GREAT LENT AND HOLY WEEK

VEMKAR TOPICAL SERIES

BY THE ORDER OF THE
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PRIMATE

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THE MEANING OF LENT

The principles and practices of Lent in the Armenian Church are deeply rooted in the Bible, the ancient Christian traditions, the life-example of Christ and His disciples, and the lives of the great church fathers, all of whom contributed to the establishment of the canons of Lent. The focus of Lent is on "Mankind the Sinner": on the repentance, spiritual cleansing, and eventual salvation of human beings.

The following biblical passages elaborate the deeper meaning of Lent:

"Even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God" (Joel 2:12-13).

"When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners, to be seen by men. Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:5-6).

Lent is a very personal spiritual journey. It is a period of sincerity, self-recognition, and reflection. According to Christian tradition, repentance means a change of mind (*metanoia* in

Greek). As the prophet Joel advised, we must "turn toward the Lord... with all our heart"—with honesty and humility. In this way, we can create a bridge between God and ourselves. Through prayer, we communicate with God, express our love, and ask for forgiveness. Prayers of the sincere heart are acceptable to God.

During Great Lent, we are called to reflect on our lives and make amends by renewing our Baptismal commitment to Christ through worship, charity, and abstinence. In the Sacrament of Baptism, the officiating priest asks the godparents the following questions: *"What is the request of this child?"* To which the Godparents reply three times: *"Faith, hope, love, and baptism. To be baptized and justified; to be cleansed of sins; to be freed from demons and to serve God."*

As we grieve over our sins, we also rejoice in God's mercy and trust in His grace to empower our efforts toward transforming our minds and hearts. We abstain physically, but we do so in the joy of our resurrection into life everlasting. We prepare for the resurrection, both Christ's and our own.

Abstinence, moderation, and sacrifice free us for meditation and prayer. Reducing our food consumption or avoiding some meals and earthly pleasures opens up space for us to receive a deeper kind of nourishment that comes from God; it lets us experience true repentance within the depths of our hearts. Thus, fasting is more than just avoiding certain foods. It is first and foremost a way of cleansing our mind, soul, and heart, of turning to a God-pleasing and virtuous life through prayer and repentance. During the Lenten season, our aim is to strengthen our spiritual life, especially through our love for one another.

It is important to beware of spiritual pride: fasting should not become a reason to judge the one who is weak in fasting. *"Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him"* (Romans 14:3). Fasting is pleasing to God only when it increases our love for God and our fellow human beings. As Yeznik Koghbatsi says: *"One may not eat animal meat, but constantly chew the meat of his brother."*

Above all, fasting during Lent needs to be done in the context of deep reflection on the truth about ourselves, in a spirit of soberness, sincerity, and honesty. Fasting is, in fact, a companion to prayer: one more way we speak to God from the heart.

The Armenian Apostolic Church established the traditions of Lent through canons based on the teaching of the Gospels and apostles. Apostolic

Canon #8 reads: "The Apostles ordered and affirmed that the 40 days be set aside as days of abstinence from evil-doing, from sin, and from food, preceding [the day] of the passion of our Savior."

The true experience of Lent rests on a sturdy tripod of **prayer**, **abstinence**, and **charity**. During Great Lent, the Armenian Church conducts services that reflect this spirit. They are part of the cycle of seven daily hours of worship that were practiced in monasteries, and are now used especially during Great Lent to help us restore a purer, and more joyous relationship with God.

THE PEACE SERVICE, performed late in the evening, contains prayers for peace and praises to God, such as the following: "Thank you for passing this day without trouble and reminding us that You are always with us in the face of trial and temptation."

THE REST SERVICE, offered before retiring for the night, requests that God watch over us throughout the night. This service contains the eloquent and beloved prayer of twenty-four stanzas by St. Nersess the Graceful.

THE SUNRISE SERVICE, performed at daybreak, celebrates God as the giver of the morning light and the Light of Salvation.

Throughout the period of Great Lent, the altar curtain of the church sanctuary is closed, symbolizing man's expulsion from paradise. The main altar represents the kingdom and paradise, where we were always in God's presence and in communion with Him. By closing the curtain, we are called to repentance and to deep spiritual reflection on how much we need God's presence in our lives.

