

Unique Preparations For a Unique Passover

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Through God's grace and compassion, He has allowed me to celebrate the Easter (or the Christian Passover Feast) for the year 2007 while on my bed of illness, where I have been since the last week of the Holy Great Lent. This has been an amazing opportunity for me to contemplate on the day when Christ entered Jerusalem to offer Himself as the Passover Lamb on behalf of the whole world. He continued His Priestly Mission, for He is the True Sacrifice and the Heavenly High Priest. I decided to meditate upon the preparations that paved the way for this unique celebration of the Holy Resurrection (unique Passover)!

WAS THERE A NECESSITY FOR THE PROCESSION OF PALM SUNDAY?

The four evangelists cared to describe the procession of Palm Sunday, where Christ our Lord entered Jerusalem to offer Himself as a Sacrifice for the whole world, being the Sacrifice, the Priest and the King. They also cared much to describe the events that preceded His entering into Jerusalem. They recorded them in accurate details, as they touch the salvation that used to and is still occupying God's heart -if we can say so -, that has astonished the heavenly hosts, trembled the devil and his entire kingdom, inflamed the hearts of the believers with the divine and brotherly love, and that has opened before them the doors of heaven.

We can say that it occupied the people of God who have previously departed since Adam up until these particular moments. It seems to me that everybody was following Christ our Lord in great amazement step by step during this fateful week. What was behind the ancient events that occurred since Adam was revealed along with the symbols they carried regarding our salvation. The divine promises throughout the generations were highlighted and became like posters of fire that pour brightness and joy upon them. The prophecies were projected along with all their meanings that maybe even those who have prophesized them did not completely realize.

This is what drives the Church on every Palm Sunday to relive this procession, starting from the altar - as if from the divine throne in heaven - and stopping at several stations before the icons of St. Mary, the angels, the apostles, the martyrs and the saints, and even before the doors of the church, and the baptismal font. It is as if the Church is inviting her members to share in the joy of heaven in the Lord Jesus Christ, our Passover. Every believer would hear the prophet's voice through the Holy Spirit: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your King is coming to you. He is just, and having salvation; Lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey... He shall speak peace to the nations; and his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth" [Zechariah 9:9-10].

This procession continues to occupy the heart of the believer, so that he beholds His Christ, the Savior, longing to enter into his Jerusalem (his heart). He builds His divine Kingdom inside him, and proclaim the joy of salvation, the power of the cross, and His super glory.

The human soul would look upon her Groom as He enters into Jerusalem to joyfully affianced her unto Himself, for He has come to pay her dowry on the cross. Therefore, the daughters of Zion have cried out and said: "Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and see King Solomon with the crown with which His mother crowned Him in the day of His wedding, the day of the gladness of His heart" [Songs 3:11].

❖ Your love has brought You down from the chariot to the regular colt.

Instead of the hosts of the Cherubim, You are glorified in our town by a lowly colt!

Your mercies have brought You down from amongst the Living Creatures, the faces and the wings of fire to be glorified by a foal of a donkey.

The heavenly beings are advocating Your brightness on the chariot, while here the pitiful scorning colt is carrying You amongst the earthly beings.

The fiery Cherubim are blessing You with their hovering and here the children are glorifying You with their praises!

The angels of light are preparing His way with their wings of light, and the disciples here are throwing their gowns before Him!

The Tremendous has descended from the place of His Father to look for us in our place, and with His own will He reached utmost humbleness.

He rode on the colt to look for His people with meekness.

Zechariah the prophet carried the spiritual harp, and hurried before Him to praise his prophecy joyfully. He adjusted his strings, moved his voice and said: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold, your King is coming to you. He is just, and having salvation; Lowly, and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" [Zechariah 9:9].

St. Jacob of Serugh

THE PLEASURE OF THE HOLY ONE

Man, in his foolishness, sold his friendship with his Creator, the Giver of life happiness, and glory, and received nothing but enmity, hatred, and eternal death. As for the Creator and Lover of mankind, He began to deliver His divine promises and proclaim His Fatherly bosom, which is calling for man to return to Him. Through these promises, the head of every family acquired the right to offer animal sacrifices on his behalf, his family's and the community's. These sacrifices were offered as a symbol to reveal the true path of reconciliation.

the Word of God delightfully accepted the Father's call to become Man and to offer Himself as a Sacrifice of Love carrying the sins of the whole world.

In the beginning of the Feast of Passover, it is said: "*...all the armies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. It is a night of solemn observance for the Lord for bringing them out of the Land of Egypt. This is that night of the Lord, a solemn observance for all the children of Israel throughout their generations*" (Exodus 12:41-42).

