

The service of the Nymphios (the Bridegroom Service) (Vassilios Papavassiliou)

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[Previous Publication: <http://pemptousia.com/2016/04/if-this-is-how-you-see-christ-then-holy-week-wont-mean-a-thing-to-you/>]

Having established the identity of Christ, let us now begin getting to grips with what He did for us, meaning above all, the events of Holy Week.

The Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Great Week are marked by the service of the NYMPHIOS (the Bridegroom Service). The morning service of each day takes place on the evening of the night before in anticipation. Each day liturgically begins at sunset, and so the service of Monday is held on Sunday evening, the service of Tuesday on Monday evening, and so on. On Sunday evening, the priest, preceded by lights, and bearing the icon of the Bridegroom makes a solemn procession within the church and places it in the centre, while we sing the following hymn which we are to repeat over the next two days:

“Behold the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is the servant whom he shall find watching. And again, unworthy is the servant whom he shall find heedless. Beware therefore O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the kingdom. But rouse yourself crying: holy, holy, holy are you our God.

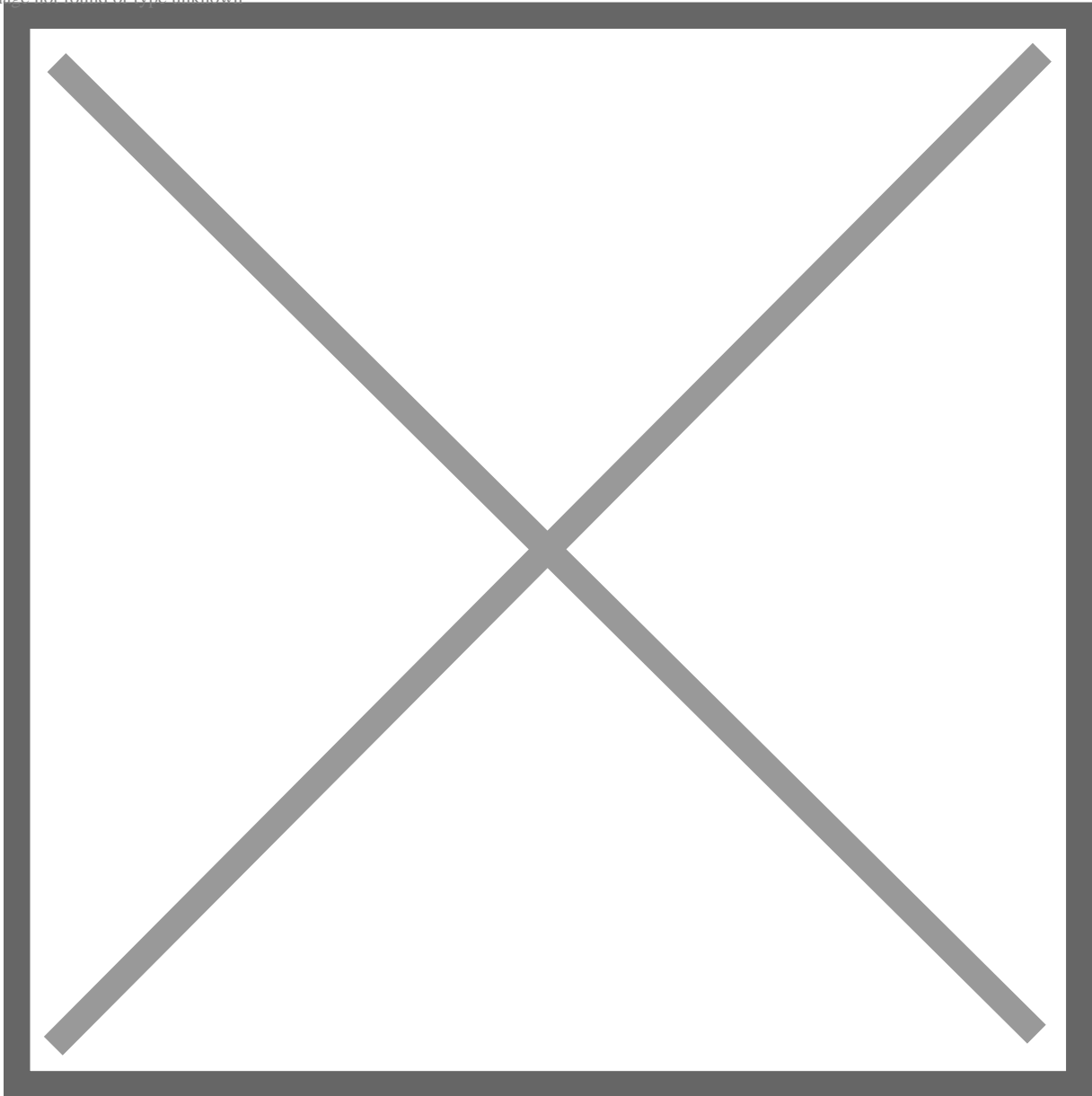


As I said, all three days are characterized by this special Bridegroom Service and all share a common theme and a common imagery: the theme of vigilance, and the image of a wedding feast. While the theme of vigilance is common to all three days, each day expresses this theme in slightly different ways. As I said, we will not have time to look at each day in turn, but in the handout you have been given, you will find some additional notes on some of the Readings and Events of Holy Week which we will not go through today, but which you can read at home and keep for future reference.