At the conclusion of Great Lent, when we celebrate Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the church offers the service of the "Opening of the Doors." During this beautiful and solemn service, the faithful ask God to open the gates of His mercy and receive us back into His kingdom.

The five Sundays of Lent take us through time, from the dawn of Creation to the triumphant return of Christ. The Lenten journey's central message—to renew and repair our relationship with God through penitence, fasting, prayer, and Christian witness—is reinforced through our beautiful Lenten *sharagans* as well as the daily Scripture readings.

There are five Sundays in Great Lent, and each has a story to tell us about our relationship with God and our journey of salvation.

SUNDAY OF THE EXPULSION

Like many of its sister ancient churches of the East, the Armenian Church lays special emphasis on the season of Great Lent as a "school" for spirituality. The faithful are guided on a "pilgrimage of the soul," with each Sunday of Lent dedicated to a story from Scripture, based on a parable of Jesus or on prophecies concerning him.

The first of the series—the **Sunday of the Expulsion**—seems, at first, to be an outlier with no direct link to the life of Jesus. But there is actually a deep connection here: the Sunday of the Expulsion invites us to consider Jesus's exile in the wilderness as a kind of recapitulation of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden.

Let us start with the Expulsion. It concerns what happened after the Fall, on the day *after* Eden, and is the story of man's first experience of poverty: his first feeling of material and spiritual want. These conditions are sketched out at the end of the third chapter of Genesis (Gn 3:14–24).

In that passage, God's first words are directed, not to a human being, but to an animal: the serpent. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed," He says (Gn 3:15). This is our first hint that the Edenic "peaceable kingdom" is at an end. In the new condition, there will be no more harmony between man and nature; to the contrary, there will be competition and fear—even hatred.

God directs his next remarks to the first woman. He warns her that "Your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gn 3:16). The idea being advanced here is that henceforth the exiled world will be a place of rulers and subjects, of "haves" and "have-nots."

Finally, to Adam God says: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread … [for] you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gn 3:19). Man is warned that the exiled world will be a place of toil, of meagerness; a place that never lets man forget that in the end, he is nothing.

And with that, our first parents are expelled from the Garden of Eden: from the place of abundance, ease, and eternal life to one of emptiness, toil, and — the most terrible of burdens — death. To ensure that man can never return, the entry to Eden is blocked by the Cherubim—not pretty angels, but terrible supernatural monsters—who will "guard the way to the tree of life" (Gn 3:24).

How does all of this tie in with the life of Christ? Just as the Expulsion describes mankind's introduction to poverty, so Jesus, as the opening act of his ministry, goes to the place most associated with poverty: the desert.

In the "cursing" passage in Genesis 3, God warned that man and nature would inherit a relationship of mutual hostility—that man and certain animals would actively seek to destroy each other. But in the Gospel of Mark's very brief mention of Jesus's sojourn in the wilderness, we receive the striking line that Jesus "was with the wild beasts" (Mk 1:13): evidently a restoration of the "peaceable kingdom," in a setting where the fauna—snakes, scorpions, scavengers—is otherwise deadly to man.

In Genesis, God had warned that under the Expulsion, one person would rule over another. But in the Temptation, Jesus explicitly refuses to rule over anyone. Offered by Satan dominion over "all the kingdoms of the world," Jesus rebukes him with the words: "You shall worship the Lord your God *and him only* shall you serve" (Lk 4:8, Mt 4:10). This astonishing sentiment—in effect, that God is the only being fit to rule over others—cuts to the root of every hierarchical order.

God warned Adam in Genesis, "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread." We find bread featured in the Temptation story as well. But Satan's words —"command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3, slightly varied at Lk 4:3)—are now the *negation* of God's assertion to Adam, replacing work with some kind of miracle. Jesus's refusal, with the words "Man shall not live by bread alone" (Mt 4:4, Lk 4:4), serves to accept the divinely-ordained connection between bead and toil, while also addressing

the larger question of nourishment in relation to man's physical and spiritual neediness.

