

Wisdom! Let Us Attend!: The Readings and Homily

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

It has been a little while since we last met, so let's remind ourselves of where we are in the service. We begin today just after the thrice-holy hymn has been sung and the altar has been censed to prepare us to hear the Holy Scriptures. The reader approaches the solea and the deacon proclaims "Let us attend!". The set of readings that follow are the culmination of the first part of the Divine Liturgy: the Liturgy of the Word. They occur at a pivotal moment; everything preceding them, all the prayers, hymns, and incense, has prepared us to hear the Scriptures. Likewise these readings prepare us for the second half of the Liturgy: the Liturgy of the Eucharist, wherein we shall receive Christ. The Readings consist of three parts, the Psalms, the Epistle, and the Gospel, and are accompanied the homily to expound upon what was read.

Prokeimenon

But where do the Psalms appear? They aren't announced as in "The reading is from the Psalter." Rather the prokeimenon, the introduction to the epistle, is taken from the Psalms. In former times, the prokeimenon was a longer passage, up to an entire Psalm. Today however, it is one or two verses.

We've discussed the importance of the Psalter as the songbook of the Church and how much of our services references the Psalms. We see the Psalms functioning here as well to introduce the readings from the New Testament. As Blessed Augustine said, "The New Testament is in the Old concealed; the Old Testament in the New is revealed." Or as St Germanos states the prokeimenon is "the revelation of the divine mysteries by the Prophets and the foretelling of the coming of Christ the King." The message of Christ was foretold by the holy Prophets before his birth by the Theotokos. Likewise, St Stephen before his martyrdom, recounts how the whole of Hebrew history was driving to the salvific work of our Lord.

A few weeks ago, while Father was saying the Vesting Prayers, Subdeacon Loren asked me how many of those prayers were from the Psalms. I answered, 'all of them I believe'. A discussion ensued noting when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament the whole context of the passage is intended. This is true also in the services. Today's prokeimenon, "Let thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us. Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous," comes from the last and first verse of Psalm 32 and the whole Psalm speaks of the mercy and faithfulness of the Lord in creation and providence echoing themes found in the Epistle and Gospel.

This is why the deacon intones 'Let us attend' before the prokeimenon and epistle. The whole of the Liturgy has been leading up to these readings, and they are for our edification and salvation.

Epistle

After the reader has intoned the prokeimenon, the deacon responds 'Wisdom' and the reader replies, 'The reading is from...' and announces the epistle. The deacon again responds 'Let us attend!' emphasizing by repetition the importance of these readings and calling us out of our inattention. The reader then reads the epistle.

The Epistle and Gospel readings fit together. Today in the Epistle we heard of God's provision for us and our proper response of thankfulness and assisting those of the household of God. In the context of 2 Corinthians 9, St Paul is raising funds from the Corinthian church to aid the impoverished

church in Jerusalem. If we were to have read further, we would see that God has given us the supreme gift of his grace in Christ. Like the Psalms, the Epistle reading ought to remind us of the entire passage. We see in the Gospel today that just as our Lord raised the dead man to life, so he gives life to us in the tombs and enables us to praise him for his great grace.

Now, you may wonder, since the Gospels precede the Epistles in the order of the New Testament, why do we not read the Gospel first? St Nicholas Cabasilas provides the answer.

Because that which our Lord himself said constitutes a more perfect manifestation than the words of the Apostles. Now the Lord did not display to men all the extent of his power and goodness at once..., but he proceeded from that which was more obscure to that which was clearer. That is why, if we wish to illustrate the gradualness of his showing himself, it is better to read the Epistle before the Gospel. And therefore those texts which reveal his supreme manifestation are kept to the end.

In a sense, the Epistles are commentaries on the Gospels and the Gospel shows Christ more clearly, as an icon of Christ. This is why we have the Gospel book enthroned upon the altar, but the Epistle book is kept with the chanters stand.

Gospel

Remember the first act in the Divine Liturgy was the priest making the sign of the cross with the Gospel Book. He does this because we can only enter the Kingdom of the Triune God through the Cross of Jesus, who is revealed in the Gospel. We saw the Gospel Book as an icon of Christ carried through the Holy Doors showing Christ entering the sanctuary. Note however the Gospel was closed.

While the Epistle was being read, the priest prays "The Prayer before Reading the Gospel", which should be familiar to us as it starts with "Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge..." We cannot hear the Holy Gospel and receive benefit from it apart from the Grace of God. This is why the priest prays

this and he blesses the deacon before the reading. Before the Matins Gospel reading, we pray a small litany asking that we may be made worthy to hear the Holy Gospel. The deacon reminds us again, “Wisdom” calling us to stand upright and hear the Gospel. The priest gives us the peace of God and the deacon announces the reading. And again he calls us to attend, for inattention is a dragon we must do battle with constantly while praying. St Nicholas Cabasilas commends us:

The cry ‘Stand upright’ alongside ‘Let us attend’ warns us to be ready for battle when we converse with God and assist at the Holy Mysteries. There must be no inattention; we must act with fervor and all reverence, and in this manner look, listen, and pray throughout the service. The first sign of this fervor and devotion is the uprightness of our bodies; we do these things standing on our feet, not sitting down....That is the meaning of these prayers.

The Gospel is opened and the deacon reads the passage while the lamp bearers stand on either side reminding us of the Light of Christ and his illumination of our souls; indeed our souls should be “all aflame and shining with the light of the Holy Spirit” as St Symeon the New Theologian exhorts us.

The opening of the Gospel calls to mind the passage in Luke, where Jesus travels with two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. They did not recognize him until he opened the Scriptures and broke bread with them. Our Lord explained how the Scriptures all pointed to him and it God alone who can open the Books. But the opening of books is also a symbol of judgement,

“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.”

Let us respond to the mercy of God and judge ourselves, amending our lives before that fearful day.

Before and after the Gospel reading we sing “Glory to thee, O Lord, glory to thee.” We do this as St Nicholas says, “because it is fitting to do so for all those things which he does not cease to bestow upon us, and especially for so great a benefit as listening to the Divine Word.” The priest blesses the congregation with the Gospel Book, reminding us that Christ gives his blessing through the hearing of the Scriptures.

Homily

After the Gospel is read, the priest or deacon preaches the homily. The word homily comes from a Greek word that means discourse, but note also the resonance to *homo* meaning same. Thus the homily is a discourse on the Scriptures, saying the same thing as what was just read. The Ethiopian eunuch asked how he would understand the Scriptures, unless someone guided him. Therefore the Church has always had holy men and women, taught by the Spirit, who are able to expound the Scriptures to us. When the priest gives his homily, he draws upon this treasury, Holy Tradition, so we may understand the Scripture in line with those who have gone before us, and not be lead away by fanciful interpretations and speculations.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the readings are the culmination of the first part of the Divine Liturgy; the Liturgy of the Word. The hymns, incense, and prayers have prepared us to hear the Holy Scriptures, and we beseech God for his grace to receive him in them. We hear the Psalms, the Epistle, and the Gospel to prepare us to receive Christ in the Eucharist. All the Scriptures point to Christ and the Gospel is the verbal icon of Christ. Let us conclude by quoting St Nicholas of Thessaloniki once more. “The Gospel represents Christ, and he who has found Christ has obtained all that he could desire... and those who possess all things need ask for nothing more.”

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

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