

The Epitaphios (The tomb of Christ) (Vassilios Papavassiliou)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



[Previous Publication: <http://pemptousia.com/2016/04/the-twelve-gospels/>]

The service of Great Saturday is effectively a funeral service for Christ, and yet it is the most colourful service of Holy Week, because we have already begun to celebrate the Resurrection. The Epitaphios which represents the tomb of Christ, is adorned with an array of flowers, and is carried in a solemn and yet joyous procession outside the church. There is on Great Saturday a clear, steady progression from sorrow to joy. The Engomia or Lamentations – those beautiful dirges that we sing on the evening of Great Friday in honour of Christ's death – begin in the sombre plagal first, then becoming brighter and ending in the joyful and festive third tone. This progression continues and accelerates into Great Saturday morning, when the celebration of the Resurrection becomes more explicit.



On Great Saturday we remember Christ's burial and His descent into Hades, or Hell. Why is this important? The whole point of Christ becoming a man is to restore mankind's relationship with God. Christ is both God and man at once, and so it is only through Him that this restoration can happen. Christ, therefore, had to undergo everything that we do; and one thing that we all undergo without exception is death. Whatever Christ has done, whatever He has taken on and made His own, has been made holy by virtue of His divinity – a way to salvation. In effect, He paved a road for us. It is the same road that we have always trodden, but He made it a road to the Father, to paradise. In order to make death a passage to paradise, he had to endure death Himself. By doing this, he destroyed the power of death, because God is the source of life. By undergoing a state of death, He altered the very nature of death and made it a source of new life. This defeat of death is beautifully expressed in a hymn which we sing on Great Saturday morning, again chanted in the joyful third tone. It is a poetic hymn, personifying Hell and telling us the story of Christ's descent into Hades from Hades' point of view:

Today Hell cries out groaning: "I should not have accepted the man born of Mary; He came and destroyed my power. He shattered the gates of brass; He has raised the souls which I had held captive". Glory to your Cross and Resurrection, O Lord.

Today Hell cries out groaning: "My authority has been taken away; I received a mortal man as one of the dead; but I was powerless to contain Him; Because of Him I have lost those whom I ruled. For ages I had dominion over the dead, but

behold, He raises all". Glory to your Cross and Resurrection, O Lord.

Today Hell cries out groaning: "My power has been trampled on; the Shepherd has been crucified and Adam is raised. I have been deprived of those whom I ruled. Those whom I swallowed in my strength I have given up. He Who was crucified has opened the tombs. The power of death has been vanquished". Glory to your Cross and Resurrection, O Lord.

Throughout our journey along Holy Week, the tension building up to the Resurrection has been growing steadily greater, and it finally reaches its climax at the Easter Vigil. I challenge anyone to be present at this midnight service without being caught up in the sense of universal joy. After all the anxious expectation of the Resurrection, there is an overwhelming sense of liberation, satisfaction and joy, as the church which was previously in darkness floods with light and we sing with inexhaustible joy:

"Christ is risen from the dead; by death He has trampled on death and to those in the tombs given life".

The sense of liberation is even greater for those who have fasted and attended the services of Great Lent. The long austere fast is over. The time for kneeling and prostrations has ended. Religious disciplines have been relaxed. Furthermore, this joy is enhanced by Holy Communion at the liturgy which follows the midnight service. It is therefore a shame that so many choose to go home before the Liturgy begins. Indeed, it is quite embarrassing that, after the priest has sung the verse "let God arise and let His enemies be scattered", half the congregation clears off! Before the distribution of Communion, we chant "Receive the Body of Christ; and taste of the Immortal Spring". In other words, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating". To really experience Christ, we ought to taste him in the Eucharist.

(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