Finally, we recall that in Genesis, our last vision of Eden included the Cherubim: supernatural creatures blocking the return path to Paradise, set there by God to "guard the way to the tree of life." This idea of guarding or protecting something valuable resurfaces in the Temptation account, when Satan challenges Jesus to throw himself from a great height (Mt 4:5-7, Lk 4:9-12). Satan's point is that angels—God's supernatural agents—will guard Jesus and protect him from injury.

But Jesus refuses to be protected by supernatural means. He chooses instead to be vulnerable, injurable, like any other man. Yet for that very reason, Jesus will also be *approachable*. The parallel with the Expulsion illuminates this subtle point. Unlike the protected Tree of Life in Eden, from which man is eternally cut off, Jesus will be a new Tree of Life whose pathway is unguarded, unprotected—so that man can draw near.

By leading us to view these two stories together, the ancient Christian tradition helps us to appreciate the depth of our human intimacy with Jesus. Throughout the Temptation, Jesus is being tempted to live as a god; but at every point, he chooses to live *as a man*—to embrace the burdens mankind has borne since the days of the Expulsion.

This is the seed from which Lent grows: Let us choose to live like Jesus, because he first chose to live like us.

SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Perhaps the holiest moment in the Armenian Divine Liturgy is when the congregation fills the church with the singing of the Lord's Prayer. We begin with the words *Hayr Mer*— "Our Father"; but what really do we mean by referring to God as a "father"?

Do we mean that God brought us into this world? That He is responsible for our welfare until we can go off on our own? Do we think of God as a stern disciplinarian, who will punish us if we go astray? Or do we expect Him to treat us with fatherly favoritism, and turn a blind eye to our faults and misdeeds?

We are told in the Bible that the followers of Jesus were also struggling with this question. The answer that Jesus gave is probably the best summary of Christian love that has ever been uttered: the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

This gospel passage (Luke 15:11-32) should be familiar to everyone—it provides the reading for the second Sunday of Lent—but let us try to see it with new eyes.

Bowing to the request of his younger offspring, a man divides his property between his two sons. The younger son takes his share and leaves home, but quickly squanders his wealth. Destitute and disgraced, and feeling unworthy of his father, the boy swallows what little pride he has left and returns to his father's house, where he expects a cool reception. To his surprise, the father runs out to meet him and welcomes him with embraces and kisses, ordering the servants to make preparations for a great celebration: "My son was dead, and is alive again," the father announces; "he was lost, and is found."

Jesus could have ended the parable here—with the "happy ending" of a father celebrating the return of his lost son—and had a simple story expressing God's undying forgiveness for man, and His joy when a sinner repents. But Jesus did not stop there: he switches the scene to the field where the older son is working—and has been working diligently his entire life. The older boy is outraged when he learns of his father's behavior and corners his father to complain bitterly of the injustice of it.

From a public celebration, we are pulled into a private family argument, and it is as if reality suddenly bursts into the story. In the real world, grand public displays of forgiveness are easy to make; but in private—in the family, so to speak—resentments still linger. The older son's anger has the ring of

truth: he has worked hard to do the right thing, taken responsibility for his life. He has earned his father's love. One might ask whether a father who throws away his affection on an undeserving child is so very different from a prodigal son who squanders his inheritance.

Part of what makes this such a touching parable is the way the details seem drawn from real life. Jesus shows himself not as a teller of moral fables, but as an acute observer of human behavior and the human heart.

