

13/04/2023

Archbishop Elpidophoros Homily for the Service Holy Unction - Great and Holy Wednesday



Beloved Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I have come to your wonderful parish, to serve this very special service of Holy Unction with you, the faithful Christians of Holy Trinity in Bridgeport. Tonight, we gather for the healing of body and soul, and for the forgiveness of our sins, in accordance with the Epistle of Saint Iakovos, the Brother of the Lord, who is often called "James."[*] The Mystery of Anointing with Holy Oil is a profound Mystery that has filled our Churches since the days of the Apostles.

The use of olive oil - a substance that is so very precious in the Holy Land - has a distinct meaning in Holy Week, even if Unction can be practiced any time of the year and in any place. For tomorrow in Holy Week, the Lord Jesus Christ will face the greatest fears of every human being in the Garden called "Gethsemane." The word, "Gethsemane" means "Olive Press" in Aramaic, the Lord's mother tongue. This was because the garden was at the base of the Mount of Olives, and the garden was where the oil was pressed out at harvest time.

In this Garden, the Lord subjected Himself to stress and pressure that is literally beyond our imagination. In Gethsemane, He took the anxiety, the worry, and ultimately, the fear and revulsion of death that every human being has ever known - knew at that moment - or would ever know, and He experienced it in a single moment. He drank the cup to the dregs.

Listen to what the Lord endured in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Then they arrived at a place called Gethsemane, the "Oil Press." And Jesus said to the disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And He took along Peter, Iakovos and John. But then He began to feel overwhelmed by an alarming sense of sadness, and He said to the three, "My very soul is overcome with sorrow, even to death. Stay here, and stay vigilant." And when Jesus had walked on a little further, He fell to the ground on His face. And Jesus prayed that if it were possible, this moment might pass by Him. He prayed, "Abba! Father, all things are possible for You! This cup You

set before Me.... Take it from Me! But not as I will, but as You will.” [†]

And an Angel from Heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. As Jesus prayed more intensely, He was wracked with agony. His sweat rained down on the ground like bloody clots.[‡]

What the Lord experienced in Gethsemane was not the fear of a single human being facing death. The cup that He begged His Heavenly Father to have pass from Him, was filled with more than apprehension about his own impending death. It was filled with all the fear, all the foreboding, all the dread that every human being has ever felt in the face of death. It was an act of ineffable love. Our Lord Jesus Christ was pressed to such a degree in that Garden, that blood poured from His divine brow. Not the sweat of Adam.[§] Not the oil of gladness. But the foreshadowing of the bloody Cross.

Let no one believe that the Lord was afraid for Himself. Let us stand in awe of the Cup from which He drank. As the Prophet Isaiah foretells:

He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.[**]

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, we receive this Unction tonight, not as a mere symbol, but as the mystical power of God’s healing – of both body and soul. The Lord brings forth this oil from the Press He entered in Gethsemane, and the dregs He drank for our salvation. Thus, you will arrive with the forgiveness for all your sins at the glorious Resurrection not many days hence. Amen.

Photo: GOARCH/Dimitrios Panagos

[*] Cf. Iakovos (James) 5:14,15.

[†] Mark 14:32-36.

[‡] Luke 22:43-44.

[§] Cf. Genesis 3:19.

[**] Isaiah 53:5.

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