But for the purposes of this talk, in regard to the first three days of Holy Week, we will focus only on the parable of the ten virgins, which we remember on Great Tuesday, but which is the basis of the hymn of the Bridegroom Service that pervades the first three days of Holy Week. But before we look at this parable, let us first consider the image of the wedding banquet. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is often compared to a wedding feast. In the book of Revelations, for example, St John writes: "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband", and an angel who appeared to him said: "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb". The Bride is the Kingdom of God, and Christ is the Bridegroom. The relationship between a bridegroom and his bride is analogous to the relationship between Christ and His Church. The two honour and glorify one another, and the two are joined and become one. It is at the same time both a solemn and a joyous occasion. Before a wedding, the couple send out invitations to

their friends and relatives. God has invited us to the mother of all weddings: the union between heaven and earth, between Christ and His Church. We could say that, in this present life, the Church is engaged to Christ. The wedding ceremony itself has yet to take place. The lesson of vigilance is that we need to be ready for the wedding day. To not turn up at, what is effectively, our own wedding, is to miss the once in a lifetime opportunity to live blissfully for the rest of our lives. Being ready for the wedding means being spiritually prepared for Christ's coming or, unless God has told any of you personally that you are going to live to see that day (which I doubt, somehow), it means being prepared for death. This might sound a little morbid to you, but if it does, it is probably because you have misunderstood the meaning of the term 'prepared for death'. Preparing for death means living your life the way you ought to. It does not mean overlooking all the joys of life. It means living life for what it is: the first steps to eternal life. That being the case, we should be very careful about how we take those first steps. We should do our best to make sure that we are going in the right direction. To be prepared and vigilant means having the right attitude – a heart that is ready and eager for the wedding feast.

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Let us now turn to the parable of the ten virgins:

‘The kingdom of heaven is comparable to ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were wise, and five were foolish. The foolish ones took their lamps, and took no oil with them; but the wise took oil with their lamps. As they were waiting for the bridegroom, they fell asleep. At midnight, a voice was heard crying: “The bridegroom is coming! Go to meet him!” The virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise ones, “give us some of your oil, our lamps have gone out”. The wise ones answered, “no, if we do that we will not have enough for ourselves. Go and buy some of your own”. So they left to go and buy some and, in their absence, the bridegroom came, and the wise virgins who were ready to meet him went in to the house with him, and the door was shut. The foolish virgins arrived and asked the bridegroom to open up, but he

answered, "I do not know you". So be watchful, because you do not know when the Son of man will come'.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of this parable, we need to bear in mind the ancient eastern custom of marriage. After the engagement ceremony, the bridegroom, accompanied by relatives and friends, makes his way to the bride's home, where she awaits him in her best attire, surrounded by friends. The wedding ceremony would usually take place at night; therefore, the friends of the bride would meet the bridegroom with lit lamps and, since the exact time of the bridegroom's arrival would not be known, those who were waiting would provide themselves with oil in case it should burn out in the lamps. The bride, with her face covered by a veil, together with the bridegroom and all the participants in the ceremony, would make their way to the bridegroom's house, singing and dancing. The doors would be shut, the marriage contract signed, blessings would be pronounced in honour of the couple, the bride would uncover her face and the marriage feast would begin.

In the parable, the waiting for the bridegroom signifies our earthly life, the aim of which consists of preparing oneself to meet the Lord. The shut doors of the marriage chamber, which did not admit the latecomers, signify the gates of paradise, and the time of their closing signifies human death, after which there is no repentance. In other words, to "get into paradise", for want of a better phrase, we cannot afford to wait for death. Salvation begins here and now. Once the doors are shut, it is too late, and when they do shut, we better hope we are inside the bridal chamber and not outside.

But why virgins? Virginity has always been something which Christianity has regarded as rare and beautiful, (and these days it is rarer than ever), but in this parable, virginity refers not to bodily virginity, but spiritual virginity, meaning purity of faith. So what is the meaning of a foolish virgin? The five were foolish because they took no oil for their lamps. Oil, in Sacred Scripture, is often an image of the Holy Spirit, and in this parable the burning oil signifies the spiritual zeal of the faithful. In other words, what the foolish virgins ultimately lacked was a burning love for God. The foolish virgins are comparable to 'formal' Christians, who may attend church frequently, are regular and punctual in their prayers, observe their religious obligations, but who lack love and repentance, assured that their works are sufficient, being therefore neither anxious nor eager for the wedding feast and thus unprepared for death.

(To be continued)

Source: The Youth Conference & Workshop held at the Greek Orthodox Parish Community Hall of the Holy Cross & the Archangel Michael, Golders Green, London, 14th April 2006