

When is the Divine Liturgy?: “It is Time for the Lord to Act”

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

Who can tell me *what* we discussed last time? That’s right: we discussed *what* the Liturgy was. It is a sacrifice, a meal shared with God wherein we partake of the very Life of Christ.

This week we will address *when* the Liturgy occurs. Does anyone already know? (Is the answer more profound than 10 o’clock on Sunday morning?)

Let’s start by exploring the opening dialogue between the priest and deacon. This takes place quietly in the altar before the initial proclamation “Blessed is the Kingdom...” I’ll need two volunteers, one to read the lines of the priest and the other to read the deacon’s lines.

Opening Dialogue

The priest and deacon stand together before the holy table. The priest with hands uplifted says the following prayer while the deacon lifts his orarion [stole].

O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the Treasury of good things and Giver of life: Come, and abide in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O Good One.

The priest and deacon make three [low bows] while the priest says:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.

The priest then kisses the gospel book and the holy table, while the deacon kisses the holy table. The deacon bows his head to the priest and holding his orarion says:

It is time for the Lord to act. Bless, master.

The priest makes the sign of the cross over the deacon's head, saying:

Blessed is our God, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

The deacon responds:

Amen. Pray for me, master.

The priest says:

The Lord direct thy steps unto every good work.

To which the deacon responds:

Remember me, holy master.

Blessing the deacon, the priest says:

The Lord God remember thee in his kingdom, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

The deacon replies:

Amen.

And exits the sanctuary through the north door. Standing in the center of the solea, the deacon makes three [low bows] before the holy doors, saying each time:

O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.

What do you see in what we just read?

That's great, I'm going to focus on the phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act". What does this line mean? Is it simply the deacon looking out, seeing that the congregation have arrived, looking at his watch and seeing it is 10 o'clock, and telling the priest they need to start the service?

Psalm 118 'They have broken your law'

The first step in understanding what is meant by the line, "It is time for the Lord to act," is to realize, like much of the Divine Liturgy, it comes from the Scriptures. Does anyone know where?

It is from Psalm 118.126. When we encounter a verse referenced in the services of the church, we have to go back to the Scriptures and understand the context.

Who can tell me something about Psalm 118 or 119 in the Hebrew numbering?

You may remember Psalm 118 is the longest of the Psalms, and is divided into 22 sections—one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight verses, and they all begin with the Hebrew letter for the section. Legend has it that King David used this psalm to teach his son Solomon both the literal and spiritual alphabet.

The theme of the Psalm is the Torah—the Teaching or Law. The psalmist expounds his love of the Torah expressing how it is life for him. Almost every verse references the Torah, using one of several synonyms.

Can some one read the full verse Psalm 118.126: "It is time for the Lord to act; for they scattered your law."

See how the Lord reacts, we have broken and scattered his Law, but by placing this text at the start of the Divine Liturgy, we see the Lord is gathering to himself a people. The Prophet Isaiah envisions the future gathering of the children of Israel, who were scattered by the Assyrians and Babylonians for breaking the covenant. Not only will scattered Israel be gathered, but others from the nations will be added to their number.

Our Lord expands on this when he declares in the Gospel of John: “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

The Funeral Service

Probably, the most prominent place Psalm 118 is used in the Church is in which service? The funeral service. Does anyone know what the funeral service is modified from? Matins.

One the hymns of Matins has the refrain, “Blessed art thou, O Lord; teach me thy statutes,” which is Psalm 118.12. In the Matins service the verses are about Christ’s resurrection and destruction of death, the first verse being:

The company of the angels was amazed, when they beheld thee
numbered among the dead, yet thyself, O Savior, destroying the
power of death, and with thee raising up Adam and releasing
all men from hell.

In the funeral service the refrain is the same, “Blessed art thou, O Lord; teach me thy statues,” but the verses differ. For example, the first verse states that the gates of Paradise are opened through repentance. The second verse is:

O thou who of old didst create me from nothingness, and didst
honor me with thine image divine, but because I transgressed
thy commandments hast returned me again unto the earth from
which I was taken: Bring me back to that likeness, to be
reshaped in that pristine beauty.

When we attend the funeral of one we love but will see no longer and hear this hymn, we are reminded of hearing the same hymn every week in Matins, and just as Matins corresponds to dawn, so too does death correspond with the dawning of the true Sun and the beginning of daylight. For as Christ says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Concerning this Fr John Behr writes:

Christ's own work has turned death inside-out, showing himself to be stronger than death, and proving himself to be the one who is ultimately and totally in control from the beginning: All things are in his hands and providence—even our apostasy. Turned inside-out, death now becomes the means whereby the creature returns to God, and, in fact, is fashioned by God as a living being... [Christ in his death] has opened up a way of seeing a deeper mystery in death and has transformed death throughout all time: for what was once the end now becomes the beginning of a deeper mystery.

The Eighth Day

Let us also consider one additional aspect of our phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act." There are two Greek words for time. Does anyone know them?

Chronos is the usual word, and means time as a continuous succession of moments, and gives us such words as chronic, chronicle, and anachronism. However, the word used here in our phrase is *kairos*, the opportune or right time.

Kairos is used in the Scriptures to indicate the right time to do something as in Sirach. Who wants to read that passage? "A wise person will be silent until a proper time, but the swaggerer and fool overstep a proper time." Additionally, it is often used to indicate God's time, when God is going to act. In Genesis, God tells Noah, "The time of all humankind has come before me" and he sends the flood to rescue the righteous Noah from the wickedness of the earth. In the book of Esther, Mordecai tells Esther, "Because even if you keep silent at this time, from elsewhere help and protection will come to the Judeans, but you and your father's household will perish. And who knows if for this time you were made queen?" For this reason, at this time, God raised Esther to be queen to deliver her people from their enemies.

In the New Testament, this sense of *kairos* as God's time and activity intensifies. St Mark records Jesus preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the

kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel.” The Apostle writes to the Romans:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In related language, the early Christians often equated worship on the Lord’s Day with the eighth day of the week. This was connected with the circumcision of the Hebrews on the eighth day after birth. Last year when we studied Genesis, we saw that the Prophet Moses lists a table of nations and their fall at the Tower of Babel (chapters 10–11), and then immediately following (chapter 12 and following), relates the story of the calling of Abraham. He is called out of the nations, out of fallen Babylon, to become the father of a new nation. The sign of circumcision is given to mark this new nation. The eighth day refers back to the seven days of creation; that is, the creation of a new nation is a new creation. Christ arose on the eighth day; signaling a new creation of his people.

So the eighth day is not merely within time, in the cycle of the week. Likewise, God’s time is not just a moment in the middle of history as one moment among many but it is the fullness of time, the end of time. All of time drives toward and culminates in this Never-Ending Day. In the death and resurrection of Christ, the age to come has entered into our present age. When the deacon says “It is time for the Lord to act,” he says that the Lord is bringing his time—eternity—into our time; in the Divine Liturgy we worship and commune with the True God and dine with Christ in his Kingdom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we answer the question, “*When* is the Divine Liturgy?” by stating that it is of the Eighth Day, made present to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. “Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” “Let us not receive the grace of God in vain.” Let this phrase, “It

is time for the Lord to act," be on our lips each week, for though we have scattered God's Teaching he is gathering us together, to redeem us, to open our mouths to be filled with his praise. Let the phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act," be on our lips at the hour of our death, for then we are created by God and fashioned into a living being. Indeed, may we have this phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act" on our lips continually, living our whole lives in this light, toward this end, for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is resurrected from the dead and has made all things new.

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

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

Our Father...

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