

7th May 2023

The Holy Myrrhbearers

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1] Under the Old Testament Law, the people of Israel were commanded to keep the feast of Pesach (Passover) that commemorated their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Seven weeks later, they kept the feast of Weeks, Shavuot or, from the Greek, Pentecost, that gave thanks to God for the harvest. The fifty days between the two festivals was a joyful time, celebrating their possession of the Promised Land and all the blessing of a land that flowed with milk and honey; the fulfilment of all that had been promised to Abraham the patriarch.

2] Under the New Testament of grace those older days of joy are fulfilled and transferred to these days between Pascha, the New Passover, and the feast, still called Pentecost, fifty days later. Here we celebrate not the possession of an earthly realm, but the fact that, in a mystery, we have entered the kingdom of heaven; not descendants, as many as the stars of heaven, but the Body of Christ, His Church, consecrated by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

3] That kingdom is opened to us through the death of Christ, incarnate in a body like ours, and by His resurrection in the spiritualised body that shall be ours as well; the first-fruits of which we can know, even now, insofar as our lives are dead to sin and transformed by the Holy Spirit. These days began with Bright Week in the immediate joy of the resurrection; they continue through to Ascension and then, ten days later, Pentecost, the feast of the coming of the Holy Spirit, recalling the birth, authorisation and empowering of Christ's Orthodox-Catholic Church. For, effectively, without the church, there is no authentic Christianity, but that is a sermon for another time.

4] Already by the end of the second century these fifty days were held to be different, and any penitential observances: things like, fasting or kneeling in prayer together in Church, were actually forbidden until after Ascension, as they were on any Sunday of the year. This joyful character was frequently forgotten by many Christians, so although Bright Week retained its zeal and

enthusiasm and spiritual joy, through the rest of the days that light faded and the echoes grew fainter, as they do when, in the course of human affairs, the busyness of the world rises up to dominate our thoughts and concerns, our intentions and actions.

5] A few years ago, therefore, our bishops in the Holy Synod of Antioch reinstated those salutary canons of the ancient Church, directing the churches of the Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East to reinstate the former practices of not fasting on the forty days of the Paschal season, nor kneeling at any Church service during this time, as on any Sunday. Other jurisdictions have limited fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, but that is not our tradition in Antioch; the only fast we observe at this time is the usual absolute fast before receiving the Holy Gifts. In this way, in this manner, this period of time during the year manifests the freedom and joy of the world to come, as once was prefigured in the joy of Israel in possession of the Promised Land.

6] We must be aware, of course, that there are Orthodox Christians here from many different jurisdictions, each abiding by their own local customs. We have never sought to impose one rule of spiritual practice on all who enter these postals and are happy to accommodate such customs as we can. Nevertheless, in matters of Liturgy and the liturgical calendar, we must follow our bishop in true obedience: an ancient rule that goes back at least as far as St Ignatios of Antioch, at the beginning of the second century.

7] Of course, I cannot insist that those from other local Orthodox traditions must follow us in matters of spiritual discipline, although I certainly shall with those of us who have come to know the Orthodox Christ and His Church through the Patriarchate of Antioch, where the followers of The Way were first called Christians. (Acts.11:26). Yet, on the other hand, as St Ambrose of Milan remarked to Blessed Augustine of Hippo, 'When I am here (in Milan) I do not fast on Saturday, when in Rome I do fast on Saturday;. Or, as is commonly said, when in Rome, do as the Romans.

8] But here is something that I have observed about our inner, spiritual lives, and something that says much about the human

condition: that it is easier to be penitential over a long period of time than it is to be joyful. Our capacity to feel repentant and to persevere in spiritual labours, in prayer and fasting, is easier for us over time, than to feel and know a sustained joy. Clearly, both can be soured by hypocrisy, a mask of falsehood, only, our joy is an explosive feeling that takes enormous energy to be maintained. What strange creatures we should be to the rest of the world if, at all times, we knew and showed that joy we had at the paschal vigil!

9] But I am not talking only of emotion. No emotion, no feeling, can be maintained indefinitely in this life. The negative ones can, certainly, but they eat away at us and cause great harm. Why! Even our sinful passions, anger, lust or gluttony, whatever they be, pass away as episodes that seize upon the soul, but lose their power again till an opportune moment. But Paschal joy is altogether different. It is not for us to own, individually, as if it were a private possession that each must somehow acquire. How could we tell by looking at our brother or sister in Christ whether they possessed that Paschal joy? Which of us can look into another's heart in order to tell if a quiet and joyful assurance is to be found there because of the resurrection? For the Paschal joy is participated in, it is shared within the body of the Church; it is celebrated in the Liturgy, poured out in prayers and spiritual songs and hymns.

10] The great temptation for us at Pascha is to imagine that it is the mirror-opposite of Great Lent in the way we behave. For now we still continue to pray, just as we did in Lent, but the Paschal prayers have a different character and quality; we no longer fast as we did, except before communion, of course, but that does not mean that we can excuse ourselves in over-indulgence, or must fill ourselves with every culinary delight and an over-abundant confectionary; and as for charity and almsgiving: whoever has taught that these come to an end on Lazarus Saturday? As the great Paul tells the Ephesians, 'Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' [Eph. 5:18-20]

11] The foundation of our Paschal joy is our experience of the risen Christ, an experience that comes to us through the Liturgy, the Holy Scriptures and through one another in the body of Christ. Think of all those whose stories we have retold recently, those whose encounter with the Lord saw them restored to the fulness of life: from Job the Long Suffering, to Mary of Egypt, Lazarus of the four days and today, Aeneas of Lydda, Tabitha of Joppa and the paralytic man at the Sheep Gate in today's gospel. All received their lives back, as it were, but their lives were changed; at the very least a life less ordinary now. Who can rise from the dead and just imagine that things can now just continue as usual, as if all it was for, was to restore normality?

12] The same is true for us, we who have encountered the risen Christ. You who come to Orthros early on a Sunday morning, who line up to venerate the book of gospels after the reading of one of the accounts of the resurrection: who is it you are really greeting? Is it not Christ Himself? When you come at the end of the Liturgy to kiss the gospels, as we do at this season (rather than the Holy Cross) and receive the antidoron, you are kissing Our Lord, taking your leave with His blessing and also, receiving viaticum, the food for the journey, until we all gather here again. But we too must depart in peace and joy and likewise go out to live a life less ordinary, aware that we too have been marked by that encounter with Him.

13] 'See, you are well!' Christ tells the man at the Sheep Pool. 'Sin no more, that nothing worse befalls you.' And we also who have been raised up in Christ, if we could only preserve the memory of this paschal season, not just for forty days but from henceforth, would not only prove victors over our own sins but know something, even now, of that better life that yet awaits us.