This is an unparalleled evening that God is pleased by, where God has kept His people safe from the angel of destruction, and counting His people's army as His own. This evening belongs to God. It is a Feast wherein God delights, asking His people of all generations to celebrate it. If this is a mere symbol of God's pleasure, how much more would be His delight with the True Passover, Who embraces the entire universe? God is not only asking to save the universe from Pharaoh, but from the powers of darkness; not only to take them to the Promised Land, but to enter with them into the Heavenly Bosom.

We should not be surprised that the chief priests and scribes were enraged that our Lord Jesus Christ was praised by infants and babes (Matthew 21:15), because they did not comprehend the extent of the Father's delight with the entry of the True Passover into Jerusalem and the offering of Himself as a Sacrifice! This is the day that the Lord has made! He has prepared the world for this day of His for thousands of years! They could not realize that the processional entry of the Lamb of God into Jerusalem was through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, spoken of by the prophets: "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey*" (Zechariah 9:9-10).

The chief priests and scribes deprived themselves of the gift of the Holy Spirit that grants us discernment, or spiritual vision. This gift would have allowed them to understand the prophecies, and taste their sweetness, and to celebrate the Feast in spirit and truth rather than focusing on the festivities themselves. Instead, they began to evade the heavenly delight and to overlook the divine prophecies.

Instead of participating in this remarkable procession, their hearts were plotting to kill Him and humiliate Him. They did not know that God would use their ignorance, foolishness, and evil nature to fulfill His plan to save the world. Their pitiful state is inexpressible. As for the Lamb of God Himself, it is said “*For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls*” (Hebrews 12:3).

THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE HEAVENLY HOSTS

There were two processions moving on earth: one of them was led by the simple and humble of heart whose eyes were opened to the knowledge of the Son of David as the Messiah, the Lamb of God, and the Savior of the world. The other procession was invisible and was led by the Satan who led the evildoers, the hypocrites, who, saw their nation destroyed by Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, in heaven, a strange force shook all the heavenly hosts. Since the time of the Annunciation of the incarnate Word of God, His birth, and His service on earth, the gates of heaven were open on earth, and the angelic hosts marveled at the amazing creation of God. They stood before the throne of the Almighty Creator and the Word of God with astonishment, singing new praises and meditating:

- For the sake of men, He became like them to partake with them in everything except sin.
- For the sake of renewing the divine traits in mankind He was baptized in the Jordan.
- For the sake of mankind's victory, His Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be tempted.
- The Word of God partook in man's life on earth to grant him the communion of the heavenly Life.
- He changed the earth to be like heaven to grant him the pledge of heaven.

And now, why did Christ enter into Jerusalem? Why did He ride a donkey, and specifically the foal of a donkey? Why did the leaders go into uproar? And what is the end of this amazing journey?

Is it possible that the heavenly hosts questioned one another regarding these events, or did they all stand in awe as God fulfilled His plan that was recorded in the events, symbols, and prophecies of the Old Testament? Perhaps the heavenly hosts gradually began to perceive and discover God's abundant love for mankind, so their hostility towards mankind lessened, instigating in them a desire to serve men!

I find it appropriate to say that the heavenly hosts received the mystery of divine wisdom, or the mystery of God's love towards mankind, which was hidden. As St. Paul says: “*To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles **the unsearchable riches of Christ**, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which **from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God** who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the Church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.*” (Ephesians 3:8-10)

If the procession of this unique Feast of Passover is meant specifically to create, through the Lamb of God, one Church comprised of all nations, people, and languages, and then the Heavenly Hosts received an amazing share of knowledge from God's infinite wisdom. They discerned His wisdom and learned it from the Church, and found that through the Cross the earthly beings have become like the heavenly beings. He took man from the filth of the world to live as honored members of Heaven. The Heavenly Hosts were troubled because mankind's weakness became a tool in Satan's hand to resist God. But now, Satan has lost his stronghold on mankind, and God has opened the door to adopt man. Man received the right to share in God's bosom. How delighted were the Heavenly Hosts that the Church has now become one with them?!

THE PROCESSION OF THE BELIEVERS IN HADES

As for the believers from the time of Adam until the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, who can even begin to describe their feelings and emotions at that time?

I wonder if all the Patriarchs, chief priests, prophets, kings, or writers of the Old Testament each carried a sign of fire that declared his ideas or prophecies regarding this unique Passover and the events related to the Cross and Resurrection. Or maybe they all observed the events in utter silence, wondering and inquiring on what then completion would be like.

I imagine that Adam and Eve, when they bore their son and saw the birth of their grandchildren, asked each other: "I wonder if this is the son who is said to have bruised the serpent's head (Gen 3:15)?" And after their death and their departure to Hades, and while they were awaiting the coming of the Savior, I wonder if they inquired about the Messiah every time they heard of a spiritual person and leader like Moses and John the Baptist.

