

The Purpose and Nature of the Liturgy

High School Lesson 1

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.

Preface

{Introductions, icebreaker, name, interesting story about self.}

Sunday School this year will be divided into two parts; a series on the Divine Liturgy, and a series on St Paul's Letter to the Romans after that.

Toward the end of the Sunday School year, one of your parents approached me in coffee hour and suggested I teach a series on the Divine Liturgy for you. A few weeks later, Fr Gabriel asked me to help organize the catechumenate program and we decided to start with a series on the Divine Liturgy. So I've been teaching the catechumens and others a series on the Divine Liturgy this summer and now I have the privilege of teaching you.

What questions do you have about the Liturgy?

Thank you, I'll try to address those as we go through the series.

Well, that is probably enough preface to the series, as the writer of Second Maccabees writes, "At this point therefore let us begin our narrative, without adding further to what has already been said; for it is foolish to lengthen the preface while cutting short the [content] itself."

Introduction

While we have all heard the very excellent advice that ‘the very beginning [is] a very good place to start’, we shall start at the end. After all, when the Divine Liturgy begins, the Matins service has just ended and the services of the Preparation, Vesting, and Opportune Time have been offered before that. And Vespers was said the night before. Moreover, as we shall see, when we offer worship in the Divine Liturgy, we join with the worship of the angels, and those holy ones have been offering the Triune God worship since their creation.

By ‘the end’ I do not mean the dismissals of the Divine Liturgy; we will get there eventually. I mean the goal or purpose of the Liturgy. *Why* do we gather together at least once a week to celebrate the Mysteries? Also we’ll discuss *What* are we doing when we gather to worship and *what* exactly is the Divine Liturgy.

Why we meet each week

St Nicholas Cabasilas begins his *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy* with these words:

The essential act in the celebration of the holy mysteries is the transformation of the elements into the Divine Body and Blood; its aim is the sanctification of the faithful, who through these mysteries receive the remission of their sins and the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

What awesome words from the saint! The elements of bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, and we the faithful are transformed into holy ones. We are given the Body and Blood of Christ to make us holy and to unite us with the Church, the Body of Christ. In the Divine Liturgy, through the grace of God, we are given forgiveness of sins, and the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

Scripture and Preparation

The Divine Liturgy assumes familiarity with the Scriptures. Much of the words are directly out of Scripture or allude to the scriptures. There are two passages I want to look at today to help illustrate the Divine Liturgy.

Someone please look up Isaiah 6.1–9 and someone else please look up Hebrews 12.18–24 & 29.

Who's familiar with Isaiah's vision of throne room of God?

As we read it notice what the Prophet Isaiah sees and what happens to him:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw 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 [undone]; 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.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”

So what's going on here?

Isaiah comes into the presence of the Lord and sees the angels worshipping him. Upon seeing the greatness of God, Isaiah he immediately recognizes

his sin and unworthiness, calling down a curse upon himself. But God, through a seraph, cleanses him with a coal from the altar of incense, and commissions him to give his word to the people.

Let's look at that passage in the Letter to the Hebrews, notice where we come in worship and what is happening.

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But 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....

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

What did you notice about this passage?

We've come to the mountain of the Lord and join in worship with the saints and the angels. We're given a new covenant and kingdom which cannot be shaken, while this world will crumble. So what's the proper response? Offering God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. But this also means we have to prepare ourselves lest we find ourselves cast out of the kingdom without a wedding garment. How should we prepare?

All of the Christian life is preparation, and we see manifold examples of that. We also see God provides for us in the life of the Church and the Scriptures. Our private prayers and the services of Vespers and Matins prepare us for the Divine Liturgy; in the Divine Liturgy itself, the first

portion, the Liturgy of the Word, prepares us to partake of the Eucharist. Likewise, in the annual calendar, Pascha is preceded by Holy Week, which the 40 days of the Great Fast prepare us for. Moreover, there is a three week period to prepare us for the Great Fast. Truly, all of our life is to prepare us for our death, when we shall meet the Lord. As St Isaac of Syria said, "This life is given to us for repentance; do not waste it in empty pursuits." Or, as St Paul writes, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Let us not neglect our preparation because the Liturgy unites us to God.

