

HOMILY By His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America On the Fifth Sunday of Lent



Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am delighted to be with you, here in this wonderful community of Staten Island, as we prepare for the final week prior to Holy Week. Today, we celebrate one of the greatest Saints of the Church, Mary of Egypt, whose life was completely changed by her experience of Jerusalem, and the power of the Holy Cross in the Church of the Anastasis. We, too, are called to be changed by the same power of the Cross that we will witness not many days from now, and by the glory of the Lord's Resurrection.

As we ready ourselves for the mysteries of Holy Week, the Church invites us to enter into the mindset – and the timeframe – of this narrative of redemption. We are called to become part of the story, as the days proceed through the coming week that is commonly called Κουφή Ἑβδομάδα, or, the “Empty Week.” But it is not empty at all! This week of the Fast gets its name from the fact that it is the only week that does not contain the Salutations to the Holy Virgin. Such is the impact of the Akathist Hymn! But in truth, the week, is the beginning of the story of our

salvation.

We know that the coming Saturday is that of Lazarus, and that Palm Sunday happens the day after. But we enter into the stream of salvation history starting tomorrow. We begin to travel – in real time – with the Lord. We join His final journey to Jerusalem, where He will die and rise from the dead for us and for our salvation. We enter into the chronology of Holy Week, as we commence this Week leading to Palm Sunday. Tomorrow, we hear in the Matins Service:

Today, Christ made manifest the illness of Lazarus, while staying beyond the regions of the Jordan, as one Who knows all that will come to pass, saying: “This sickness is not unto death.” [*]

But on Tuesday evening, in Vespers, we hear:

Today, Lazarus has breathed his last, and Bethany laments for him.... [†]

On Wednesday we hear:

Today, Lazarus has been buried, and his sisters chant lamentations.... [‡]

On Thursday of this Week of Palms, we chant:

Lazarus has been dead for two days, and his sisters Martha and Mary have shed tears of grief for him, gazing upon the tombstone before them. [§]

Finally, on the Friday in which no Salutations are chanted, we hear:

The Lord draws near: open your gates, O Bethany, and receive the Master with faith, for He has come to raise Lazarus from the tomb.... [**]

Thus, my beloved Christians, we arrive at the Saturday of Lazarus, when our Lord manifested the truth of His Godhead, and the destiny of the Resurrection for all humankind.

How, then, could anyone refer to this week as the “Empty Week?” Rather, it is a week when the story of our redemption engages in high gear, readying us for the trials of Holy Week.

Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday are a high point in the ministry of Jesus, but we know where the journey leads. To Gethsemane. To the Trial. To the Ridicule. To the cruel lashes and the crown of thorns. To the Cross, and death, and burial. But we also know that the raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of the glory that is to come.

My beloved faithful, may this coming week not be empty at all for you. May it be a week filled with anticipation, preparation and opportunity for you to enter into the stream of salvation history. Thus, after traveling with the Lord through Holy Week, and dying with Him, we may also rise with Him in His glorious Pascha, the passing over from death to life.

Amen.

Photo: GOARCH/Dimitrios Panagos

[*] Second Canon of the Ninth Ode; the Gospel of John, 11:4.

[†] Stichera Prosomoia.

[‡] Kathisma.

[§] Kathisma.

[**] Second Canon of the Ninth Ode.

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