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Archbishop Elpidophoros Homily for the Divine Liturgy of the First Resurrection



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros
Homily for the Divine Liturgy of the First Resurrection
The Vespers of Holy and Great Saturday – May 4, 2024
Saint Paraskevi Greek Orthodox Shrine Church
Greenlawn, New York

My Beloved Christians,

Σιγησάτω πᾶσα σάρξ βροτεία, καὶ στήτω μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου, καὶ μηδὲν γήϊνον ἐν ἑαυτῇ λογιζέσθω.

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and stand with fear and trembling; and let it take no thought for any earthly thing.[*]

Indeed, my dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we keep silence and interior stillness in the presence of this profound mystery, the Sabbath of Rest of our Lord in the Tomb. We hear the ancient prophecies of this day – there are fifteen by

tradition – that were used in this Baptismal Liturgy. Today, the Catechumens went down into the Font of Rebirth, just as Christ descended into the grave and beyond, in order to be reborn.

For this Sabbath, this Seventh Day of the week is even greater than the Seventh Day on which God rested from the creation of the Cosmos.[†] On this Holy and Great Saturday, God the Son rested from His work of re-creating our human nature.

In willingly dying upon the Cross, He made it possible for each and every human person to be reborn with Him by His Resurrection from the dead. He made it possible for our lives to be utterly transformed. He made it possible for us to live in the highest potential of our created form, as loving, merciful, compassionate, forgiving and altruistic persons.

And in taking His rest on the Seventh Day, the Lord Jesus fills all things with Himself, as is said in one of the final prayers of the Proskomide:

Ἐν τάφῳ σωματικῶς, ἐν ᾅδου δὲ μετὰ ψυχῆς ὡς Θεός· ἐν Παραδείσῳ δὲ λῃστοῦ, καὶ ἐν θρόνῳ ὑπῆρχες Χριστέ, μετὰ Πατρὸς καὶ Πνεύματος, πάντα πληρῶν ὁ ἀπερίγραπτος.

In the Tomb with Your Body, in Hades with Your soul as God, in Paradise with the Thief, and on the throne, O Christ, with the Father and the Spirit – You Who cannot be encompassed, fill all things.

In death He transcends every limitation of space and time. And by descending into the realm of the dead, He offers them the same eternal life that He offers us. No one is left behind.

In all the sacred Scripture that is read today, there are so many images and metaphors, so many similitudes and iconic narratives that manifest the truth of our Faith. But it is in the Prophecy of Daniel, when the Angel of the Lord descends into the Fiery Furnace with the Three Holy Youths, and protects them from the burning fire, that we behold our salvation to come.[‡]

We see in the very same image the Incarnation and at the same time, the Descent into Hell. And for us, it is the image of the solidarity of God with us. You see, there is no danger, no suffering, no sickness that we can experience, that God will not join. He is with us in every aspect of our human experience except one … sin.

And by being present with us, even to the point of death and lying in a tomb, He redeems our human condition, in unseen and unforeseen ways. The Righteous

Women with the Panagia, Joseph and Nikodemos, could not see the Lord’s Descent and Conquest of Hell. They only saw the stone that was rolled before the entryway of the Tomb. But though the Garden where He was buried was shrouded in silence, in the netherworld of the dead there was a triumphant cry of the Angels of God who accompanied their Lord and King as He burst the gates of Hell asunder.

And so it is for us: what we see and what we hear is not the entire story. God is with each and every one in their personal fiery furnace.

That is why we cry: Ἀνάστα ὁ Θεός! Arise O God! Because we know in our hearts that as He is risen from the dead, and so shall it be for every one of us, who believe in His Holy Name, and live in His Holy Light. Amen.

Καλή Ἀνάσταση!

Photo: GOARCH/Dimitrios Panagos
[*] The Cherubic Hymn of Holy Saturday.

[†] Cf. Genesis 2:2.

[‡] Cf. Daniel 3:49,50 (LXX).

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