Now, after more than thirty three years from the time of the Annunciation of the Incarnate God, Hades had become a conference inviting millions of people from all generations who closely followed the events of Jesus of Nazareth, especially His entry into Jerusalem that was spoken of by Zechariah the prophet (Zechariah 9:9-10). When Archangel Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary, their eyes were turned to Isaiah the Prophet when he wrote in his book: "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel... For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6).

When the children of Bethlehem entered Hades, and told their story of what happened to them due to the birth of the King of the Jews, Jeremiah the prophet marveled, and we read in his enlightening prophecy, "*A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more*" (Matthew 2:18).

The critical moments have begun to come, and with every hour of time that passes in the world, many prophets and many prophecies enlighten us regarding events that were once incomprehensible, such as Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek and Isaac's sacrifice that portrayed the love of God, who is able to raise from the dead. We wonder about those who were in Hades at the time, especially during this specific week when all the books of the Old Testament were opened and deciphered in many astounding ways.

In all honesty, I find it difficult to remove my mind from thinking about these incredible circumstances, which will become even deeper and more astonishing when we meet with the Word of God the Incarnate on the clouds on the day of our Wedding with Him.

PROCESSION OF THE BLIND AND PARALYZED

Matthew the Evangelist described to us the encounter between the Jesus Christ and the crowd of people who joined Him in the procession. Many placed their clothes on the road, while others placed palm branches at His feet. The tongues of the babes and nursing infants were moved to sing praises appropriate to the Lamb of God and Savior of the World. Matthew especially focused on one particularly remarkable procession, when he wrote: "*Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them*" (Matthew 21:14). They were not able to participate with the rest of the crowd in the encounter at the entrance of the city, but they joined with their hearts. They believed in the Passover Lamb, the Sun of Righteousness who enlightens the inner vision and uncovers His Holy mysteries to them. He is the road through which we move, to which we go, and in which we settle.

Unfortunately, many of the leaders did not get the opportunity to participate in the procession, for they thought that by themselves they would be able to see and move through the road. They hence deprived themselves from the Sun of Righteousness, the Way, Truth, and the Life!

PROCESSION OF THE UNKNOWN

This is a very different procession, because our Lord Jesus Christ did not stay the night in the temple or at one of the leader's homes. Instead, "*...Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He*

lodged there” (Matthew 21:17). This may have cleared the consciences of the leaders at the time, for they did not consider that He was the awaited Messiah. They were unable to understand that He is the God of the unknown and the Father of those who have no one to remember about them.

Nature Also Responds

When the leaders were angered at the infants and babes for praising Jesus Christ the True Pasch, Christ replied to them saying “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke 19:40). This was to show that nature will respond to witness to the Lamb of God, to open the eyes of the unbelievers and acknowledge His truth and His mission. The following are examples of nature answering to God:

- a. **The First Adam** was evicted from the Garden of Eden, and the Second Adam came not to return us to an outer Garden but to create inside of us an enclosed garden (Song of Songs 4:12), where the soul can come to the Beloved: “...*Let my Beloved come to His garden and eat of its pleasant fruits*” (Song of Songs 4:16). Our Lord Jesus Christ allowed the fig tree that is by the road to wither and be removed (Matthew 21:19), and through His Cross, to replace it deep inside the soul instead of by the road, so it will be the Tree of Life and a joyful Paradise for the soul.
- b. **The animals:** Our Lord Jesus Christ chose to ride on the colt even though it is considered to be one of the filthiest animals. He also specifically asked for a firstborn (Leviticus 27: 26-29). Our Lord Jesus Christ chose the colt to teach us that nothing is considered disgraceful in His eyes. Each person should be similar to the Cherubic Chariot. The Church sings on Palm Sunday “You who sits upon the Cherubim, today appeared in Jerusalem, riding on a colt with great glory, surrounded by hosts of *ni angelos* (the angels).”
- c. When He offered Himself as a sacrificial Lamb, “*Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many*” (Matthew 27:51-53).

What amazing examples that portrays to us the depth of Jesus Christ, our Passover, Who was sacrificed for us (1 Cor 5:7).

- a. The veil of the temple was torn in two. This proclaimed the opening of the doors of heaven. Instead of the Holy of Holies and quaked the Temple of Solomon, the believers now have access to the Heavenly Throne.
- b. The earth quaked. This symbolizes that the earthly lusts are replaced with spiritual pleasures as the center of our inner leadership.
- c. The rocks were split. Through the Cross the rocks changed from their hard nature, portraying the new nature we have that is in the image of our Savior, the Creator Who is full of love and tenderness.
- d. The graves were opened. The saints rose and entered into the City (Jerusalem), a declaration of the better work of the Cross in our lives. Through the Cross, the grave has no part in us, and the gates of Jerusalem, the City of God, will never again be closed before us.