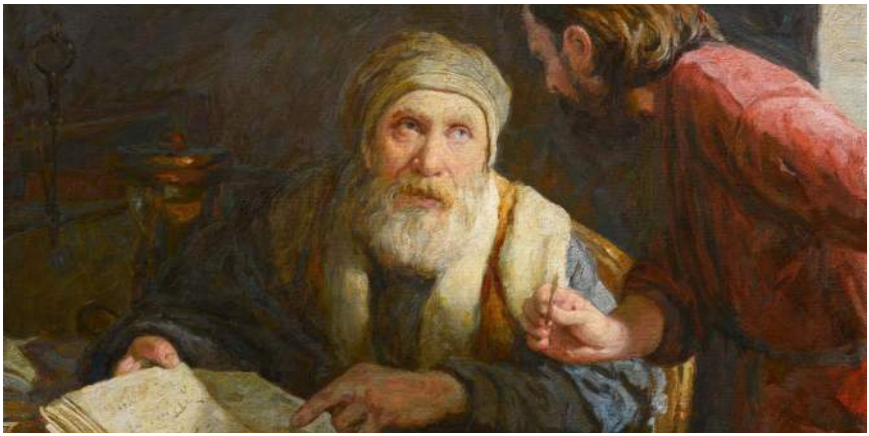
An upright son who demands fair play and just deserts; the uneasy feelings of competition which brothers harbor for a parent's approval and love—these are all too human, and all too recognizable even to us. The father's response to his eldest son is the same: having already lost one son, he does not want to lose the other; yet he can offer no counterargument, nor appeal to any greater standard of justice.

The best he can do is to repeat what he said to the onlookers when his wayward son first returned. But this time, in this quiet, private setting, the same words have a different feeling: not a joyful announcement to the world, but a father's plea for understanding from his son: "Your brother was dead, but now he is alive again."

What person who has ever lost a family member—to whatever circumstance—can hear those words and not be moved? The love of a parent for a child is very strong; but to lose that child, and then to get him back again—this must bring forth the most powerful love of all.

This is what God's love for us is like. This is what it means for us to be able to call Him "Father." With regard to God, we are all like children who want to be close to our parents: we wonder which child they love best and worry that we may become unworthy of their love. These are not small concerns, but in our child-like way, we miss the point about our father's love, which is not necessarily the same for all, but which is so deep that it makes no sense to set up a ranking of least to most favored. It is a love whose depth cannot be measured, and which sometimes is not even fully recognized until it confronts the prospect of loss.

It is a powerful lesson, and a fine example of the kind of teaching that made Jesus famous during his mission to the world. He offers not a fairy tale where actions have no consequences and love conquers all, but rather a full portrait of what real love requires, and of the obstacles such love presents to real people.



SUNDAY OF THE STEWARD

The steward is a figure who comes up in many of Jesus' parables—a "stock character," we might say, who would have been very recognizable to Christ's listeners. What did stewards do, in the time of Jesus? What made them so interesting to our Lord?

They were, first of all, servants. But a special kind of servant: They were caretakers, or business managers, as we might say today. They were not owners; rather the true owner, the master, had given the steward responsibility and authority. And to be given such things meant that the steward was in a position of trust.

Clearly, Jesus saw this special relationship of "stewardship" as symbolic of the greater dynamic between God and man. In the deepest sense, we are not the owners of the good things in our lives: our families, our healthy bodies, our heritage, our church. To be sure, we are responsible for all these things, and we cannot neglect our responsibility. But our highest responsibility is not really to satisfy ourselves, but to please God.

Jesus's parable about an unjust steward who was accused of cheating his master (Luke 16:1-17—the reading for the third Sunday of Lent) is famous for being difficult to understand. But it gives us some very concrete clues about what it means to be a "good steward."

Jesus tells us: "He that is faithful in a little, is faithful also in much" (Lk 16:10). He asks: "If you

have been dishonest with another man's belongings, who will give you something of your own?" (Lk 16:12). And he concludes with the famous saying: "No servant can serve two masters" (Lk 16:13).

These words of wisdom should be "food for thought" for us, during our journey through Lent. But the most important words in the parable come at the very beginning, when the Master asks the Steward: "What is this I hear about you? Give me an account of your stewardship!" (Lk 16:2).

Surely, this is the larger point Jesus was making throughout his teaching on stewardship. God has entrusted us with many serious responsibilities. He has given us many beautiful gifts and blessings. But we are called to make an account.

When our Master calls us to do so, will we show ourselves to have been good stewards or negligent ones?

But let's return for some final thoughts on the parable of the Unjust Steward. As mentioned, it's difficult to understand. Some interpreters strive mightily to make the desperate, swindling steward into an exemplar of moral conduct. But these attempts are unpersuasive, given Jesus' larger themes about what constitutes being a "good steward."

