

Psalms of Blessedness: The Antiphons

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

Last week we discussed the litanies of the Divine Liturgy. Today, we'll address the antiphons today which follow the initial Litany of Peace. The antiphons are drawn from the Psalms which describe the blessed one. Ultimately the blessed one is Christ who humbled himself for our salvation and leads us into his Kingdom.

Psalms

Who knows what an antiphon is? The antiphons are lines sung responsively. Thus we have one line sung by a chanter and the refrain sung by the choir and congregation. Again we see the necessity of our participation in the Liturgy.

The antiphonal verses are taken from the Psalms and vary with the feasts and cycles of the year. The Psalter is rightly called the song book of the Church. And the Psalter is used extensively in the Church: Vespers, Matins, and the Divine Liturgy all have Psalms at the front of the service after the initial prayers.

Perhaps the place to begin with the Psalms is the first one:

Blessed is the one
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the Teaching of the LORD,
 and on his Teaching he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree
 planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
 but are like dust that the wind drives away
 from the face of the earth.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

This psalm, at the head of the psalter, establishes a pattern for the other psalms. In it we see who are truly blessed, those who delight in the teaching of the Lord, and grow deep like the tree planted beside streams of water. But notice also the singular, 'Blessed is the *One* who...' Who is this singular person, who always did the right and rejected the wrong? Of course, it is Jesus Christ, our Lord. At the very outset of the psalms, we see they have a Messianic interpretation. For Christ secured our salvation, and enables us by the grace of the Holy Spirit to walk in it. He is the singular blessed one but he has lavished these gifts upon us as the Apostle says to the Ephesians.

Beatitudes

Let's focus a bit further on this psalm and look at the first word: blessed. What does it mean to be blessed? Often we hear it translated as 'happy' and while that is a good translation, there is more context to be gleaned. We

do not have to be content with the corners of the field, but like Ruth we are invited to glean among the sheaves.

Perhaps the most famous passages in the Bible concerning blessedness are the Beatitudes in the Gospels according to Ss Matthew and Luke.

Occasionally, we sing the Matthean version as the third antiphon.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We've heard these words so much we no longer recognize how remarkable they are. But they are revolutionary, both when Jesus first said them and today. Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the persecuted. These groups of people are not who the world would call happy, rather the world would consider these people unhappy, perhaps forgotten by God. But in St Luke's Gospel, we see after Jesus pronounces the beatitudes, he utters woes. Woe to those who are rich, who are full now, who laugh now, and when people speak well of you, for so they did to the false prophets. As St Paul writes, God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. This of course is centered in the Cross. Read 1 Corinthians 1.18–31

While I quoted Psalm 1 as 'Blessed is the one', a more literal translation is 'Blessed is the human'. This line from Psalm 1 is echoed by St John in his description of Jesus in the hours leading up to his crucifixion. Pontius

Pilate had humiliated Jesus Christ by having him scourged and mocked, and while presenting him to the crowd wearing the crown of thorns and false purple robe he declared, "Behold the human." The Gospels portray Jesus showing us both True God and True Human in his humiliation and exaltation on the Cross.

As we studied last year in Genesis 1, God said let us make humanity in our image, distinguishing the creation of humanity from everything else he created of which he said merely "Let there be". But the creation of humanity was not done in this way, but required the cooperation of humanity. For example, the virtue of love must be acquired by its practice. We see this in the blessed Theotokos who when the angel Gabriel came to her to announce she would bear the Christ responded 'Let it be to me according to your word.' She fully cooperated with God, and thus Christ was conceived and brought forth into the world.

The final words of Christ on the Cross were "It is finished" as recorded by St John. Many writers indicate that the work of both *creation and redemption* was completed by this act. One of the prayers of the hours for Friday connects Adam being created in the afternoon of the sixth day of creation with Christ hanging on the cross on the afternoon of the sixth day of the week. Human nature was created on the Cross in Christ, the Second Adam. As St Nicholas Cabasilas writes:

It was for the new human being that human nature was created at the beginning, and for him mind and desire were prepared... [Christ] himself is the Archetype for those who are created. It was not the old Adam who was the model for the new, but the new Adam for the old...

To sum it up: the Saviour first and alone showed to us the true human being, who is perfect on account of both character and life and in all other respects....

Refrains and Only Begotten

Let us consider the refrains of the Antiphons. Who can tell me what a refrain is? Yes, a line repeatedly sung between verses. The first refrain is

“Through the intercessions of the Theotokos, O Saviour, save us.” We have spoken previously of the Theotokos’ holiness and her intercessions for us. As our great example we often commemorate her in our prayers. Inasmuch as it was possible for a mere human, she fully listened to God and was granted the honor of bearing him in the flesh. After her death she was bodily taken up into heaven. As she is our great example, this foreshadows our destination if we abide in Christ in faithfulness.

The usual refrain for the second antiphon is “O Son of God, who art glorified in the saints, save us who sing to Thee. Alleluia.” Which echos Psalm 88. Having commemorated the Mother of God in the first antiphon we now commemorate the friends of God, the saints. This refrain varies with the liturgical season. Now while I said “who art glorified in the saints” is the usual refrain, did you hear it today? No, it is not used on Sundays, but only on the other six days of the week. What do we sing on Sundays? This is because the refrain for Pascha is “O Son of God, *who art risen from the dead*, save us who sing to thee. Alleluia.” Every Sunday we celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord, and therefore we use this festal refrain.

After the second antiphon we sing a hymn:

Only Begotten Son and Immortal Word of God, Who for our salvation
didst will to be incarnate of the holy Theotokos and ever virgin Mary,
Who without change didst become man and wast crucified, O Christ
our God, Trampling down death by death, Who art One of the Holy
Trinity, Glorified together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us.

This hymn contains densely packed theology of the Incarnation, calling to mind St Paul’s words to the Philippians 2.5–11. Like we sang in the refrains, we petition Christ to save us.

The last refrain we’ll consider is that of the Beatitudes, “In thy Kingdom, remember us, O Lord, when thou comest into thy Kingdom.” These words, taken from the repentant thief hanging next to Jesus, emphasize that the Beatitudes are about the Kingdom of God. The Beatitudes show this themselves, for two of them promise the kingdom of heaven.

Conclusion

Repeatedly the Psalms show us who is blessed, those who do God's will. The Beatitudes continue and expand upon this theme showing us that it is not the wealthy, the wise, or the powerful in this age that are blessed, but the poor, the meek, the powerless, those who trust in God, the lover of humankind. Christ accomplished our creation and redemption through the cross, which is folly to those who are perishing, but the power of God to those being saved. "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." Christ humbled himself that he might be exalted and with him all humanity. The way up is the way down, pivoted upon the cross.

Let us conclude by finishing the quote of St Nicholas of Thessaloniki:

To sum it up: the Saviour first and alone showed to us the true human being, who is perfect on account of both character and life and in all other respects....

So then, for all these reasons humanity strives for Christ by nature, by his will, by his thoughts, not only because of Christ's Godhead which is the goal of all things, but because of His human nature as well. He is the resting place of human desires; He is the food of our thoughts. To love anything besides Him or to meditate on it is a manifest aberration from duty and a turning aside from the first principles of our nature.

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