May our Good Lord Jesus Christ, the True Lamb of God, grant us all to partake in the Procession of the Passover Feast, and to be graced with His continual work in us. Amen!

Christ, the Risen from the Dead, and the Disciples!

St. Augustine

The Lord appeared to His disciples after His resurrection and greeted them, saying: “Peace be unto you” [Luke 24:36]. This is the true peace and the greeting of salvation, where the greeting takes its name from the salvation! What could be better than having the Salvation itself, “Christ”, greet mankind. Christ is our salvation! For our sake, He was wounded and nailed to the wood, and He was brought down from the cross and put in the grave, but He is risen from the dead.

HE HEALS WITH THE MARKS OF HIS WOUNDS!

Although His wounds were healed, their marks remained! He judged that it is beneficial unto His disciples to leave the marks of His wounds in order to heal the wounds of their spirits -the wounds of their not believing! He appeared before their eyes and showed them His true body, and despite of that they thought He was a ghost!

What did the Lord tell them? “Why are you troubled? And why do thoughts arise in your hearts?” [Luke 24:38]. If there were thoughts arising in their hearts, these would be earthly thoughts. It is better unto man not to raise thoughts in his heart, but to raise his heart unto the heights. The apostle appealed unto the believers to raise their hearts, saying: “If you then were risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory” [Colossians 3:1-4].

The spiritual wounds of the disciples were bleeding! Thus, the marks of the Lord’s wounds came to heal them! “Why are you troubled? Behold my hands and my feet”; i.e. where I was nailed with nails; “handle me and see”, for you are looking but not seeing! See “for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see me have”. According to what was written, “when he had thus spoken, he showed them his hands and his feet” [Luke 24:38-40].

THE FAITH WENT TO THE WORLD THROUGH THE DISCIPLES

“And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered” [Luke 24:41]. They were happy, but were still hesitant, because what happened was unbelievable! At first, they could not believe, but then finally they did, not just because of what they saw with their eyes, but also for what they touched with their hands.

In this way, faith has entered their hearts through their senses, so that later they would preach this faith unto the whole world -unto all those who did not see or touch, and yet believe without hesitation.

The Lord said: “Have you here any meat?” [Luke 24:41]. The righteous Builder, Jesus, was adding to the building of their faith with this saying! He was not hungry, yet He asked for food and He ate from it but not out of need. In this way, the disciples believed that the Lord is indeed in front of them in the flesh, and the whole world believed in His resurrection through their preaching.

THE FAITH IS COMPLETE IN CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

The disciples saw Jesus in His pain when He was on the cross, and now they see Him alive amongst them after His resurrection from the dead. Thus, what didn’t they see?! They did not see the church. They saw the Groom, but the bride was still hidden, for they did not see the church in the midst of the nations. Starting with Jerusalem, they saw the head (Christ), and based on what they saw they believed in what they could not see (the church).

We do the same, for we see what they did not, like they beheld what we did not. We now can see the church, but we did not see Christ in the flesh. Just as when they saw Him, they believed in the church, likewise we can now see His body (the church) and thus believe in Him (Christ, the head of the church).

What that what each of us has seen supports his faith. Christ that is seen in the flesh is the support for the faith of the disciples in the forthcoming church, while the church that is seen unto us now is the support for our faith in Christ that He was raised from the dead.

Their faith was completed and so is ours. Their faith was completed as they beheld the Head (Christ), while our faith is completed as we can now see His body (the church). The “complete Christ” became known to them, just as He became known to us as well, although He was neither fully seen by them nor by us. They saw the Head and believed in the body (the church), while we saw the body (the church) and believed in the Head (Christ).

THE HOLY FILE OF PREACHING

The disciples believed in the resurrection, and through them many have accepted the faith in Jerusalem, in Judea and in Samaria. Let the believers be gathered so that the building would be raised on the foundation; “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” [1 Corinthians 3:11].

Let the Jews be angry and be filled of envy! Let Steven be stoned and let Shoal guard the clothes of those who stoned him to death! Let the church be persecuted in Jerusalem, because from there the burning embers were spread and their flames were incensed! For example, the church of Jerusalem was flaming with the Holy Spirit, where they were of one heart and one spirit for God [Acts 4:32]. When Steven was stoned, the whole body (the church) suffered from the persecution, and embers (the faith) started to spread, flaming the world with fire!

Let us turn to our Lord, the heavenly Father, and give Him our best gratitude from all our hearts, beseeching Him in His great salvation to have mercy on us and to hear our prayers, and with His grace to dismiss every evil from our thoughts and deeds. May He intensify our faith, guide our thoughts, grant us His holy hope, and bring us to the eternal joy with the grace of His only Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

St. Augustine