

“It is Time for the Lord to Act”: The Age to Come

Thank you again for attending. Let’s begin with prayer.

Prayer

Illumine our hearts, O Master Who lovest mankind, with the pure light of thy divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind to the understanding of thy gospel teachings; implant in us also the fear of thy blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee. For thou art the illumination of our souls and bodies, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory, together with thine unoriginate Father, and thine all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend the soul of thy servant, the Deacon Lawrence, and beseech thee to grant him rest in the place of thy rest, where all thy blessed Saints repose, and where the light of thy countenance shineth forever. And I beseech thee also to grant that our present lives may be godly, sober, and blameless, that, we too may be made worthy to enter into thy heavenly Kingdom with those we love but see no longer: for thou art the Resurrection, and the Life, and the Repose of thy departed servants, O Christ our God, and unto thee we ascribe glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Introduction

Last time we discussed *what* the Liturgy was. It is a sacrifice, a meal shared with God wherein we partake of the very Life of Christ.

This week we will address *when* the Liturgy occurs. To answer the question of *when* let us explore the opening dialogue between the priest and deacon. This takes place quietly in the altar before the initial proclamation “Blessed is the Kingdom...” I would like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Deacon Lawrence, our long time deacon who passed into glory late last year.

To make this easier to follow, and because I'm abbreviating the rubrics, I've included the dialogue on one side of your handout.

Opening Dialogue

The priest and deacon stand together before the holy table. The priest with hands uplifted says the following prayer while the deacon lifts his orarion [stole].

O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the Treasury of good things and Giver of life: Come, and abide in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O good One.

The priest and deacon make three [low bows] while the priest says:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will among men.

O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.

The priest then kisses the gospel book and the holy table, while the deacon kisses the holy table. The deacon bows his head to the priest and holding his orarion says:

It is time for the Lord to act. Bless, master.

The priest makes the sign of the cross over the deacon's head, saying:

Blessed is our God, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

The deacon responds:

Amen. Pray for me, master.

The priest says:

The Lord direct thy steps unto every good work.

To which the deacon responds:

Remember me, holy master.

Blessing the deacon, the priest says:

The Lord God remember thee in his kingdom, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

The deacon gives the:

Amen.

And exits the sanctuary through the north door. Standing in the center of the solea, the deacon makes three [low bows] before the holy doors, saying each time:

O Lord, thou shalt open my lips, and my mouth shall declare thy praise.

There is much in this dialogue and one could spend weeks examining it and not exhaust it. However, I want to focus on the phrase, “It is time for the Lord to act”. What does this line mean? Is it simply the deacon looking out, seeing that the congregation have arrived, looking at his watch and seeing it is 10 o’clock, and telling the priest they need to start the service? As we unpack this line, we will understand that the meaning is somewhat more profound.

Psalms 118 ‘They have broken your law’

The first step in understanding what is meant by the line, “It is time for the Lord to act,” is to realize, like much of the Divine Liturgy, it comes from the Scriptures. It is from the 118th Psalm, verse 126. This Psalm is the longest of the Psalms, and is divided into 22 sections—one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight verses, and they all begin with the Hebrew letter for the section. Legend has it that King David used the psalm to teach his son Solomon both the literal and spiritual alphabet.

The theme of the Psalm is the Torah—the Teaching or Law. The psalmist expounds his love of the Torah expressing how it is life for him. Almost every verse references the Torah, using one of several synonyms. And our verse is no exception for the full verse reads, “It is time for the Lord to act; for they scattered your law.”

See how the Lord reacts, we have scattered his Law, but by placing this text at the start of the Divine Liturgy, we see the Lord is gathering to himself a people. Isaiah envisions the future gathering of the children of Israel, scattered by the Assyrians and Babylonians for breaking the covenant. Not only will scattered Israel be gathered, but others from the nations will be added to their number.

For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you...The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

Our Lord references this when he declares in the Gospel of John: “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

The Funeral Service

Probably, the most prominent place Psalm 118 is used in the Church is in the funeral service. We’ve mentioned before that the funeral service is a modified Matins service. One the hymns of Matins has the refrain, “Blessed art thou, O Lord; teach me thy statutes,” which is Psalm 118.12. In the Matins service the verses are about Christ’s resurrection and destruction of death, the first verse being:

The company of the angels was amazed, when they beheld thee
numbered among the dead, yet thyself, O Savior, destroying the
power of death, and with thee raising up Adam and releasing
all men from hell.

In the funeral service the refrain is the same, “Blessed art thou, O Lord; teach me thy statutes,” but the verses differ. For example, the first verse states that the gates of Paradise are opened through repentance. The second verse is:

O thou who of old didst create me from nothingness, and didst
honor me with thine image divine, but because I transgressed
thy commandments hast returned me again unto the earth from
which I was taken: Bring me back to that likeness, to be
reshaped in that pristine beauty.

