

Journey to Pascha

The Lenten Journey: Chapter 4

Great Lent by Fr. Schmemmann

These pages contain amplifications and additional reflections on the themes presented in the book **Great Lent—Journey to Pascha** by Father Alexander Schmemmann. Copies can be obtained from the publisher St. Valdimir’s Seminary Press at 800-204-book or their website at <http://www.svots.edu>.



theme in the odes of the Canon. Hearing the salvation history of repentance I place myself into that event from scripture. I know that just as surely as that event has taken place, and requires repentance; I have done the same. I have participated in acts harmful to myself and others. I must prostrate myself and beg forgiveness from the savior. Liturgical services all contain references to events in salvation history. Here we have all of the events of repentance gathered together for our meditation.

The Canon of Saint Andrew picks up with the story of Adam in Genesis. Moving on from there he touches on every instance where humanity rejects the call to Theosis, the restoration of the likeness of God lost in the fall. At vespers on Sunday evening when we open the Great Fast, I placed myself

“Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness!...God created humankind in his image, in the image of God did he create it, male and female did he create them.”

Genesis 1:26-27

Great Canon

Saint Andrew of Crete wrote the Great Canon on repentance that has become the theme service for the Great Fast. On Thursday of the fifth week of the Fast we sing this service in its’ entirety. But the service is also prescribed for the opening days of the Great Fast. The odes of the canon are divided across the first four evenings of the Great Fast during the Compline service. This is the service taken after vespers right before going to bed.

The Canon of Saint Andrew becomes the liturgical book ends for the season of the Great Fast. The Great Fast opens with these meditations on repentance served in manageable doses across the first few days. By the time we reach the fifth week our practice of fasting and prayer has prepared us to revisit these meditations in their entirety.

The canon is served in a special way as well. After each irmos verse in the canon the congregation prostrates on the ground, just as we do when singing “Having Suffered...”. This creates a meditation pause after each and every

Adam was rightly exiled from Eden for not keeping Your one commandment, O Savior. But what shall I suffer who am always rejecting Your living words?

Canon of St. Andrew
Ode 1

they all partake of a meal with Jesus. At this meal Lazarus takes the position of pupil at the feet of the teacher. He models for us the proper response to receiving new life from the savior. We come to the banquet of the Lord and sit as a pupil at his feet. At this meal we see the woman anoint Jesus and prepare and prefigure his coming death and burial.

The Eastern Church takes the entire chronology for Holy Week from the Gospel of John. The last week of the Great Fast preparing for the raising of Lazarus begins this fixed time schedule. Right on the heels of this miracle the royal entry into Jerusalem reveals the true nature of Christ. Riding on a colt the people proclaim Jesus as the messiah.

The coming Friday at sun down will be the Passover. The city is jammed with people for the feast. John has Jesus with his apostles on the Thursday before Passover. This meal is not a Passover seder. The other Gospels all have the Mystical supper as a Passover seder, not John. From this difference comes the two different eucharistic breads in the east and west. Following the synoptic tradition the west uses unleavened bread, as on Passover. Following the chronology of John, the Eastern Churches make normal leavened bread for the Eucharist.

The journey to Pascha has both the spiritual and physical dimensions. We move thematically from exile to new life and we travel from

You come to the tomb of Lazarus in Bethany, O Lord, and You weep, according to the law of nature, O God our Savior, to establish our faith in the reality of your incarnation.

You have drawn up your friend Lazarus from the darkness of Hades, and by your almighty word, O Lord, You have broken the bolts and destroyed the kingdom of Death.

Canon Ode 3
Lazarus Saturday

Cross of Christ as the final step, without the Cross there is no Resurrection.

But the Eastern Christian focus in on the victory and resurrection not the passion and death. The Cross is surely a part of the journey, but not the destination. Pascha is our destination, the cross is a stop on the way. The Cross is a means to the glorious end.

When we plant the Cross in the midst of the assembly we sing: “We bow to Your Cross, O Lord, and we praise Your Holy Resurrection!” We bow to the Cross, but the praise is to the Resurrection, not the crucifixion. The focus is on the end, not the means. We prostrate ourselves to the glorious gift of new life, not the death of the savior, the new life for the saved.

Bethany & Jerusalem

Our prayer and fasting journey through the Great Fast bring us to the Paschal celebration. But the journey has a geographical destination in Bethany and Jerusalem. The Eastern Church structures the liturgical season of the Great Fast on the Gospel of John. In John Jesus is also on a pilgrimage when he arrives at the cross and Resurrection. Jesus’ pilgrimage brings him to Bethany on Lazarus Saturday. Here the preparation for the Passover celebration begins.

