

Come, O faithful, let us enjoy the Master's hospitality:
the banquet of immortality...
(Ode 9, Matins Canon of Holy Thursday)

I.

In past years, as we prepared to celebrate the Vespereal Liturgy of Holy Thursday, I looked forward to sharing with you on Wednesday evening thoughts about the "Master's hospitality." Woven into the Matins canon of Holy Thursday are the themes of Jesus' humility revealed in the foot washing, Jesus' impending passion and Jesus' desire to share the new Passover with his disciples and therefore to share with us the "banquet of immortality."

This year, due to the Covid-19 crisis we did not gather in the nave of the Cathedral to celebrate Matins and the Vespereal Liturgy. There has been no Liturgy for most of Great Lent. And there will be no Liturgy Pascha morning. Ostensibly, it would appear that our separation from the Liturgy, our separation from the Lord's banquet has deprived us of our Savior's hospitality. Yet, the question I would like to raise is whether this is in fact true.

Certainly, our inability to concelebrate the Eucharist has impaired the life of our parish. Unable to gather as the living body of Christ as co-celebrants has limited our entering more deeply into the mystery of the inaugurated kingdom which is to come. Without celebrating the Divine Liturgy the mission of the Church is severely hindered since it is through our Eucharistic worship that we are afforded the best means to proclaim and, in anticipation, reveal Christ's victory over sin and death.

II.

The first four evening services of Holy Week commonly fall under the rubric of Bridegroom Matins. "Bridegroom" is a title with Old Testament antecedents found in the prophets. It emphasizes the intimate relationship God has with his people. It is a title that also points to the coming of God's anointed – God's Messiah – who delivers Israel from its surrounding enemies. As the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, Jesus claims for himself the messianic title of Bridegroom. As the Bridegroom Jesus is the very incarnation of God's intimate love for his people comprised of Jews and Gentiles. As the Bridegroom the marriage initiated by God remains eternally indissoluble. Therefore we can never be deprived of the Master's hospitality. Though we, personally and corporately as the Church, are marked by the sins of infidelity, our Bridegroom remains ever faithful and protective.

Yes, for the time being we are deprived of the Eucharist. But this deprivation does not deprive us of the Master's hospitality. We remain united in the unbroken bond of marriage with our Bridegroom through baptism and chrismation. In Baptism we

are crucified and raised with our crucified and risen Lord. By baptism we are led into the Church and therefore into the Bridegroom's glorious bridal chamber. Through chrismation we are recipients of the Holy Spirit – the inexhaustible *gift* by which our life with the Bridegroom is able to grow and mature. Within the bridal chamber we behold, through iconography, the beautiful face of the Bridegroom while he nourishes us with his living word that is eternally consumed.

Feasting on the word of Scripture is skillfully expressed in the Holy Thursday Canon:

“Go,” says the Word to his disciples, “and in the upper chamber prepare the Passover which confirms the mind of those whom I initiate with the unleavened word of truth; and magnify the strength of grace. (Ode 9)

Being deprived of the Eucharist does not deprive us of the Master's hospitality. By hearing, receiving and entering the mystery of Scripture, we continue to commune with the Bridegroom whose word we consume and make our own. With the “unleavened word of truth” the Bridegroom feeds his Bride – feeds his Church. By consuming the “unleavened word of truth” we prepare ourselves for when we again approach the chalice.

During these challenging days we can look forward to gathering in the nave of the Cathedral and to offer up ourselves and the creation as a *fragrant* offering of thanksgiving for the Master's hospitality.

Father Robert