When we attend the funeral of one we love but will see no longer and hear this hymn, we are reminded of hearing the same hymn every week in Matins, and just as Matins corresponds to dawn, so too does death correspond with the dawning of the true Sun and the beginning of daylight. For as Christ says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Concerning this Fr John Behr writes:

Christ's own work has turned death inside-out, showing himself to be stronger than death, and proving himself to be the one who is ultimately and totally in control from the beginning: All things are in his hands and providence—even our apostasy. Turned inside-out, death now becomes the means whereby the creature returns to God, and, in fact, is fashioned by God as a living being... [Christ in his death] has opened up a way of seeing a deeper mystery in death and has transformed death throughout all time: for what was once the end now becomes the beginning of a deeper mystery.

The Age to Come and the 8th Day

While we are speaking of the last things, specifically our deaths, let us also consider one additional aspect of our phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act." Many have made much of the fact that there are two words in ancient Greek for time, and I would be remiss not to follow in their footsteps or stand upon their shoulders. *Chronos* is the usual word for time, time as a continuous succession of moments, and gives us such words as chronic, chronicle, anachronism, synchronize, chronometer (a highfalutin word for 'clock'), chronourbanism (a concept of planning cities to minimize travel time; a word Tucson city planners are thoroughly unfamiliar with), and chronocide, which I confess to engaging in while compiling this list. However, the word used here in our phrase is *kairos*, the opportune or right time.

Kairos is used in the Scriptures to indicate the right time to do something as in Sirach, "A wise person will be silent until a proper time, but the swaggerer and fool overstep a proper time." Additionally, it is often used to indicate God's time, when God is going to act. In Genesis, God tells Noah, "The time of all humankind has come before me" and he sends the flood to rescue the righteous Noah from the wickedness of the earth. In the book of Esther, Mordecai tells Esther, "Because even if you keep silent at this time, from elsewhere help and protection will come to the Judeans, but you and your father's household will perish. And who knows if for this time you

were made queen?" For this reason, at this time, God raised Esther to be queen to deliver her people from their enemies.

In the New Testament, this sense of *kairos* as God's time and activity intensifies. St Mark records Jesus preaching, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel." The Apostle writes to the Ephesians:

In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the *fullness of time*, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

This concept of *kairos* must also be coupled with the New Testament's conception of two ages: this present evil age, and the age which is to come. For example, St Paul writes to the Galatians:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

And St Mark records Jesus saying:

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

In related language, the early Christians often equated worship on the Lord's Day with the eighth day of the week. This was connected with the circumcision of the Hebrews on the eighth day after birth. In Genesis, Moses lists a table of nations and their fall at the Tower of Babel, and then

immediately following, relates the story of the calling of Abraham. He is called out of the nations, out of fallen Babylon, to become the father of a new nation. The sign of circumcision is given to mark this new nation. The eighth day also refers to the seven days of creation; that is, the creation of a new nation is a new creation. Christ arose on the eighth day; signaling a new creation of his people. But the eighth day is not merely in time, in the cycle of the week, but signifies the Never-Ending Day and is associated with the eternal Rest, for just as the seventh day is not bounded by the phrase 'and there was evening and morning' in the Genesis account, Moses, as the hymns tell us, mystically foreshadowed Christ resting in the tomb from his works on Holy Saturday and returning through the Resurrection on the next day. As the author of Hebrews says:

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

God's time is not just a moment in the middle of history as one moment among many but it is the fullness of time, the end of time. All of time drives toward and culminates in this Never-Ending Day. In the death and resurrection of Christ, the age to come has broken through and entered into our present age. When the deacon says "It is time for the Lord to act," he says that the Lord is bringing his time—eternity—into our time; through the ritual of the Liturgy we enter more fully into the age to come, we worship and commune with the True God and dine with Christ in his Kingdom. Often, it is said that the answer to any question about the last things is 'now and not yet'; in the Divine Liturgy the 'not yet' has become 'now'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we answer the question, "**When** is the Divine Liturgy?" by acclaiming that it is of the age to come, made present to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. "Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." "Let us not receive the grace of God in vain." Let this phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act," be on our lips each week, for though we have

scattered God's Teaching he is gathering us together, to redeem us, to open our mouths to be filled with his praise. Let the phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act," be on our lips at the hour of our death, for then we are created by God and fashioned into a living being. Indeed, may we have this phrase, "It is time for the Lord to act" on our lips continually, living our whole lives in this light, toward this end, for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is resurrected from the dead and has made all things new.

Having thus detailed when the Divine Liturgy occurs, next time we will focus on *who* is celebrating the Divine Liturgy.

Are there any questions? {Questions and maybe answers.}

Thank you, let us close with prayer.

Our Father...

Through the prayers of St Nicholas of Thessaloniki, and all our holy fathers and mothers in the faith, O Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us and save us. Amen