{ Concluded here for week 1 }

Sacrifice

And how does it do that? What's the primary thing going on in the Liturgy? And what is the Eucharist an example of?

Last year we discussed sacrifice a bit. We saw that it is fundamentally a meal shared between people and their God. It is an act of hospitality.

The Eucharist is the central act of the Divine Liturgy. Does anyone know the two sections of the Liturgy? The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. You've all been in the Liturgy hundreds of times so you know that all the prayers, hymns, and readings before the Eucharist prepare us to receive.

The Old Testament sacrifices of the burnt offering, sin offering, peace offering, thanksgiving offering, etc. were meals with the God of Israel. In the case of sin offerings, the sacrifice served as a meal to restore the relationship and reconcile with God. Someone please look up Hebrews 10.3 & 4. "But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." As the sacrifices of the Torah were not sufficient to deal with the root of the issue and eradicate sin, God offered us himself. God the Son became man in order to live a life pleasing to God in a fallen world and offer it to God for the life of the world. As Hebrews continues [10.12 & 13], "But when Christ

had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”

The Gospels use image of the Passover in describing the sacrifice of Jesus. In the Passover, God judges the gods of Egypt, displaying his power over them, and rescuing his people. In anticipation and celebration of this event, they are instructed to keep the Passover each year. This meal defined the children of Israel and their covenant with God. It was so important that the prophets likened the return from exile in Babylon to the Exodus and Ezra made sure the returned Hebrews kept the Passover. Moreover, the prophet Jeremiah envisioned a new covenant enacted between God and his people.

Likewise, Jesus gave the Eucharist to his disciples before his death telling them to keep it as his memorial sacrifice of the new covenant. He tells them that he will not drink of the fruit of the vine until he drinks it in the kingdom of God. St Paul writes Christ is our Passover Lamb, sacrificed for us, and we should keep the feast in sincerity and truth.

How is the Eucharist a sacrifice? First, the elements of the Eucharist are food because as physical food essential to sustain life and strengthen those who eat of it, the Eucharist is spiritual food to sustain our Life in Christ. While grain and grapes are given by God, grown with his sunlight and rain, it also takes human labor in order to transform them into bread and wine. This cooperation of humans with the Divine is especially suited for the Eucharist; it points to our whole life being offered to God as sacrifice. The transformation of grain into bread and grapes into wine involves crushing the raw material—reminding us of our sanctification and death to sin—and uniting many individual elements into one loaf or cup—reminding us of the union we have in Christ.

When we keep the feast of the Eucharist, having properly prepared, we receive Christ and are united to him in his kingdom. We participate in the one sacrifice he offered for our salvation. Just as God rescued Israel in the Passover, Christ after the Last Supper defeated sin, death, and the Devil and rescued us from their grasp. He did this in a most unexpected way, through entering death on the Cross. Death, of course, could not hold the

Author of Life and Christ defeated it. As St John Chrysostom says in his Pascal Homily,

“[Hades] took a body, and face to face met God! It took earth and encountered heaven! It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen! “O death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is thy victory?”

Conclusion

So to sum up we offer the Divine Liturgy to worship God and be united to him. The Divine Liturgy prepares us to partake of the Eucharist where we receive Christ's body and blood. Christ both gives us the Eucharist and is given in the Eucharist. He is both the priest and the offering. Just as grains of wheat are united and transformed to form bread and likewise with grapes and wine, so are we united together and transformed to be the Body of Christ, dying to ourselves and offering our whole life to Christ.

Therefore, let us join with the deacon in prayer:

O Christ, great and most holy Pascha, O Wisdom, Word and Power of God: Grant that we may more perfectly partake of thee in the never-ending day of thy Kingdom.

Having discussed the *why* and the *what* of the Divine Liturgy, next time we'll focus on *when* the Liturgy occurs and the Never-Ending Day.

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