

Prelude to Easter

The Armenian Church calls the final week of Christ's life on earth **Great Week or Holy Week (Avak Shapat)**. During this time, we share in His teachings, His suffering, His death, and His resurrection.

Holy Monday is dedicated to the creation of Heaven and Earth, the foundation for Christ's Second Creation. Christ condemns the fig tree that did not bear fruit (as Israel failed to bring forth the fruits of repentance) and teaches that faith can have the strength to move mountains, overcoming despair and even death.



The parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens (Matthew 25:1-13) is the focus of **Holy Tuesday**. Ten maidens waited for their bridegroom. (In the custom of that time and place, the bridegroom would fetch the bride from her parents' home to bring her to his own.) Five of the women foolishly took their lamps with no extra oil and when the bridegroom was delayed, could not go out and meet him. The wise maidens went prepared and joined him in the marriage feast. Similarly, we must pray and wait, in a state of perpetual preparation to receive Christ.

In the reading for **Holy Wednesday** (Matthew 26:6-13), a fallen woman anoints Christ with costly oil and kisses his feet. The apostles chastise her for wasting oil that could have been sold to help the poor, but Christ defends her action, perceiving her deed as one of devotion, and knowing that this anointing anticipates His upcoming death and burial.

The morning liturgy service on **Holy Thursday** marks the institution of the New Covenant: Holy Communion, which Christ established at the Last Supper. During a Passover meal, Christ broke and distributed unleavened bread and shared the wine with His apostles, identifying these as elements His Body and Blood. Through this sacrament, mankind participates in the Kingdom of God.

Another episode at the Last Supper is recalled during the evening service on Holy Thursday. "The Washing of the Feet" ceremony commemorates how Christ washed the feet of His apostles, setting an example of humility and love. The priest in turn washes the feet of twelve church members, usually young men.

On Holy Thursday, an all-night vigil is kept in memory of the last sleepless night of our Lord on earth. This service is called Khavaroom (darkness). Before He was arrested, Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane and endured in solitude the agony of His impending death. Six sets of laments are chanted, each followed by a Gospel reading depicting Christ's betrayal, imprisonment, torture, trial, sentence, and crucifixion. Twelve lit candles, 11 white and 1 black (representing Judas) are extinguished in pairs.

Holy Friday is the most solemn and sad day of the Christian calendar. The "Crucifixion Service," usually held at midday, recalls the suffering, execution and death of our Lord, memorialized amid readings from the psalms. In the evening, a white tomb is placed in the chancel of the church for the "Entombment or Burial Service." The tomb is adorned with flowers and during the service is taken in procession around the church. As the faithful leave the church they approach the tomb, kiss the Gospel book, and take a flower in remembrance.

On **Holy Saturday**, also known as the Easter Vigil, the mystery of salvation in the Resurrection of Christ is celebrated. The church is dark, and its lights are dim. Then the great verses from Isaiah 60 are read: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you"-at which point the lights are suddenly turned on. The dramatic, joyful candle-lighting ceremony is called jrakalouytz.