

Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!

In this period where we have just finished Holy Week and celebrated the resurrection of our Lord, I thought it a good idea to highlight several church services that are very unique and beautiful, yet (judging by relative attendance) not as well known to our people.

On Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday mornings we celebrate vespers and the liturgy of St. Basil. In this combined service, we do about the first half of vespers and then pick up at the Trisagion hymn and continue the rest of the liturgy. After the hymn "O Gladsome Light" there is the Prokeimenon (usually some verses of the psalms sung responsorialy). Prokeimenons usually introduce Scripture readings in our church services. On a normal Sunday evening there are no additional readings at vespers, but on feasts there are usually 3 Old Testament readings. On both Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday there are Old Testament readings (3 on Holy Thursday and 15 on Holy Saturday!) Following this, there is a little litany and then we pick up with the Trisagion Hymn (which in Greek literally means the "thrice-holy" hymn: "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us"), or the hymn (on Holy Saturday, Pascha, Christmas, Theophany and Pentecost) "As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ;" and continue with the rest of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. The uniqueness of the Holy Thursday liturgy is that, within the scheme of Holy Week, it is the commemoration of the Last Supper. We are remembering the first Eucharist; the Lord's giving us the sacrament of Holy Communion.

On Holy Friday in the evening we celebrate Matins of Holy Saturday. This service is, in my opinion, one of the most theologically deep and rich services in the church, and some of the melodies of the hymns are among the most beautiful. It has the same structure of the funeral service and is kind of like a funeral service for the (temporarily!) dead Christ, with the burial shroud ("plaschanitsa" in Slavonic) with the icon of our Lord's dead body on it laid out in the center of the church. You wouldn't want to miss Jesus Christ's funeral would you? At the end of the service there is a wonderful procession carrying the burial shroud of Christ three times around the outside of the church, singing "Holy God" just as we do at a funeral, when carrying the coffin in procession to the grave.

The Holy Saturday morning service (vespers and the liturgy of St. Basil) has several unique aspects about it. First, it has 15 Old Testament readings, all of which are prophecies relating in some way to Christ's death and resurrection. Carefully listening to these, one can learn a lot! Secondly, this service also has a powerful Paschal (Easter) theme to it. In the middle of the service the clergy and altar servers change their vestments from black to white, and the colors of the church are also changed. It is a beautiful transition that powerfully symbolizes the transition from death to life, and the life-giving resurrection of our Lord. In fact, in Canada some of my former parishioners said they preferred this "Paschal" service to the actual Paschal vigil! (I would highly recommend both!) Third, this Divine Liturgy is the one liturgy of the year celebrated not behind the altar but out in the center of the church! It is a unique opportunity for people, especially girls and women, to see what happens behind the altar. The liturgy is celebrated out on the table with the burial shroud of Christ on top of it, a symbol for the tomb of Christ.

Fr. Stacey