

“We waited, and at last our expectations were fulfilled,” wrote the Serbian Orthodox Bishop, St. Nikolai of Ochrid, describing the Paschal service at Jerusalem. “When the Patriarch chanted ‘Christ is risen,’ a heavy burden fell from our souls. All at once, from all around, the same cry resounded like the noise of many waters...Coming out from the service, we began to regard everything in the light of the glory of Christ’s Resurrection, and all appeared different from what it had yesterday; everything seemed better, more express, more glorious. Only in the light of the Resurrection does life receive meaning.”

Brothers and sisters, in order for us to experience the full power of Paschal rejoicing, each of us needs to pass through a time of preparation. “We waited,” says St. Nikolai. Without this waiting, without this expectant preparation, the impact of the Paschal event on our lives is lost. Great Lent is the season of expectant preparation when the Bride (the Church) prepares to joyfully receive her Bridegroom (the Risen Christ). It is the springtime of the soul, when each Christian is reminded to prune his own dry branches with forgiveness and repentance, till around the roots of his sins with prayer and fasting, and allow himself to be watered by the gentle showers of God’s grace --- all of this spiritual cultivation done so that new, young shoots, producing fresh branches, heavy-laden with the flowers and fruits of holiness, may blossom forth. It is for this reason that we await Great Lent with eagerness and greet it with joy, chanting, “Let us begin the Fast with joy!” May you and all members of our parish family have a joyful, blessed and fruitful Great Lent.

~*Father Basil Essey*



By the Waters of Babylon

...One liturgical particularity of this “Sunday of the Prodigal son” must be especially mentioned here. At Sunday Matins, following the solemn and joyful Psalms of the Palyeleion, we sing the sad and nostalgic Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and we wept when we remembered Zion....How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer no Jerusalem above my chief joy...”

It is the Psalm of exile. It was sung by the Jews in their Babylonian captivity as they thought of their holy city of Jerusalem. It has become forever the song of man as he realizes his exile from God, and realizing it, becomes man again: the one who can never be fully satisfied by anything in this fallen world, for by nature and vocation he is a pilgrim of the Absolute. This Psalm will be sung twice more: on the last two Sundays before Lent. It reveals lent itself as pilgrimage and repentance – as *return*.

~An excerpt from *Great Lent* by Fr. Alexander Schmemman



Saturday of Souls



A great man once said, “It is not death that I fear, but rather the hour of death.” How true is this indeed. Death is not to be feared by the Orthodox Christian. Our blessed lord and Saviour has told us that “whosoever believeth in me shall have everlasting life.” Death for the Orthodox Christian is leaving this temporary life on earth and entering into life everlasting in the kingdom of God.

The Church on earth is called the Church Militant because it is constantly waging a militant struggle against the forces of evil that have plagued mankind down through the corridors of time. The church in heaven is called the Church Triumphant because it consists of Saints who have triumphed over evil during their lifetime and are now enjoying forthcoming fruits of blessed immortality. These two aspects of the Church are united by prayer. Our prayers are offered for those who have departed as a sign of our love and respect for them. Just as we pray that God will protect us and our loved ones on earth, we also pray for those who have passed away and are now awaiting the final judgment day. The Nicene Creed tells us that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Memorial Services for the dead may be offered at any time. However, the Church has designated certain days of the year for special prayer services for the dead, such as the three Saturdays before Meatfare Week, Cheesefare Week, and the first Sunday of Lent. The Church honors all of the Saints on these days and also those who have died.

Why have the Church Fathers designated Saturday for the Memorial Services? Saturday is actually the Jewish Sabbath and the word itself means “termination” or “the end.” Everything was ended on this day, and every person was to turn his attention only to meditation and prayer. In the Orthodox Church during these weeks of the pre-lenten and lenten period, the truths of the judgment day are emphasized during Services. Everything ends at the time of judgment, therefore the Church Fathers have designated Saturday for special services for the dead. It was also on Saturday after the Crucifixion of Christ that He descended into Hades and preached to the dead.

The Epistle and the Gospel readings during the three Saturday Memorial Services are the same as those read during the regular funeral service of the Orthodox Church (I Thessalonians 4:12-16 and St. John 5:24-30).