O sweet Jesus!’ A little while and the sun saw you hanging on the cross it was clothed in darkness, the earth quaked in fear and the curtain of the temple was torn asunder, but behold, I now see you as accepting death for my sake. How, O my God, shall I prepare you for burial? With what type of shroud shall I wrap you? With what hands shall I touch your pure body? With what laments shall I sing for your burial? ...”

The Lord who had borne the cross and burial descended to Hades to release those who were there, and therefore Saturday is called “Great Saturday” and “Saturday of Light” due to the descent of the Lord into Hades. Since all this is linked to the resurrection so we scatter bay leaves in the church in the service of the divine liturgy of St Basil the Great before the reading of the gospel, as a sign of triumph, and we sing: “Arise O Lord and judge the earth, for you shall have an inheritance among the nations.”

Christ, Who suffered for our sake, breaks down the gates of Hades and arises triumphant. This is what the Lord shows us on Sunday, and therefore we shout aloud: “Christ is risen!”. One person calls to another “Christ is risen!” and he replies “He is risen indeed!”. This is the victory after that long bitterness. Christ obeyed God the Father unto death, death on the cross, and He raised Him on the third day, and revealed Him life and resurrection for us. These rites are nothing but our participation in this sacrament. It is the sacrament of the Lord Jesus Who was hung upon the cross, but trampled down death and arose victorious to open the gates of paradise to us once again. This sacrament was performed once in history, but we live it in the liturgy, and especially in Great Week, in our hearts when we accompany the Lord on His way to the Passion and the Cross, and we see Him triumphant and victorious, and therefore we sing on the day of Pascha (as on every Sunday throughout the year):

“Since we have seen the resurrection of Christ, let us worship the most Holy Lord Jesus who is alone without sin, We bow to your Cross, O Christ, and we praise and glorify your holy resurrection.”

I wish you a Glorious Pascha

+Metropolitan John