

The Hosts of Heaven with Our Lord: The Entrance with the Gospel Book

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

We last looked at the antiphons and how they draw from the Psalms showing us the truly blessed one who is Christ himself. This week we'll explore some aspects of the Little Entrance and show how the Entrance with the Gospel is Christ entering among his holy ones, the angels and saints to lead us all in worship.

As the third antiphon is being sung, the priest lifts the Gospel Book from the altar and hands it to the deacon, who with the priest and altar servers proceed to make the Entrance with the Gospel.

Icons

To set some ground work for this Entrance, we have to look at some of the elements of architecture of how Orthodox churches are constructed, as well as the items that are being carried in the procession. As you see behind me, there is a wall or screen separating the nave, where we are, from the sanctuary, representing heaven. This screen has several icons on it, and they follow a particular order in every Orthodox Church. To orient ourselves, note that the screen contains three doors: the center half-doors are known as the holy doors or the beautiful gate, and the north and south doors are known as the deacon's doors or angels' doors. The holy doors have upon them the icon of the Annunciation for two reasons, the

Annunciation is the beginning of our salvation, when Christ was conceived of the Virgin Mary, and because Christ descends (and we ascend) in the Mystery of the Eucharist. Above the beautiful gate is an icon of the Mystical Supper, wherein we participate each week. The deacon's doors have either angels or deacons imaged on them. The north door is the starting point for the entrances, both the Entrance with the Gospel and the Great entrance, but also it is where the deacon exits the sanctuary to intone the litanies. For this reason St Michael the Archangel is depicted here, guarding the door to heaven warring against the enemies of God, as we see imaged in St John's Apocalypse. On the south door, understood as an entrance into the sanctuary, into heaven, for the deacon enters the sanctuary here at the end of the litanies, we see St Gabriel the Archangel who announced Christ to the Theotokos, and began our entrance into heaven, into the presence of God.

As an aside, I often hear the question of why the named angels are given the title 'Saint'. 'Saint' and 'Holy' are the same word in Greek. In the Scriptures, the angels are often depicted as the holy ones of the Lord, for example in Psalm 88, "The heavens praise your wonders, O Lord and your truth is declared in the assembly of holy ones." But we see in the Letter to the Hebrews quoting Psalm 8 that man was made a little lower than the angels. Because of Christ's defeat of death and sin, we are who are in him are joint-heirs with him and shall be like the elect angels in holiness.

Returning to the icon screen, on the sides of the holy doors we see on the left side the Theotokos holding the Christ child and Christ Ruler-of-All on the right, images of the first and second coming of our Lord, between which all the activity in the altar and indeed our earthly lives takes place. On our Lady's left we have the patron saint or feast for the church, here it is the dedication of the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. And on our Lord's right we see St John the Baptist and Forerunner.

Before the procession proper the altar servers take up the lamps, processional cross and fan. The lamps speak to Christ being the light of the world, and their position going before the cross call to mind St John the Baptist, the voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord.

Next comes the Cross which needs no introduction. On one side of it is an image of Christ crucified, and on the other side is an image of the Resurrection with Christ trampling down the gates of Hades. Next comes the priest with the deacon holding the Gospel book and last in the procession are the fans; these are the circular metallic disks. On them are imaged the six-winged seraphim with an inscription, "Holy, holy, holy, the whole earth is full of thy glory," from Isaiah 6.

Gospel as icon of Christ

With this background on the iconography, let us delve into more aspects of the Little Entrance. In the first few centuries, this entrance marked the starting point of the Liturgy. Due to the value of the Gospel, in times of persecution the book was kept by the priest in his home to hide it from the authorities. Later on, after persecution ceased, the Gospel Book was kept in the sacristy, but soon it came to be permanently enthroned upon the altar. This development is why now the Entrance both starts and ends in the sanctuary.

The Gospel is an icon of Christ, not only because the covers depict his crucifixion and resurrection, but primarily because it tells his story and is how we know Christ's actions for us while upon the earth. At the start of the Entrance, the priest takes it from the altar and hands it to the deacon. If the deacon is not serving then the priest will take up the Gospel Book and elevate it, both showing the place the Gospel has in our religion, and obscuring his face so that the congregation sees Christ instead of himself.

