
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. X

Palm Sunday and Holy Week



Above: The Apostles try to stay awake while Jesus prays at Gethsemane, before His ultimate betrayal by Judas.

“Are you still sleeping...? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners.” (Matt 26:36–44)

The final steps to Pascha

Over the six weeks of Lent, the services and readings relive the history of man’s relationship with God. Adam and Eve, Noah & his sons, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Esau, Joseph – we’re called to identify with their diverse and changing relationships with God, using them as guides. The scope of this narrative is sweeping: thousands of years of history, studded with specific portraits of people who lived hundreds of years apart from each other and thousands before us. In Holy Week, the week before Pascha, the story we’re presented with becomes more intimate and intense, as day-by-day we join Christ on the road to the Cross. It starts with Jesus’ raising from the dead of his friend Lazarus on Saturday, then His entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. After these joyous days we then remember Jesus’ final parables to his disciples, the Last Supper, His betrayal by Judas, His prayers at Gethsemane, His arrest, torture and, finally, His execution at Golgotha, then burial in the tomb. This is not just a bare history lesson. Through the prayers, hymns and services of Holy Week we **relive** these events as **contemporaries**. This is clearly shown by the use of the word ‘*Today*’ in the Church’s hymns.

Thus we sing: “*Today Christ enters the Holy City*” on Palm Sunday; “*Today Judas makes a covenant with*

the chief priests” on Wednesday; “*Today He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung on the Cross*” on Good Friday. We cannot truly understand Holy Week without reliving these events with Christ. Why? We must identify with Jesus and His suffering because He first identified with us: by taking on our human nature, being tempted, and suffering what we suffer: and more. By reliving Jesus’ days before His death, we also share in what came after: “*Yesterday I was buried with Thee, O Christ, and today I rise with Thine arising*” (hymns at Easter Midnight).

The church services of Holy Week run to about 38 hours; on top of this are daily prayers meant to be said at home! This is too much for most parishes and parishioners, which means we miss out on the hymns that follow these final steps of Jesus. It’s a good idea, therefore, to read the ‘Passion Gospels’. These Gospels are read at a service on Holy Thursday, but can be spread out over Holy Week instead. Combined with giving up TV and unnecessary Internet use, we can deepen our relationship with Jesus during Holy Week. The twelve passion Gospels, in order, are: **1)** Jn 13:31-18:1; **2)** Jn 18:1-29; **3)** Matt 26:57-75; **4)** Jn 18:28–19:16; **5)** Matt 27:3-32; **6)** Mk 15:16-32 **7)** Matt 27:33-54; **8)** Lk 23:32-49; **9)** Jn 19:19-37; **10)** Mk 15:43-47; **11)** Jn 19:38-42; **12)** Matt 27:62-66