Lazarus in Bethany prefigures the Resurrection in Jerusalem. After raising Lazarus from the dead

with Adam outside the gates of paradise weeping and lamenting. I acknowledge my own fallen nature. I sin. I rejected my divine likeness, just as Adam did. The first step in the journey home to Theosis is acknowledging this fact and having a change of heart. Christ’s incarnation, death and Resurrection are for this very purpose. Saint Athanasius tells us that “God became man so that we might become God.” Theosis is the process of shedding our sinful, fallen nature, metanoia, having that change of heart.

The litany of names and events is sobering. Saint Andrew does not retell the stories, he assumes that we all know the bible well enough to recall the original events. He comments on the penitential aspects of the tale. He asks us to place ourselves into these events. How would we act? Rather how DID we act? If we read the stories again, we will see events in our own life. When we were tempted in the same way did we take the high road?

Saturdays

The weekend days, Saturday and Sunday, the Divine Liturgy is celebrated again. Week days the Divine Liturgy is not celebrated during the Great Fast, but week ends we return to the normal cycle of services. We also return to the normal musical melodies for the services as well. The week day services are sung in the minor key, but on week ends we return to the normal resurrectional melodies. This liturgical rhythm for the Great Fast reflects that “Bright Sadness” of the season. We are serious and penitential during the week, but on the week-

ends we allow the celebration of the Resurrection to shine through a little.

Saturday is the seventh day of the week. Genesis tells us that the creation of the world was completed in six days and on the seventh day God rested. This seventh day is holy to God and became the Sabbath celebration for our Jewish ancestors. We still commemorate this Sabbath as a day of rest. We celebrate the Divine Liturgy on Saturdays during the fast in remembrance of creation.

O God our Savior, You have transformed death to sleep, putting our wretchedness to sleep in the tomb; You have given life to the departed. Through the prayers of your holy martyrs, grant rest to those who have gone from us in the place of the chosen ones.

Canon Ode 6
Saturday of the
Second week

human condition that surrounds us then we see the compassion of Christ in calling forth Lazarus from the tomb.

The last Saturday before Pascha constitutes Christ’s day of rest in the tomb. Hades trembles as Christ appears and sets all the captives free. The old creation rests in the tomb, just as God rested in the original creation on Saturday. Sunday begins the new creation of the Resurrection, the new day, the eighth day. Christ calls us forth from the tomb to this new life.

Sundays

The Churches weekly celebration of the Resurrection cannot be stopped during the Great Fast. We continue to commemorate this saving day without fail. The command of our Lord to remember provides the high point for the week. On Sunday we have the lamp of our journey lit. Saturday will always be the day of rest from creation. But Sunday is the day of the new creation. The day Christ rises from the grave he makes us a spiritual creation. We are born again in the death and resurrection of Christ.

From the earliest days of the Church the celebration of the Resurrection was the central act of worship. From this Feast of Feasts the rays of the resurrection stretch to the entire year through the Sunday Eucharistic celebration. The joy of this new creation spreads to the entire year.

During the Great Fast Sunday becomes the thematic turning point for each week. The journey to Pascha begins with the expulsion of Adam on the Sunday of Cheesefare. Then on each successive Sunday we change focus. During each following week we elaborate on the theme. Step-by-step we approach the destination, Pascha.

On the first Sunday we commemorate the triumph of true worship, the Sunday of Orthodoxy. This historical event, the restoration of icons for use in the Church, affirms that our journey is not alone, but as a pilgrim Church together. I don’t follow my own feelings or decisions, but place myself in the company of the faithful in the Church.

On the Second Sunday the paralytic stands for my own spiritual illness before God. As I make the journey back from exile must ask the Lord for his healing power. I acknowledge my need for healing along the way.

This is the day on which we bow before the life-giving Cross. Come, let us all venerate it; resplendent in the light of the Resurrection, it is given to us; let us kiss it in the joy of the Spirit.

O lofty Cross of my Lord, show me the divine image of your beauty. Grant that I may adore your most pure glory. I speak to you and surround you with reverence as if you were alive.

Canon Ode 1
Cross Veneration
Sunday

At the mid-point of the Great Fast the Church plants the cross in our midst. Following Christ will entail taking up the cross daily, willingly as he did. I must expect no better than what our Lord received.

On the fourth Sunday the Church offers the “Ladder of Divine ascent”. This book by Saint John Climacus spells out all the behaviors that build up our souls and those that tear it down. Each is like a step on Jacobs ladder to heaven.

Finally, Mary of Egypt provides us with an example for turning my own life around. She found the Lord and came from the life of sin and death to the new life in Christ.

The Holy Cross

On the third Sunday of the Great Fast the Cross is planted in the midst of the assembly. In solemn procession we bring the cross to the center of the Church and place it for veneration on the tetrapod. The Cross is the central symbol of the Christian people. An instrument of execution became the means for our salvation. At the mid-point of the fast we remember call to mind our destination. This journey to Pascha has the