Perhaps a key to its meaning can be found in an overlooked point in Luke's account. We learn (Lk 14:14) that Jesus was addressing the Pharisees: the religious authorities of Jesus' time, entrusted with the job of telling the people what God wanted from them. But in order to make themselves popular, they had "watered down" the message: like the unjust steward, they had "discounted the debt" that man should rightfully owe to God.

Through the parable of the Unjust Steward, Jesus seems to have been warning the Pharisees—and all authorities in positions of trust—that while this might make them welcome in the homes of men, eventually there would be an accounting—and did they think that God would congratulate them on their shrewdness?

In this reading, Jesus is being ironic when he says (Lk 16:8), "The lord commended the unjust steward because he had done wisely." But that mood certainly fits better with the stern lessons about honesty, integrity, and the impossibility of serving two masters, which immediately follow the parable.

Did Jesus tell this parable to praise the steward's resourcefulness, or to condemn him as a swindler? Is he showing us what we should *do*, or what we should avoid? Lent is the season to grapple with the Gospel—to read it for ourselves, and discuss it with others—and that is precisely what this parable encourages us to do.

SUNDAY OF THE JUDGE

A common image runs through the Gospel readings for the Sunday of the Judge (Luke 17:20-18:14). Two stories show Jesus talking about the coming of God's kingdom, and the way to pray to our Heavenly Father.

In one parable, our Lord tells the story of a widow who would not cease calling on a judge for justice—and we are meant to think about our own prayers to heaven. In a second parable, a Pharisee and a publican pray in the Temple, displaying very different attitudes towards God. Christ leads us to see that as human beings, every day, we stand before God. Indeed, one day, at the coming of God's kingdom, we will stand before Him as our judge. And so we must ask ourselves: "How should we stand before God? How should we prepare to show ourselves to Him?"

This is how St. Paul answered that question: "Study to show yourself to God as one approved: a workman who has no need to be ashamed, because he rightly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15) St. Paul wrote these words to his pupil Timothy—and what a vivid image he presents of the Christian life!

It is not a game, the apostle warns us, this calling to the profession of

Christianity. It requires effort. “Study to show yourself to God,” is his advice. Be determined and diligent, so you can show yourself to God “as one approved.” But, what does it mean to be “approved” before God?

As he does so often, St. Paul answers that question with a very down-to-earth example. Think of a workman, he says: a carpenter or stone-carver. What would it mean to call such a workman “approved”? He would be a person who had learned his profession. A person confident in his abilities. One “who has no need to be ashamed,” as St. Paul puts it.

And he would be a person who knew how to correctly handle the tools of his trade. That’s important for two reasons. First, because the expert use of special tools is the mark of a master. But second, because the tools themselves can be dangerous. In the wrong hands—in poorly-trained hands—they are a hazard both to the user and to those around him. What then are the Christian’s tools?

Paul’s answer is that the Christian is a workman who “rightly handles the word of truth. “And what is that word of truth? Surely it is the Good News of Jesus Christ: his incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection; his promise of eternal life to all who follow him. “Rightly handling the word of truth” is not a job we can simply walk into, without any preparation. It’s not what we call today “unskilled labor.” It requires some study on our part.

And just as importantly, in the wrong hands even that precious word of truth can be a dangerous tool. We hardly need to elaborate on the point; we are all aware that religious teachings can be placed in the service of foolish or destructive ends. And no religion, not even Christianity, is immune to this.

Christians are called to be masters of their profession: experienced; confident in their ability; skilled in the proper handling of the tools they have been given. Paul’s point is not that this is the way to obtain God’s approval, because such approval can never be “earned”: it is the free gift of a loving God, the fruit of the sacrifice of His only begotten Son.

Rather, his point is that if you are to be a Christian, then this is the kind of Christian you must be. Christianity is not a religion of half-measures. You cannot be a Christian part of the time, or only in certain aspects of your life. In accepting Christ’s “word of truth,” you embrace a total way of life. You need to gain a master’s competence in the profession of Christianity.

And just as every serious workman wants to stand before his employer and declare, “Yes, I am prepared to do everything you ask of me”—so

with the same words should we, as Christians, present ourselves before our Lord and Creator. In the deepest sense, this is our gift to God.