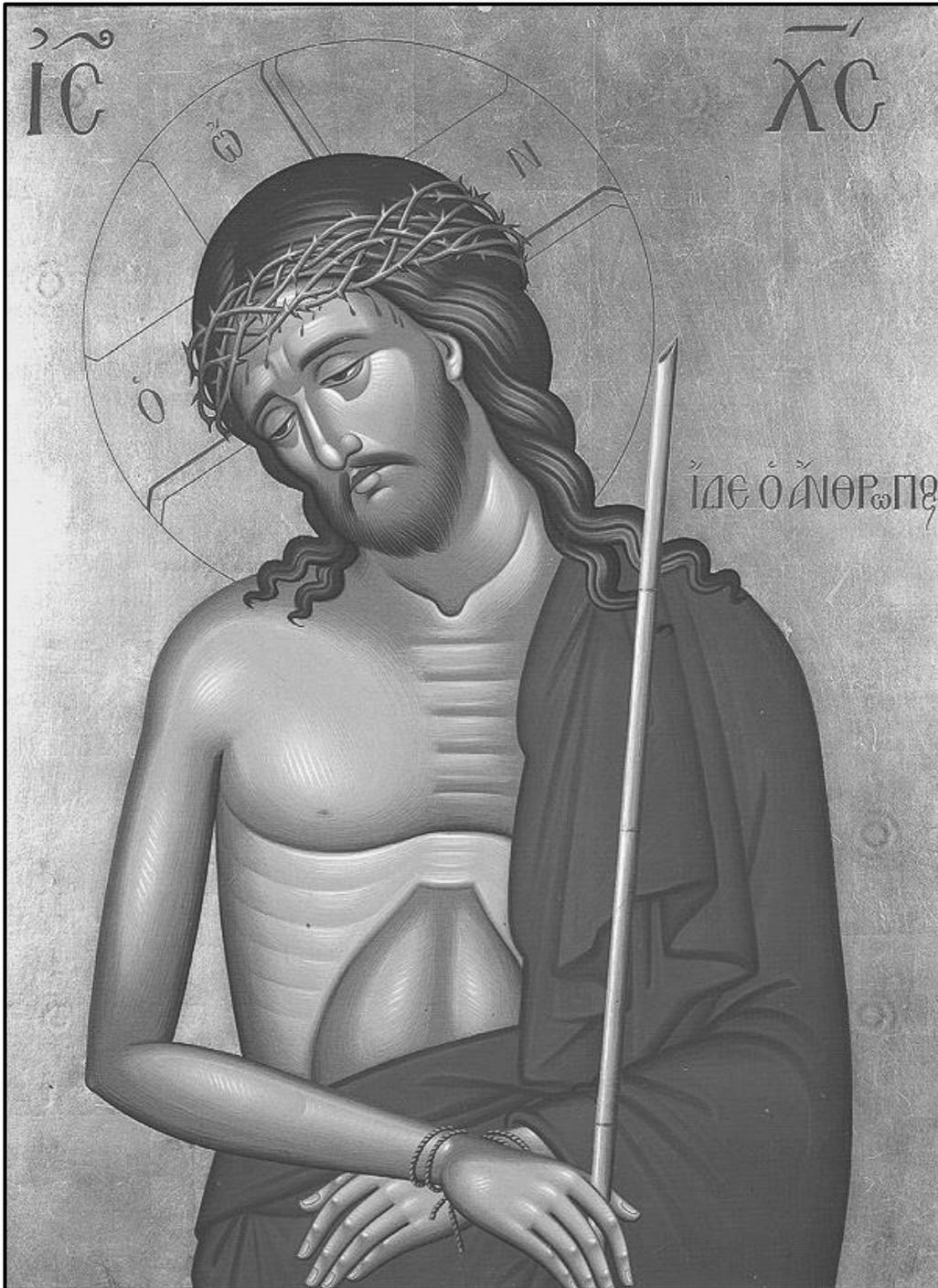
Behold the Man! | Christ our Bridegroom

During the service on Palm Sunday evening, the priest carries an icon of Christ ‘the Bridegroom’ to the front of the church, where it stays until Thursday. The three days of Holy Week it is there are dedicated to Jesus Christ as the central figure in the parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13). The parable recalls the second coming, summed up by one of the hymns sung these days:

Behold, the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night, and blessed is the servant He shall find vigilant; but unworthy is he whom he shall find neglectful. Beware therefore, O my soul, lest you be weighed down by sleep, lest you be given over to death and be closed out from the kingdom; but rise up crying out: “Holy! Holy! Holy art Thou our God; through the intercessions of the Mother of God, have mercy on us.”

It might be expected that the Bridegroom icon shows Christ in Glory, at His second coming, similar to another parable of the judgement used at the beginning of Lent (Matt 25:31-46).

Yet the icon shows Jesus humiliated by Pontius Pilate’s soldiers (Matt 27:27-31): beaten, cloaked in scarlet, crowned with thorns, bound and holding a reed. The crown is a symbol of Christian



marriage in the Orthodox Church, and the ropes binding Jesus' hands are a pagan symbol of marriage. The reed used as a mock-sceptre is a symbol of humility – of a person that does all possible to bend in service to others. In stark contrast to the fearsome images of Christ the King presented at the beginning of Lent, we are now presented with our beloved bridegroom, suffering silently. Why does He suffer? Because of human sin. The betrayal of Judas, His disciple, the hatred of the Jews, the cowardice of Pilate, the cruelty of the (Gentile) soldiers: this is why Christ appears as He does. What form of humanity is not represented by those who mocked Jesus and called for His death? Yet still He stands before us. While we are still

unfaithful harlots, Christ is betrothed to us. This is Divine Love, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Such perfect, holy, love casts out all fear; and so instead of the stern Judge of the Apocalypse to ‘frighten’ us into repenting, we “behold the man”: the Bridegroom Who burns with such love for us that He suffers for us, even unto death on the Cross. Jesus here is the image of love and also of humility. We must turn to this example of Christ when we ask: “*What is humility? How much unfairness must I endure for Jesus’ sake?*” In silence, Jesus responds to these questions in this uncomfortable way. The image of the Bridegroom shows us nothing more than what the Roman soldiers who spat upon Christ saw. It is up to us whether we see beyond the bloody, brutalised, Jew before us and recognize our divine spouse. A good sign we have benefited from the rigours of Lent is to look upon our humiliated King and still worship Him. Ah...but even the Roman soldiers did that. With hard-hearts they mockingly hailed Him as king, bowed before him, and led Him off to be executed. For our worship to be any more perfunctory than the Romans’, **it must be heartfelt.**

I see Thy Bridal Chamber adorned, O my Savior, but have no wedding garment that I may enter. O Giver of Light, enlighten the vesture of my soul, and save me!

Transforming mourning into joy

At the end of Holy Week is Good Friday. At 3pm, there’s a ‘procession of the shroud’, where an image of Christ’s body on a large cloth is taken in a funerary procession and laid to rest in the centre of the church. This is followed by the ‘lamentations by the tomb’, a 3 hour vigil of hymns interspersed between Psalm 118 (used in funeral services). Although a ‘funeral service’ for Jesus, the procession and vigil isn’t a time of mourning, but of expectation. We relive the burial of Christ’s body and through hymns imagine the grief of His mother: “*O my most sweet Springtime, my beloved Son, where has Thy beauty set?*” (3rd Stasis, Lamentations); yet in other hymns Jesus responds: “*Weep not for me, O Mother, beholding in the sepulchre the Son whom thou hast conceived... For I shall rise and shall be glorified, and as God I shall exalt in everlasting glory those who magnify thee with faith and love.*” (9th Ode, Canon) We know Christ suffered death, but also know that when lying in the tomb He was, as God, setting free the souls trapped in Hades. This is how our Lenten period should end: with intense and eager expectation. “*Surely I am coming quickly,*” the Saviour says to us (Rev 22:20); with joy in our hearts we make ready to reply to the Risen Christ: “***Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!***”