Quiet Prayers

As the priest is participating in the Entrance he prays silently:

O Master, Lord our God, who hast appointed in heaven orders and hosts of angels and archangels for the service of thy glory: Cause that with our entrance there may be an entrance of holy angels serving with us and glorifying thy goodness. For unto thee are due all glory, honor and worship to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

Together with the images on the fans this prayer reminds us that we do not serve alone but with the host of heaven. As we see in the Prophet Isaiah's and the Apostle John's visions, the angels always worship God in heaven, but we who are redeemed by Christ, being baptized into his death and resurrection have the great privilege to join with them. Not only do we worship with the angels but with the saints, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us:

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [the Old Covenant saints just mentioned previously], let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

At the holy doors the priest prays, "Blessed is the entrance to thy holy place, always, now and ever and unto ages of ages." Interestingly, the Greek of this prayer is ambiguous and the words translated 'holy place' can also be translated 'holy ones', so we see here the entrance of the holy ones into the holy place. Of course, as we learn later in the Divine Liturgy, 'One is holy, one is the Lord Jesus Christ' and it is by his grace that we are enabled and made worthy to worship him.

The deacon then exclaims "Wisdom! Stand upright!" for this is the posture of those who are called to attention for the entrance of Christ into the sanctuary. The choir and congregation sing the entrance hymn, the usual one being, "O come let us worship and fall down before Christ. O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, save us who sing to Thee. Alleluia."

Variable Hymns

Next follow a series of hymns, which vary with the season, day, and place of the Divine Liturgy. For example we'll sing a hymn for the Resurrection, a hymn for the festal period or saint of the day, and a hymn for the patron of the Church, in our case the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem.

Thou hast revealed the earthly majesty of the dwelling place of thy holy glory, O Lord. As the brilliance of the firmament on high make firm its foundation unto ages of ages, and receive our fervent supplications which are offered to thee therein. Through the intercessions of the Theotokos, O Life and Resurrection of all.

These hymns remind us that although the Divine Liturgy is outside of time and not counted among the hours of day, it intersects with our time and place. Just as the priest pronounces our name in every Mystery, so too the specific place and time the Divine Liturgy is offered is recognized.

Trisagion

After the variable hymns, we sing the Thrice-Holy Hymn, the Trisagion. The words, “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” are taken and expanded from the song the seraphim sing in Isaiah 6. To recount the story, Isaiah received a vision of the Lord:

“...sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”**

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Before we sing the trisagion, the priest prays:

O holy God, who resteth in the holy place, who art hymned by the seraphim with the thrice-holy cry and glorified by the cherubim and

worshipped by every heavenly power, who out of nothingness hast brought all things into being, who hast created man according to thine image and likeness and hast adorned him with thine every gift; who givest to him that asketh wisdom and understanding, who despisest not the sinner but hast appointed repentance unto salvation, who hast vouchsafed unto us, thy humble and unworthy servants, even in this hour, to stand before the glory of thy holy altar and to offer the worship and praise which are due unto thee: thyself, O Master, receive even from the mouth of us sinners the thrice-holy hymn and visit us in thy goodness. Pardon us every transgression both voluntary and involuntary; sanctify our souls and bodies; and grant us to serve thee in holiness all the days of our life, through the intercession of the holy Theotokos and of all the saints, who from the beginning of the world have been well-pleasing unto thee.

While there is much in what was just quoted, let me focus on that we are unworthy to approach God. We have no holiness but must be cleaned and made worthy by God. For just as he sent a seraph to cleanse the Prophet Isaiah's lip, so too must we be cleaned. But then amazingly, he is pleased to accept our prayers and hymns.

Conclusion

All of this shows us that as we approach God himself, it is an awesome and holy act. We are led in worship by Christ who in his ascension entered into the throne room of God with the heavenly altar and sits at his right hand. He cleanses us and we join in worship with the angels and saints who have been worshipping God from the beginning of the world. As Saint Paul says:

...you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the 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.

Are there any questions?

{Questions and maybe answers.}

{Next week we're not meeting for the special meeting.}

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