

ENTRANCE OF OUR LORD INTO JERUSALEM — PALM SUNDAY
Preparing for Pascha - Ten Essential Things to Know about Holy Week
John 12:1-18

By Archpriest Peter Olsen (Based on a talk given by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev)
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We are now entering into Holy Week, also known as Passion Week. During this week we remember the last days and hours of the earthly life of our Lord Jesus Christ: His passion, death and burial. What does one need to know about Holy Week? **First**, during the entire Holy Week, Church regulations prescribe fasting. It ends on Pascha after the midnight Divine Liturgy. **Two**: every day during Holy Week commemorates particular events described in the Gospels. On Monday, we remember the curse of the fig tree by the Lord on His way to Jerusalem. Tuesday we remember the last sermons of our Savior in the Jerusalem temple, including the Parable of the Ten Virgins. On Wednesday we remember the supper at Bethany at which a woman anointed Jesus with expensive ointment. On Thursday we remember the Mystical Supper during which Jesus gave His disciples His Body and Blood in the form of bread and wine. On Friday we remember the arrest of Jesus, His trial, His crucifixion and death on the Cross. On Saturday, we remember His burial. **Three**: the believers are invited to participate in all of the services of Holy Week. However, it is especially important to participate in the Liturgy on the morning of Holy Thursday, in the Divine service in the evening at the reading of the twelve Passion Gospels on the evening of the same day, on Friday evening in the Vespers with the bringing out of the plaschanitsa, (a shroud with an image of our Savior lying in the tomb) followed by the Burial service of our Lord, and the liturgy on Holy Saturday morning. Try not to miss any of these Divine services.

Four: at the Holy Thursday morning Liturgy, due to its special significance, traditionally, all Orthodox Christians receive Holy Communion, including those who rarely receive. Try to be among those who will take the opportunity to receive Holy Communion on that day. **Five**: in the ancient Church, Holy Friday was known as “the Pascha of the Crucifixion.” Gospel readings which are read on that day narrate that Jesus faced suffering and death, having been left alone during the last days of His earthly life with those who hated Him. At the same time it is stressed that Christ died not because He was betrayed by Judas, hated by the High Priest and the elders, was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, and was crucified by Roman soldiers, but because of *our* sins and God’s desire that we be redeemed and saved. Jesus had unconditionally submitted His will to the Divine will. **Six**: the Divine services of Holy Friday proclaim that the Lord died voluntarily by His own choice. He became incarnate in order to offer Himself as a sacrifice for mankind and He performed this feat in obedience to His heavenly Father. There is no greater evidence of God’s love for mankind than the Cross upon which God incarnate was crucified. There is no stronger testimony to the salvation of mankind than the silence which emanates from the tomb of the only-begotten Son of God. There is no greater sacrifice that God could have made for men than the one that He made.

Seven: the leitmotif of the entire service of Holy Friday is the theme of the Mother of God standing next to her Son on the Cross, the account of which is found only in the Gospel of St. John. The liturgical texts, on the other hand, devote a great deal of attention to this topic by putting heartwarming monologues into the mouth of the Mother of God addressing Her dying Son, crucified on the Cross.

Eight: one more key theme of Holy Friday and Holy Saturday is the responsibility of the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ. Until recently, similar texts have been part of the Latin Divine services. However, Pope John Paul II made the decision to remove them due to their explicit anti-Jewish connotation. For the Orthodox Church, the very idea of revising liturgical texts in order to bring them in line with modern political correctness is unacceptable. Besides, these liturgical texts have no anti-semitic nature. On the contrary, they just give a moral judgment of

what certain ancient representatives of the nation of Israel did to our Savior. At the same time, these texts serve as a warning for any people who embark on a path of fighting against God.

Nine: Divine services of the last three days of Holy Week involve the paschanita. It is taken out ceremoniously to the center of the church during vespers on Holy Friday, and during Matins it is carried ceremoniously around the church in commemoration of the burial of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Ten:** Holy Saturday is the day when we remember how the body of Jesus was buried in the tomb, and His soul descended into Hades. During the Divine Liturgy of Holy Saturday morning the vestments of the clergy, the altar servers, and the church are changed from dark colors to white, and the Gospel of Christ's Resurrection is read. Thus, the feast of Christ's Resurrection begins with the liturgy of Holy Saturday and it culminates on Paschal night. These very special services occur only once a year, and it is the holiest time of the year. It is the essential dogma and basis of the entire Christian faith — the Resurrection of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ that we are celebrating. Try not to miss any part of this special time, because every part is extraordinarily meaningful and essential. Amen.