It is an awesome thing to realize that we stand before our Creator—not just at the end of our lives, but at every point in life. At this very moment, in fact. Every day, our Lord is asking something of us—great things and small things. And it is the greatest blessing in mortal life to be able to declare, "Yes, Lord, I can do what you ask of me. I am prepared to perform your will."

SUNDAY OF ADVENT

As the last Sunday of Lent, the **Sunday of the Advent** gives an answer to the great question posed at the start of our Lenten journey. The question was posed on the Sunday of the Expulsion, which told the story of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and mankind's exile from Paradise.

The Expulsion marked the moment when humanity first became separated—physically and spiritually—from God: a separation that came about, tragically, of our own free will.

Because of it, one question became the fundamental, urgent issue of human history: *How could human beings come back to God?*

In the largest sense, the history of mankind charts our attempt to return to Paradise. And that same history shows what a terrible failure that attempt has been, when it has been undertaken on *our own* terms, and not God's.

The Sunday of the Advent gives us an answer to this urgent question—and in a most unexpected way. For it turns out that *only God* could overcome the separation between Himself and humanity. And only a loving, forgiving God would enter into history as a human being, to restore what His children had lost.

That is what the Sunday of the Advent teaches us. The word "Advent," of course, refers to the coming of Jesus Christ: his birth and revelation as our Savior; his sacrifice for mankind; his victory over sin and death; his promise to return in a Second Coming. As Lent draws to a close, we are meant to understand that Christ is the answer to the deepest, most fundamental human question. He is our *bridge*, so to speak, enabling us to return to God. He is our *model* to live a truly human life: life as God intended us to live.

And he is our greatest proof of God's unlimited love for us—a love that endures in spite of our sins, failings, and unworthiness.

Our journey through Lent is a way to take stock and re-orient our lives, to come more into line with the model Christ presents for us. Throughout his ministry, whenever people came to our Lord with questions about how to live and act, his answer would often come down to two words: *"Follow me."* And those same words, *"Follow me,"* are the answer he gives to each of us, when we pray for guidance in our daily lives.

Christ's call to *"Follow me"* is his invitation to us, to take up his ministry in the world. We are called to undertake his ministry within our families, in our parishes, in the society around us. By truly following our Lord Jesus Christ, we also bring his presence into each of these settings, allowing others to get to know our Lord, and answer his call for themselves. As Armenians, we come from a long line of forebears who followed Christ and brought his light to others.

This too is something we can learn on the Sunday of the Advent. For Christ not only came into the world, but he also comes into our hearts. When he comes to each one of us, we must answer him. When he knocks on the door of our hearts, we must let him in. When he invites us to follow, we must step forward.

This is the task that stands before us, on the last Sunday of Lent. By accepting it, we will follow our Lord through Palm Sunday, through the drama of Holy Week, and finally through the glorious miracle of Easter.

HOLY WEEK
A PRELUDE TO EASTER

LAZARUS SATURDAY

Holy Week in the Armenian Church begins on Lazarus Saturday, the day before Palm Sunday.

The Resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh and last sign of our Lord Jesus Christ described in the Gospel of John (John 11:1–46).

Jesus frees Lazarus, who died four days previously, from the clutches of death and gives him life again. He does this by the power of His words: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43).

The voice that brought the universe into existence now calls Lazarus from the darkness of death to the light of life. The resurrection of Lazarus points to the hope of resurrection and new life that we have in Jesus Christ.

This sign is also a promise to all believers: If we trust God, then there is no difficulty or trial, not even death, that can deprive us of eternal life with God. We must look to Jesus Christ in the midst of troubles, difficulties, and sufferings and remember His promise of eternal life.

To all who are mourning, grieving, and lonely, the Lord Jesus says: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (John 11:25).

In the story of the Raising of Lazarus Jesus speaks that revelation, then turns to the dead man's sister and asks, "Do you believe what I said?" It was Martha's response that made her brother's resurrection possible. "Yes, Lord," she answered, "I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:27).

