

Who Celebrates the Divine Liturgy & Where do They Celebrate?

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 you learned *when* you met last time? Last time we got a quiet dialogue between the priest and the deacon just before the Divine Liturgy, in which the deacon declares “It is time for the Lord to act”, for the Lord is bringing us into his time, into eternity.

This week we pick up where we left off last week, with the deacon on the solea having just said thrice “O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.” As we join him, let me have two volunteers to read, one for the deacon, and one for the priest.

The deacon lifts his orarion and says aloud, “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.” And the people respond ‘Amen’.

Who is the deacon referring to when he says, “Bless, master”? Let us explore this utterance and discover *who* is celebrating the Divine Liturgy. And let’s also explore the opening blessing and discuss *where* the Divine Liturgy occurs: the Kingdom of God, and why does the priest pick up the

Gospel book and make the sign of the cross with it? Since you all figured out the first topics of the first few talks answer the fundamental questions of why, what, when, who, and where, I figured we could tackle two questions this week.

“Bless, Master”

So who is the deacon talking to when he says, ‘Bless Master’. Is he talking to the priest? He is the one giving the opening blessing. But the priest is never otherwise addressed as ‘master’ outside the services. Well, is he perhaps addressing the bishop while absent with the priest acting in his stead? However, in a liturgy where the bishop is presiding, the priest still gives the opening blessing.

From last week, what did the deacon say just before “Bless, master”? He prayed “O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise,” and the priest also prayed it in the opening dialogue. So then, if the Lord is opening the lips of the priest and deacon, it is Christ that the deacon is addressing, and Christ who is using the priest as his mouthpiece.

Christ the Master

Christ is the true celebrant of every Divine Liturgy. He brings us into his time, and feeds us with his flesh and blood, giving us his very life, and takes us up into the Kingdom of God.

St Matthew records Christ saying, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.” We see this reflected in the custom of turning toward the priest as he censes down the aisle of the church, and during the great entrance the laity touch his vestments calling to mind the woman who touched Jesus’ garment and was healed of her illness.

The priest in celebrating the Divine Liturgy mystically shows forth Christ, who is indeed doing all things through his servants. Can someone read Hebrews 8.1–2

“Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty

in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man."

The Servants of the Lord

Let us expound upon the concept of servants. If there is a Master, then the next question is "Who are the servants?" Having established that the master is Jesus Christ, when we look at the New Testament, we see several parables about the servants of the King. The apostles again and again refer to themselves as servants of Christ, and call each other 'fellow servants'. Paradoxically, Christ himself is shown as servant, washing the feet of the disciples, and the servant songs of the Prophet Isaiah are applied to him. Truly, we are all called to serve each other in Christ as St Paul writes, "[Give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another [that is, serving one another] out of reverence for Christ."

We need the laity present to celebrate a Divine Liturgy; in the Orthodox Church we cannot have private Divine Liturgies, served only by the priest. If the priest gets to the point of exclaiming, 'Blessed is the Kingdom...' and no one is there to respond 'Amen' then he cannot continue the liturgy. We are not called to worship by proxy and let the choir sing the responses for us. Rather, we are called to actively participate in the Divine Liturgy.

The Holy Ones

We have discussed the role of Christ, the clergy, and the people in celebrating the Divine Liturgy. There is another group who celebrates with us, God's holy ones, composed of the angels and the saints. In Hebrews 12, St Paul states we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Again and again the Scriptures tell us that God is coming with his holy ones in the Day of the Lord. But, we are taken up into the Day of the Lord every Divine Liturgy. As we sing at the Ascension of our Lord,

When Thou didst fulfill Thy dispensation for our sakes, uniting
the terrestrials with the celestials, Thou didst ascend in glory, O
Christ our God, inseparable in space, but constant without

separation, and crying unto Thy beloved, I am with you, and no one shall be against you.

Or as the Letter to the Hebrews says, if I can have someone read it (12.24ff):

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

Concelebration

Who's heard the word 'concelebration'? What does it mean? To celebrate together right. Often, it is used to describe multiple priests serving the Divine Liturgy together, but in the fuller sense of that word every Divine Liturgy is a concelebration, for as we've seen in every Divine Liturgy, the clergy and the faithful join with the heavenly hosts, the saints and the angels, to be led by Christ himself in worship. All who call upon the Lord are called to join with all the saints in worship, united across time and distance as the Church of Christ.

Cross and Gospel

So let's turn to the blessing the priest gives. Who knows what he does as he says the blessing?

He 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.

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.”

Who knows what Gospel means? And what sort of Good News is it? The Gospel is God’s good news of salvation. Now, 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 news 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. 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

What does the priest say in the Blessing? 'Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' In the Orthodox Church, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not an arcane riddle to be solved but a Mystery to be lived. Does anyone know how many times the Trinity is invoked during the Divine Liturgy? I don't know either, but it is quite a lot. Next week count them and report back. We repeatedly call upon the Holy Trinity 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.

We cannot ascend to God by our own efforts, but rather God must descend to us to reveal himself. 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. What an awesome privilege we have to be made holy as these and join in worshiping the True God with them. 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 questions that begin with W, so next time we will explore the many litanies of the Divine Liturgy. Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

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