

The Services of Great Lent

Great Compline

As with all the services of Great Lent there is a certain bright sadness that accompanies this service. The vestments are dark in color, the lights are dimmed, and there are very few chanted hymns. The central theme of the service is repentance. The psalms are filled with repentance and confession and they guide us in crying out to God for forgiveness, help, and strength. The psalms set the tone for the service. Repentance is always about help, forgiveness, and strength and the entire service is filled with these elements. The prayers the priest reads are full of repentance. The prayer he reads on bended knee is called the Prayer of Manasseh and it is a prayer of repentance offered by the sinful King Manasseh who committed terrible deeds during his reign as king. We enter into this king's repentance and join the priest on bended knee asking for forgiveness, help, and strength.

Even the few hymns that we do sing during this service are directed towards our repentance. We cry out in unison "Intercede for us sinners". That is our refrain we sing together as a church. We sing it together as a church, never alone, because we are all one body. That body is connected to the saints that are in heaven, so we ask for their intercession (martyrs, prophets, apostles, teachers) as we sing the refrain -"Intercede for us sinners". We are all sinners and we are all connected to each other on our path towards the kingdom.

The first hymn we sing during the service (God is with us) and the last hymn we sing (O Lord of Hosts be with us) really explain the bright sadness of this service. Our sadness of course lies in our sinfulness but our brightness lies in the fact that God never abandons us. He desires us and he is willing to die to unite us. He is with us even in our fallenness and sinfulness. He is there and knocking at the door. He is there doing all he can to bring us to himself and he is there waiting to embrace us as we turn to him in repentance. He is there outstretched waiting for us to cling to him. This is the greatest joy for us. This is how we can call ourselves sinners so often without losing all sense of hope and joy. It is because we can proclaim "God is with us" and let ourselves fall into the arms of Christ as we cry out to him "We have no other help but thee". We proclaim we are sinners but in doing so always proclaim the steadfast and relentless love of God. Our repentance is focused on asking forgiveness, help, and strength. The focus is never on feeling pity for ourselves or dwelling on what we have done. It's about bringing God into our lives and living more fully with the one "who is with us".

Presanctified

This service emerges as a support and strength for the faithful to continue on their Lenten journey. Communion is the food we need to stay on course and help us through the temptations we experience on our Lenten journey. It is the "food of immortality" and the "heavenly bread" which helps us strive for more perfect union with God.

The service is an evening service held on a weekday and our weekdays do not always revolve around Christ, so Presanctified helps us change the axis around which our day revolves. The day takes a different shape when we know that we'll be partaking of communion. The day starts to become for us what it was created to be- communion with God. We spend the day in anticipation and in longing and in relationship with God as we go through work or school.

The service begins with vespers and the little entrance which is followed by Old Testament readings and litanies for the Catechumens. There is no consecration during this service because the Holy Gifts were already consecrated on the previous Sunday. However, The Holy Gifts are carried from the Prothesis table to the Altar table in an entrance right before communion. This entrance is made while the people kneel and the choir sings, "...Lo the King of Glory enters in...". Also during this time the Priest covers his face with the Aer as he processes around the church. This is one of the climaxes of the service where we all affirm and remember that God is with us. After all the hard days toil, fasting, longing, and waiting for communion we finally come to the moment where we participate in and proclaim, "O taste and see how good the Lord is".

Little Compline with the Akathist

This service is a combination of Little Compline, a canon to the Mother of God, and an Akathist to the Mother of God. The Akathist hymn is a long, poem like, chant filled with praises of the Theotokos. The hymn is divided into 4 stanzas which are sung separately on the first 4 Fridays of Lent and combined altogether on the 5th Friday. The hymn is full of beautiful imagery likening the Theotokos to a "heavenly ladder", "king's throne", and a "star revealing the sun" while the choir responds with the refrain "Hail O Bride without Bridgeroom" and "Alleluia".

During this service we magnify the Theotokos and praise her in awe of her obedience, suffering, and hope. We contemplate the depths of her birth giving – how she contained God in her womb. We rejoice in this along with her and we emulate her obedience and ask for her intercession. We take the time to truly think and contemplate the impact of the Incarnation and how God desires to work with us and through us for our salvation. We go through all these paradoxes- "birthgiver to the planter of our life", "land of the uncontained God", "all-holy chariot of him who is above the Cherubim"-and marvel at God's love for us and his desire to become one with us. God is with us and waiting for us to say "Yes" to him as the Theotokos did so that he might also live in us and make his home in our heart.