

## The Kingdom: “Who shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?”

{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 discussed *who* the celebrants are in the Divine Liturgy; Christ is surrounded by his holy ones, the angels and saints (including us) in worship. This time we will discuss *where* the Divine Liturgy takes place by examining the first utterance the priest says aloud in the Divine Liturgy.

To set the scene, the deacon is on the solea, and has just said, “Bless, Master.” The priest, standing in front of the Holy Table facing east then lifts the Gospel Book from the altar, makes the sign of the cross with it while saying “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.”

I wish to discuss three aspects of this action, the Kingdom as expressed in Orthodox orientation and architecture, the Cross as the entrance into the Kingdom, and the Holy Trinity in Orthodox thought and practice.

### *Orientation and Ascent*

It may strike the visitor as unusual that for much of the service, the priest has his back to the congregation. To understand this we need to first

address the orientation of the church building and then the role of the priest in worship.

Orthodox Church buildings (temples) are oriented; the altar is set on the east side. Since early times, Christians have faced east to pray. This recalls both that Paradise, Eden, was a garden planted in the east and that Christ shall appear from the East. As the Nativity Hymn states:

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, hath given rise to the light of knowledge in the world; for they that worshipped the stars did learn therefrom to worship Thee, O Sun of Justice, and to know that from the east of the Highest Thou didst come. O Lord, glory to Thee.

Another feature to consider in the architecture of Orthodox temples is that they are constructed so that the congregation literally ascends as they approach them and draw near the altar. When you approached from the west this morning, making your pilgrimage eastward, you ascended a few steps to come into the narthex. Behind me you see more steps before the solea, and one more into the sanctuary. The sanctuary is the Christian Holy of Holies, and images heaven. For there the bread and wine are shown to be the very Body and Blood of Christ. Christ is truly in our midst! As our post-communion prayers teach us “The Church is revealed to all to be a brilliantly lit heaven, leading the faithful in the way of light.”

This ascent as we make our pilgrimage into the church to dine at the Lord’s table calls to mind Psalm 23 recited in the Pascha service. “Who shall ascend onto the mountain of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? One who is guiltless in hand and clean in heart; he who did not occupy his soul with what is vain, and did not swear deceitfully to his fellow.” Since the end of the pilgrimage is to dine at the Lord’s table we also remember Psalm 22.5, “You prepared a table before me over against those that afflict me; you anointed my head with oil and your cup was supremely intoxicating.”

Focussing again on the priest: he serves the Divine Liturgy facing east, because he is leading the people in prayer. Together we look to the Lord

who is restoring us to paradise. As Baruch wrote, "Look toward the East, O Jerusalem and see the joy that is coming to you from God." When the priest turns to face the congregation during the Divine Liturgy it is because he is delivering the blessing from the Lord, by making the sign of the cross over the congregation.

### *Cross and Gospel*

As the priest gives the blessing of the Kingdom, he also makes the sign of the cross with the Gospel Book. This is the first act of the Divine Liturgy because it is only through the Cross as revealed in the Gospel that we may approach and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is on the Cross, that Christ reveals himself as King, for just as the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, we see Christ laid down his life for us on the Cross. Herein, we see love, for he laid down his life for us.

Consider the icons of the crucifixion and Extreme Humility. The usual title on the Cross in these icons is not "The King of the Jews" but is rather "The King of Glory" reflecting St Paul's words that the demonic powers did not know wisdom of God for had they understood it, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." Jesus is revealed as Lord, as King, not because he came in an awesome display of power and wealth, but because he came as a poor lowly servant, identifying with his people and suffering death for them and at their hands.

How do we become aware of the Cross and the Kingdom of the Crucified one? By the proclamation of the Gospel. The first reference to the word 'Gospel' in the New Testament appears in connection with the Kingdom of God. St Matthew writes, "And [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming *the gospel of the kingdom* and healing every disease and every affliction among the people."

The Gospel is God's good news of salvation. In first century Greek, the word referred to a specific type of good news. When a king, governor, or military general would be received in a city, he had his messengers proclaim his gospels or good tidings detailing his accomplishments, the enemies he defeated, and what was expected of those now hearing these

tidings. The proclamation of Christ's Gospel shows us both what Christ accomplished and how we are to respond, in essence it shows us our great salvation. Therefore, the Gospel Book is enthroned on the altar as it proclaims Christ our Saviour.

In the Gospel Books, our Lord Jesus spoke much about the Kingdom of God, relating several parables illustrating it. St Luke records Jesus' first sermon revealing the Kingdom of God as preaching the Gospel to the poor, liberating captives and the oppressed and restoring sight to the blind, in short establishing justice by correctly ordering the world. This Kingdom of God is our destination, our goal, that the Divine Liturgy is announcing. In the Divine Liturgy, we enter into the Kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And it is through the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus, and his Cross that we may enter therein. This is why the faithful also bless themselves with the sign of the Cross as the name of the Trinity is invoked.

### *The Holy Trinity*

In the Orthodox Church, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not some arcane riddle to be solved (or ignored for more practical or relatable concerns) but it is a Mystery to be lived. Sometime count the number of times the Trinity is invoked during the Divine Liturgy, starting with this blessing. While I don't have a precise number, it is quite a lot. God as revealed in Trinity forms a core of our worship, who we repeatedly call upon in our services. For as Jesus commanded at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, we are to disciple and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our whole life is to be hidden in Christ and taken up into the Triune God, becoming like him and receiving his grace into ourselves.

St Nicholas Cabasilas answers the question of why the opening blessing glorifies the threefold nature of God and not his unity. He writes,

It is because through the Incarnation of the Lord that humanity first learned God was three Persons, and the Mystery which is being performed is centered in the Incarnation of the Lord, so that from the very beginning of the Divine Liturgy, the Trinity must shine forth and be proclaimed.

Likewise the Theophany hymn rejoices in the Trinity:

When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan, worship of the Trinity wast made manifest; for the voice of the Father bore witness to Thee, calling Thee His beloved Son. And the Spirit in the likeness of a dove confirmed the truth of His word. O Christ our God, Who hast appeared and enlightened the world, glory to Thee.

Our God is not some abstraction, a force, or the god of the philosophers, not something we have reasoned out for ourselves that must exist. Rather he is the God of Scripture, who has revealed himself to us. We cannot ascend to such knowledge of God by our own reason, but rather God must descend to us to reveal it. Again and again in the Divine Liturgy we glory that the Triune God has shown himself to us and calls us his own.

#### *Conclusion*

When St Vladimir sent ambassadors to experience the Divine Liturgy in the Church of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople they reported back to him that they “knew not whether they were in heaven or on earth”. And so it is every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, we ascend to heaven where it is taking place and worship in the presence of Christ and his ministers, the archangels, angels, and saints who have gone on before us. We look east both in anticipation of Jesus Christ’s Glorious Appearance and in remembrance of the Paradise from which we came. For the Kingdom of the Triune God is in our midst, opened to us by the Cross and revealed to us in the Gospel.

Over the last few weeks we’ve discussed the *why*, *what*, *when*, *who* and now the *where* of the Divine Liturgy. At this point I’ve exhausted the questions that begin with the letter W, so next time we will explore the many litanies of the Divine Liturgy.

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

{Note Fr Stephen De Young has (re)started his Bible Study in Genesis.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

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