

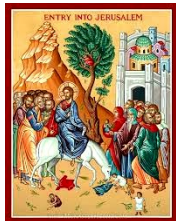
Celebrating Our Deep Faith

Byzantine Catholic Worship: *Our Church, Its Customs and Rich Heritage*

PALM SUNDAY: Our Lord's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

*"...Like the children we also carry signs of victory and cry to You,
the conqueror of death: "Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

(from the Troparion of Palm Sunday)



OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST climaxed His mission on earth with two memorable events — the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead and His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (a word meaning *"the abode of peace"*). These two events, witnessed by great crowds of people, gave a clear and convincing testimony concerning the messianic mission of Christ and His divinity. They also raised the curtain on the last act of the drama of Christ's life: His passion and death.

Since the first centuries of Christianity, the Eastern Church has been celebrating the memory of the triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His glorious Resurrection. Palm Sunday from the earliest times has been regarded as a great feast of our Lord and is included in the twelve principle festivals of our Church Year. It, too, has its own particular customs which other feasts do not have.

In our liturgical books, this day is called, "Palm Sunday," or "Flower or Blossom Sunday." Our Ukrainian people refer to it as "Willow Sunday." These names are associated with the custom of blessing and distributing palm or olive branches on that day in church. Because no palm or olive trees grow in Ukraine, we have a venerable custom of using willow branches, a tree that is the first to blossom in the spring.

Among our people, various practices existed, even some superstitious ones, that were associated with the blessed willow branch. Once blessed, it was never destroyed; instead, they placed it in the house behind an icon, or planted it in the garden. With it, they blessed the cattle, when they were being led for the first time into pasture. The farmer carried the blessed willow branch around his farm, praying that it might be protected from impure spirits. Some even swallowed the bud of the willow so that "the throat would not hurt." In some places, a blessed willow branch was placed in the hands of the deceased, so that at the general resurrection, he/she would meet Christ carrying the emblem of victory. As the faithful were exiting the church on Palm Sunday, they would lightly strike one another on the shoulder with the willow branch, saying, "It is not I who strike you, but it is the willow branch, within a week we shall celebrate Easter", thus reminding one another the Easter was drawing near.



Matins of the Resurrection

OF ALL THE SERVICES in honour of the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord, the Matins of the Resurrection (*Ukrainian* Воскресне Утренья/Voskresne Utrenya) commands our special attention. This morning service can be called the grand hymn of glory in honour of Christ the Victor. Composed by that great theologian of the Eastern Church and great master of eloquence, St. John Damascene (c. 676-749), it is based on the paschal (Easter) sermons of the Fathers of the Church — Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa and Joh Chrysostom. The content of this resurrectional service is profoundly dogmatic, its form highly poetic, its tone joyful and victorious.

The troparion of the Resurrection: "Christ is risen from the dead,...", which is sung so many times during the Easter season, encompasses the content, essence and significance of the feast. The canon is the centre of the Resurrection Matins, In the Irmoses, troparions, and sticheras of the canon, Christ reveals Himself to us as the promised Messiah, as God in majesty and power, as the Saviour and Redeemer and as the Victor over death, Hades and sin.

In regard to its form, the paschal Matins is poetry at its best and is, frankly speaking, unique in the ecclesiastical literature of the Eastern Church. Here we find a great wealth of beautiful poetic forms, images, comparisons and symbols.

The triumphal tone, characteristic of a holy, un-earthly and everlasting joy permeates the profound content and poetic forms of the Matins of the Resurrection. Here we experience that fullness of joy because of the Resurrection of Christ, which St. Gregory the Theologian expresses in his paschal sermon: Yesterday I was crucified with Christ, today I am glorified with Him. Yesterday I died with Him, today I live with Him, Yesterday I was buried with Him, today I rise with Him." In Christ's victory all creation shares — heaven, earth and Hades. Everything calls upon us to rejoice. This heavenly joy overwhelms the whole person and all his sentiments.



The joy of the Resurrection reaches its peak in the sticheras of the Resurrection. They form one powerful hymn of joy in honour of the risen Christ — the New Testament Pasch. This joy is imparted to all and embraces all, even our enemies. "This is the day of the Resurrection," we sing in the last stichera, "Let us be enlightened in triumphal celebration and embracing one another, let us say: 'Brother' — even to those hating us, let us forgive all things because of the Resurrection, and thus let us sing: **"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling death by death, and to those in the tombs, giving life!"**

The Great Litany: The Litany of Peace

THE GREAT LITANY (in Ukrainian, *Velyka or Myrna ektenia*), by which the Divine Liturgy begins, opens with a fervent request that *peace* be granted to us. This request is so important and so basic that it recurs three times in slightly different forms. There are not superfluous repetitions, for each of these petitions is filled with a deep and special meaning.

"In peace, let us pray to the Lord." This means first of all that we are called to assume a state of inner peace. Those who will take part in the Divine Liturgy should rid their minds of all confusion, all susceptibility to fleshly and earthly temptations, all obsession with "worldly cares," all hostile feelings towards any other person, and all personal anxiety. They should come before God in a state of inner calmness, trusting attentiveness, and single-minded concentration on "the one thing needful." (Luke 10:42)

Then, at once, there is a second request: **"For peace from on high and for the salvation of our souls, let us pray to the Lord."** The peace which we have already requested is something other than a state of mind or a psychological condition produced by our own effort. It is the peace which comes "from on high." We should humbly recognize that such peace is a gift from God, and we should open ourselves to this gift, stretching out our hands to receive it. On the other hand, we recognize that the divine peace and the "salvation" of the world are intimately related. Peace is a sign of the presence and the word of the Saviour within us.



Then comes a third request for peace: **"For peace throughout the world, for the well-being of God's holy churches and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord."** The peace which we request goes beyond our isolated persons and acquires a practical aspect. We pray for peace of the universe, not only for mankind, but for every creature, for animals and plants, for the stars and all of nature. Thereby we enter into a cosmic piety and find ourselves in harmony with everything God has called into being. We pray for every disciple of Christ, in order that through each one, God might be worshipped "in Spirit and in Truth." We pray for an end to warfare and to struggles between races, nations and social classes. We pray that all of humanity might be united in a common love.

Every temple of the Lord is a house of divine Presence and a house of prayer. Every temple is also a house of peace. May the soul of all those who enter into this holy temple to take part in the assembly of God, become itself a house of peace.

"...Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again, Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"

~ John 20: 19-21

The Sunday of St. Thomas (Sunday after Easter)

THE CELEBRATION OF THE EIGHTH DAY AFTER EASTER as the conclusion of Bright Week, from earliest times, had been regarded as a separate feast. The theme of the services of this feast and of the week that follows is the Gospel event describing the apparition of Christ on the eighth day after His Resurrection and the moving scene of Thomas' conversion and profession of faith.

Regarding the significance of this feast, St. Gregory the Theologian in his homily on the Sunday of Saint Thomas said: *"The old law, which was established for a good purpose, honours the day of renewal, or rather, should we say, that with the day of renewal it honours new blessings. For, was not the first day of the resurrection, which occurred after the holy and glorious night, also a day of renewal? Why then, do we give this name to today's feast? The day of the Resurrection was a day of salvation, while this day (Sunday of St. Thomas) is the commemoration of salvation. By its very nature, Easter separates the burial and the resurrection, while this day is a day of an altogether new birth...Today we celebrate a genuine renewal, going from death to life. Therefore, cast off the old man and renew yourselves and live in newness of life."*

St. John Chrysostom eulogizes St. Thomas thus: *"Of all the other Apostles he was, at one time, the weakest in faith but, with God's grace, he became more courageous and more persistent than the rest. He traversed almost the whole known world, preaching the word of God fearlessly to nations that were fierce, savage and bloodthirsty."* St. Thomas is believed to have died a martyr's death for the Christian faith in India.

When Thomas first the tidings heard
That some had seen the risen Lord,
He doubted the disciples' word.
Until His hands and His side, he explored.

"My pierced side, O Thomas see,
And look upon My hands and feet.
Not faithless, but believing be.
I am the Lord — My peace to thee!"

No longer Thomas then denied,
He saw His feet, His hands, His side.
"You are my Lord, my God!" he cried.
Rejoice, be glad at this Eastertide.

How blest are they who have not seen,
And yet whose faith has constant been
For they, eternal life, shall win
And to the Lord's banquet enter in.

Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

