

“Bless, Master”: The Celebrants of the Divine Liturgy

Thank you again for attending. Let’s begin with prayer.

Prayer

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory, together with thine unoriginate Father, and thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Introduction

Last time we got to the first words of the Divine Liturgy, a quiet dialogue between the priest and the deacon, in which the deacon declares “It is time for the Lord to act”, signifying the Lord is bringing us into his time, into eternity.

This week we pick up where we left off last week, with the deacon on the solea having just said thrice “O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.” As we join him, the deacon lifts his orarion and says aloud, “Bless, master” and the priest gives the blessing. “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.”

But wait; who is the deacon referring to when he says, “Bless, master”? And if there’s a master, then who are the servants? Let us explore this utterance and discover *who* is celebrating the Divine Liturgy.

“Bless, Master”

At first glance, it may appear that the Deacon is talking to the priest, after all he is the one giving the blessing. And last week, although we didn’t touch on this, he appeared to use ‘master’ to address the priest throughout

his conversation with him. But the priest is never otherwise addressed as 'master' outside the services. Well, perhaps the deacon is addressing the bishop *in absentia* with the priest acting in his stead. St Ignatius wrote (in words written on our apse) "Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be..." However, in a liturgy where the bishop is presiding, the priest still gives the exclamation, "Blessed is the kingdom..."

Recall that just before the deacon said, "Bless, master", he prayed "O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise," and the priest also prayed it in the opening dialogue. So then, if the Lord is opening the lips of the priest and deacon, it is Christ that the deacon is addressing, and Christ who is using the priest as his mouthpiece.

Christ the Master

Christ is the true celebrant of every Divine Liturgy. He brings us into his time, and feeds us with his flesh and blood, giving us his very life, and takes us up into the Kingdom of God.

St Matthew records Christ saying, "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them." We see this reflected in the custom of turning toward the priest as he censes down the aisle of the church, and during the great entrance the laity touch his vestments calling to mind the woman who touched Jesus' garment and was healed of her illness.

The priest in celebrating the Divine Liturgy mystically shows forth Christ, who is indeed doing all things through his servants. As the Letter to the Hebrews states, "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man."

The Servants of the Lord

Let us expound upon the concept of servants. As we mentioned, if there is a Master, then logically the next question is "Who are the servants?"

Having established that the master is Jesus Christ, when we look at the New Testament, we see several parables about the servants of the King. The apostles again and again refer to themselves as servants of Christ, and

call each other 'fellow servants'. Paradoxically, Christ himself is shown as servant, washing the feet of the disciples, and the servant songs of the Prophet Isaiah are applied to him. Truly, we are all called to serve each other in Christ as St Paul writes, "[Give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another [that is, serving one another] out of reverence for Christ."

Four weeks in and I realize we never discussed the term 'Divine Liturgy'. "Better late than never" as they say, or is this perhaps the appropriate time? The first word, 'divine' is probably fairly commonly understood; it relates to God. Since Christ, the Son of God is our High Priest, we see how it fits. For he celebrates the liturgy with us and lavishes the richness of his grace upon us, rescuing us from Hades and bringing us into his Kingdom.

But what about the word 'liturgy', what does that mean? Well, it's derived from the Greek words for 'people' and 'work' and is thus often glossed as 'the work of the people'. However, it had a more precise meaning, that of 'public works', for example it was used to describe the service every citizen of Athens was expected to render to the state. The term 'Divine Liturgy' thus includes both God and the people working together. What a great calling that we can be fellow-workers with Christ! Christ is pleased to take us, unworthy servants, and makes us worthy to do his work. St Paul reminds the Corinthians "For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building," and in another place calls St Timothy a coworker of God in the gospel of Christ. This understanding, that the people of God are coworkers with God, is why in the Orthodox Church we cannot have private Divine Liturgies, served only by the priest. If the priest gets to the point of exclaiming, 'Blessed is the Kingdom...' and no one gives the 'Amen' then he cannot continue the liturgy. We are not called to worship by proxy and let the choir sing the responses for us. We are called to actively participate in the Divine Liturgy.

The Holy Ones

We have discussed the role of Christ, the clergy, and the people in celebrating the Divine Liturgy. There is another group who celebrates with us, God's holy ones, composed of the angels and the saints. In Hebrews 12,

St Paul states we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Again and again the Scriptures tell us that God is coming with his holy ones in the Day of the Lord. But, we are taken up into the Day of the Lord every Divine Liturgy. As we recently sang at the Ascension of our Lord,

When Thou didst fulfill Thy dispensation for our sakes, uniting the terrestrials with the celestials, Thou didst ascend in glory, O Christ our God, inseparable in space, but constant without separation, and crying unto Thy beloved, I am with you, and no one shall be against you.

Or St Paul expounds, we have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, where there are:

innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the church of the first born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Concelebration

While often we hear the word ‘concelebration’ used to describe multiple priests serving the Divine Liturgy together, in the fuller sense of that word every Divine Liturgy is a concelebration, for in every Divine Liturgy, the clergy and the faithful join with the heavenly hosts, the saints and the angels, to be led by Christ himself in worship. We are of course reminded of this when we come to church and see our walls adorned with the images of those who have gone before us and are with us still. All who call upon the Lord are called to join with all the saints in worship, united across time and distance as the Church of Christ.

Conclusion

What a sublime privilege and calling we have to worship the Lord as his holy ones. Let us conclude the quote from St Ignatius we gave earlier. “Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.” Fr Konstantinos Kallinicos admonishes, “O God-beloved faithful, do not stand as a stranger in the

celebration this dreaded Mystery, taking place for you!" Let us join our voices to that of the chanters and choir, to that of the angels and saints and exclaim the 'Amen', for we have come into the holy assembly, into the Kingdom of God, where Christ presides in worship and gives us himself.

Over the last four weeks, we've gone over the *why*, *what*, *when*, and *who* of the Divine Liturgy, next time, as you are probably expecting, we will examine the *where* as illustrated by the exclamation, "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

A reminder that we will not meet next week so you may attend the special meeting and especially the baptism. We will resume on July 16.

Our Father...

Through the prayers of St Nicholas of Thessaloniki, and all our holy fathers and mothers in the faith, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen