

## **This is the Blessed Sabbath**

The "Great and Holy Sabbath" is the day which connects Good Friday, the commemoration of the Cross, with the day of Christ's Resurrection. To many the real nature and meaning of this "connection," the very necessity of this "middle day," remains obscure. For a good majority of churchgoers, the "important" days of Holy Week are Friday and Sunday—the Cross and the Resurrection. These two days, however, remain somehow "disconnected." There is a day of sorrow, and then, there is the day of joy. In this sequence, sorrow is simply replaced by joy...but according to the teaching of the Church, expressed in her liturgical tradition, the nature of this sequence is not that of a simple replacement. The Church proclaims that Christ has "trampled death by death." It means that even before the Resurrection, an event takes place in which the sorrow is not simply replaced by joy, but is itself transformed into joy. Great Saturday is precisely this day of transformation, the day when victory grows from inside the defeat, when before the Resurrection, we are given to contemplate the death of death itself...all this is expressed, and even more, all this really takes place every year in this marvelous morning service, in this liturgical commemoration which becomes for us a saving and transforming present.

## **Psalm 119- Love for the Law of God**

On coming to Church for the Matins of Holy Saturday, Friday has just been liturgically completed. The sorrow of Friday is, therefore, the initial theme, the starting point of Matins of Saturday. It begins as a funeral service, as a lamentation over a dead body. After the singing of the funeral troparia and a slow censuring of the church, the celebrants approach the Epitaphion. We stand at the grave of our Lord, we contemplate His death, His defeat. Psalm 119 is sung and to each verse we add a special "praise," which expresses the horror of men and of the whole creation before the death of Jesus:

**"O hills and valleys,  
the multitude of men,  
and all creation, weep and lament  
with me, the Mother of your God." (1:69)**

And yet, from the very beginning, along with this initial theme of sorrow and lamentation, a new theme makes its appearance and will become more and more apparent. We find it, first of all, in Psalm 119 -"Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord." In our liturgical practice today this psalm is used only at the funeral services, hence its "funeral" connotation for the average believer. But in early liturgical tradition this psalm was one of the essential parts of the Sunday vigil, the weekly commemoration of Christ's Resurrection. Its content is not "funeral" at all. This psalm is the purest and the fullest expression of love for the law of God, i.e., for the Divine design of man and of his life. The real life, the one which man lost through sin, consists in keeping, in fulfilling the Divine law, that life with God, in God and for God, for which man was created.

**"In the ways of thy Testimonies, I delight as much as in all riches..." (v. 14)  
"I will delight in Thy statutes..." (v. 16)**

And since Christ is the image of the perfect fulfillment of this law, since His whole life had no other "content" but the fulfillment of His Father's will, the Church interprets this psalm as the words of Christ Himself, spoken to His Father from the grave.

**"Consider how I love Thy precepts! Give me life, according to Thy mercy."  
(v. 159)**

The death of Christ is the ultimate proof of His love for the will of God, of His obedience to His Father. It is an act of pure obedience, of full trust in the Father's will; and for the Church it is precisely this obedience to the end, this perfect humility of the Son that constitutes the foundation, the beginning of His victory. The Father desires this death, the Son accepts it, revealing an unconditional faith in the perfection of the Father's will, in the necessity of this sacrifice of the Son by the Father. Psalm 119 is the psalm of that obedience, and therefore the announcement that in obedience the triumph has begun.

## The Encounter With Death

But why does the Father desire this death? Why is it necessary? The answer to this question constitutes the third theme of our service, and it appears first in the "praises," which follow each verse of Psalm 119. They describe the death of Christ as His descent into Hades. "Hades" in the concrete biblical language means the realm of death, which God has not created and which He did not want; it also signifies that the Prince of this world is all-powerful in the world. Satan, Sin, Death—these are the "dimensions" of Hades, its content. For sin comes from Satan and Death is the result of sin—"sin entered into the world, and death by sin" (*Romans 5: 12*), "Death reigned from Adam to Moses" (*Romans 5: 14*), the entire universe has become a cosmic cemetery, was condemned to destruction and despair. And this is why death is "the last enemy," (I Corinthians 15:20) and its destruction constitutes the ultimate goal of the Incarnation. This encounter with death is the "hour" of Christ of which He said that "for this hour have I come." (*John 12:27*)

Now this hour has come and the Son of God enters into Death. The Fathers usually describe this moment as a duel between Christ and Death, Christ and Satan. For this death was to be either the last triumph of Satan, or his decisive defeat. The duel develops in several stages. At first, the forces of evil seem to triumph. The Righteous One is crucified, abandoned by all, and endures a shameful death. He also becomes the partaker of "Hades," of this place of darkness and despair...but at this very moment, the real meaning of this death is revealed. The One who dies on the Cross has Life in Himself, i.e., He has life not as a gift from outside, a gift which therefore can be taken away from Him, but as His own essence. For He is the Life and the Source of all life. "In Him was Life and Life was the light of man." The man Jesus dies, but this Man is the Son of God. As man, He can really die, but in Him, God Himself enters the realm of death, partakes of death. This is the unique, the incomparable meaning of Christ's death. In it, the man who dies is God, or to be more exact, the God-Man. God is the Holy Immortal; and only in the unity "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" of God and Man in Christ can human death be "assumed" by God and be overcome and destroyed from within, be "trampled down by death."

## Death is Overcome by Life

Now we understand why God desires that death, why the Father gives His Only-Begotten Son to it. He desires the salvation of man, i.e., that the destruction of death

shall not be an act of His power ("Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" *Matthew 26:53*), not a violence, be it even a saving one, but an act of that love, freedom and free dedication to God for which He created man. For any other salvation would have been in opposition to the nature of man, and, therefore, not a real salvation. Hence the necessity of the Incarnation and the necessity of that Divine death. In Christ, man restores obedience and love. In Him, man overcomes sin and evil. It was essential that death be not only destroyed by God, but overcome and trampled down in human nature itself, by man and through man. "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead." (*1 Corinthians 15:21*)

Christ freely accepts death; of His life He says that "no man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself." (*John 10:18*) He does it not without a fight:— "and He began to be sorrowful and very heavy." (*Matthew 26:27*) Here is fulfilled the measure of His obedience and, therefore, here is the destruction of the moral root of death, of death as the ransom for sin. The whole life of Jesus is in God as every human life ought to be, and it is this fullness of Life, this life full of meaning and content, full of God, that overcomes death, destroys its power. For death is, above all, a lack of life, a destruction of life that has cut itself from its only source. And because Christ's death is a movement of love towards God, an act of obedience and trust, of faith and perfection—it is an act of life (Father! Into Thy hands I commend my spirit —*Luke 23:46*) which destroys death. It is the death of death itself.

Such is the meaning of Christ's descent into Hades, of His death becoming His victory. And the light of this victory now illumines our vigil before the Grave.

**O Life, how canst Thou die?  
How canst Thou dwell in a tomb?  
Yet by Thy death Thou hast destroyed the reign of death,  
and raised all the dead from hell. (1:2)**

**In a tomb they laid Thee, O Christ the Life.  
By Thy death Thou hast cast down the might of death  
and become the font of life for all the world. (1:7)**

**O, how great the joy,  
how full the gladness,  
that Thou hast brought to Hades' prisoners,  
like lightning flashing in its gloomy depths. (1:49)**

Life enters the Kingdom of death. The Divine Light shines in its terrible darkness. It shines to all who are there, because Christ is the life of all, the only source of every life. Therefore He also dies for all, for whatever happens to His life —happens in Life itself. This descent into Hades is the encounter of the Life of all with the death of all:

**Wishing to save Adam,  
Thou didst come down to earth.  
Not finding him on earth, O Master,  
Thou didst descend to Hades seeking him. (1:25)**

Sorrow and joy are fighting each other and now joy is about to win. The "praises" are over. The dialogue, the duel between Life and Death comes to its end. And, for the first time, the song of victory and triumph, the song of joy resounds. It resounds in the "troparia on Psalm 119," sung at each Sunday vigil, at the approach of the Resurrection day:

**"The angelic host was filled with awe when it saw Thee among the dead! By destroying the power of death, O Savior, Thou didst raise Adam and save all men from hell!"**

**"In the tomb the radiant angel cried to the myrrhbearers, "Why do you women mingle myrrh with your tears? Look at the tomb and understand: the Savior has risen from the dead!"**

## **The Life-giving Tomb**

Then comes the beautiful Canon of Great Saturday, in which once more all the themes of this service —from the funeral lamentation to the victory over death—are resumed and deepened, and which ends with this order:

**"Let creation rejoice! Let all born on earth be glad! For hateful hell has been despoiled. Let the women with myrrh come to meet me; for I am redeeming Adam and Eve and all their descendants, and on the third day shall I arise!"**

"And on the third day shall I arise!" From now on paschal joy illumines the service. We are still standing before the Tomb, but it has been revealed to us as the life-giving Tomb. Life rests in it, a new creation is being born, and once more, on the Seventh Day, the day of rest -the Creator rests from all His work. "The Life sleeps and Hell trembles"—and we contemplate, this blessed Sabbath, the solemn quiet of the One who brings life back to us: "Come, let us see our life lying in the tomb..." The full meaning, the mystical depth of the Seventh Day, as the day of fulfillment, the day of achievement is now revealed, for

**The great Moses mystically foreshadowed this day, when he said:  
God blessed the seventh day.  
This is the Blessed Sabbath;  
this is the day of rest,  
on which the Only-Begotten Son of God rested from all His works.  
By suffering death to fulfill the plan of salvation,  
He kept the Sabbath in the flesh;  
by returning again to what He was,  
He has granted us eternal life through His resurrection,  
for He alone is good, and the Lover of man.**

We now go around the Church in a solemn procession with the Epitaphion, but it is not a funeral procession. It is the Son of God, the Holy Immortal, who proceeds through the darkness of Hades, announcing to "Adam of all generation" the joy of forthcoming resurrection. "Rising early from the night," He proclaims, **"The dead shall arise, those in the tombs shall awake, and all those on earth shall greatly rejoice."**

## **Expectation of Life**

We return to the Church. We know already the mystery of Christ's life-giving death. Hades is destroyed. Hades trembles. And now the last theme appears -the theme of Resurrection.

Sabbath, the seventh day, achieves and completes the history of salvation, its last act being the overcoming of death. But after the Sabbath comes the first day of a new creation, of a new life born from the grave.

The theme of Resurrection is inaugurated in the Prokeimenon:

**"Arise, O Lord, and help us! Deliver us for Thy Name's sake.  
We have heard with our ears, O God..."**

It is continued in the first lesson: the prophecy of Ezekiel on the dry bones, (*Ch. 37*). "...There were very many in the open valley, and, behold, they were very dry." It is death triumphing in the world, the darkness, the hopelessness of this universal sentence to death. But God speaks to the prophet. He announces that this sentence is not the ultimate destiny of man. The dry bones will hear the words of the Lord. The dead will live again. "Behold, my people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of the graves, and bring you up into the land of Israel..." Following this prophecy comes the second prokeimenon: with the same appeal, the same prayer.

**"Arise, O Lord my God, lift up Thy Hand!..."**

How will it happen, how is this universal resurrection possible? The second lesson (*1 Corinthians 5:6, Galatians 3:13-14*) gives the answer: "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump..." Christ, our Pascha, is this leaven of the resurrection of all. As His death destroys the very principle of death, His Resurrection is the token of the resurrection of all, for His life is the source of every life. And the verses of the "Alleluia," the same verses which will inaugurate the Easter service, sanction this final answer, the certitude that the time of the new creation, of the day without evening, has begun:

**"Alleluia! Let God arise! Let His enemies be scattered! Let those  
who hate Him flee from before His face ...Alleluia! As smoke  
vanishes, so let them vanish, as wax melts before the fire!"**

The reading of the prophecies is over. Yet, we have heard but prophecies. We are still in Great Saturday before Christ's tomb, and we have to live through this long day, before we hear at midnight: "Christ is risen!", before we enter into the celebration of His Resurrection. Thus, the third lesson—*Matthew 27:62-66*—which completes the service, tells us once more about the Tomb—"which was made secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard."

But it is probably here, at the very end of Matins, that the ultimate meaning of this "middle day" is made manifest. Christ rose again from the dead, His Resurrection we will celebrate on Easter Day. This celebration, however, commemorates a unique event of the past, and anticipates a mystery of the future. It is already His Resurrection, but not yet ours. We will have to die, to accept the dying, the separation, the destruction. Our reality in this world, in this "aeon," is the reality of the Great Saturday; this day is the real image of our human condition. We believe in the Resurrection, because Christ has risen from the dead. We expect the Resurrection. We know that Christ's death is no longer the hopeless, the ultimate end of everything. Baptized into His death, we partake already of His life that came out of the grave. We receive His Body and Blood which are the food of immortality. We have in ourselves the token, the anticipation of the eternal life. All our Christian existence is measured by these acts of communion to the life of the "new eon" of the Kingdom, and yet we are here, and death is our inescapable share.

But this life between the Resurrection of Christ and the day of the common resurrection, is it not precisely the life in the Great Saturday? Is not expectation the basic and essential category of Christian experience? We wait in love, hope and faith. And this waiting for "the resurrection and the life of the world to come" this life which is "hidden with Christ in God" (*Colossians 3:3-4*), this growth of expectation in love, in certitude; all this is our own "Great Saturday." Little by little everything in this world becomes

transparent to the light that comes from there, the "image of this world" passes by and this indestructible life with Christ becomes our supreme and ultimate value.

Every year, on Great Saturday, after this morning service, we wait for the Easter night and the fullness of Paschal joy. We know that they are approaching—and yet, how slow is this approach, how long is this day! But is not the wonderful quiet of Great Saturday the symbol of our very life in this world? Are we not always in this "middle day," waiting for the Pascha of Christ, preparing ourselves for the day without evening of His Kingdom?

***Father Alexander Schmemmann***