And what is our response? Do we trust what Christ said? Do we act as if Jesus has won over death, turning it from something to be afraid of into something not to be afraid of, from a mystery to be solved into a triumph, a proclamation of the Lord's victory over death? How does this affect our view of death? Do we understand and view the dying of the body as a transition

from this life to eternal life?

As St. Paul writes: "For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Corinthians 4:11).

PALM SUNDAY

When **Palm Sunday** arrives in the church calendar, the natural world is beginning its miraculous seasonal transformation. We eagerly anticipate the warm weather and sunlight of spring, having spent so long in the cold of winter.

The spiritual progress of the church follows the same pattern. We emerge from the dark days of Lent to greet the world anew, and we savor that world—and life itself—all the more because of our experience of sacrifice and repentance. Like the faithful of Jerusalem who greeted Christ as he rode into the city on the first Palm Sunday, we enter Holy Week ready for something new and positive to take hold of us. We are hungry for that robust taste of life which Easter and the Resurrection promise us.

We are all familiar with the story of Palm Sunday. We can picture Christ's triumphant entry, riding not on the glorious horse of a soldier, but rather on the back of lowly donkey. We can hear the cheers that greeted his arrival into the Holy City. We recall his conflict with the officials of the Hebrew Temple—and the terrible events which followed. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the last week of Christ's earthly life.

These are the major outlines. But the richness of the story is in the small details. For example, before entering Jerusalem, Jesus wept at the city

gates. And yet—knowing the danger that lay ahead—Christ still entered the city: Nothing could stop him from completing his mission to the world. As another example, the people who greeted him on Palm Sunday were not simply citizens of the city: they were Hebrew pilgrims, who had traveled from all over the globe for the religious celebrations in the Holy City. During his ministry, Jesus never traveled more than a hundred miles from the town of his birth; but in entering Jerusalem, it was as if Christ was meeting with representatives of the entire world.

These details—and the meaning behind them—are part of what makes the Bible such a rich source of inspiration for us. Every year, we read through the same stories as we follow the life of Christ through the church calendar. Yet each time, the Gospels present new insights and lessons to us.

One such lesson is the way Christ's entry into Jerusalem reflects his entry into our own lives. In entering our hearts, Christ may move quietly and humbly; but he is unstoppable—he is determined to work in us and *through* us. He offers himself universally, to all the people of the world, to anyone who will accept his authority. Palm Sunday is not only the story of God's presence among us, but just as importantly, it is the story of His outreach to us.

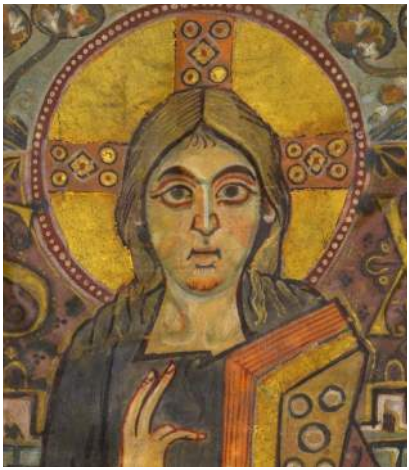
Through that divine example of outreach, Christ set an example for us to follow. Indeed, reaching out to others—especially to our fellow countrymen in their hour of need—has been the foundation of the church's activity since Armenia became a Christian kingdom. The sacrifice of St. Hripsime, the mission of St. Gregory, the efforts of the Holy Translators—what were these, after all, if not ways of spreading the word of God, and bringing more people into the circle of believers? The love of God for man, exemplified in the figure of Jesus Christ, inspired these and countless others—down to our own day—to extend the hand of friendship, solidarity, and common purpose to people throughout our nation.

Needless to say, this virtue has not always been the rule in our history. It is an ideal, after all, and mortal man can only reflect it imperfectly. But outreach is as important today as it ever was—in some ways it is *more* important. Our church will surely prosper from the talent and energy brought in by Armenians from all walks of life. It will surely benefit from having the greatest number of people contributing to her holy mission.

One of the Scripture readings for Palm Sunday contains the following message: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; …Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."*

This is the great reality behind Christ's entry into Jerusalem: it shows that "the Lord is *near*." His closeness calls us to unite as his followers, and to spread the word to all his children.

Let that be true of us, throughout the worldwide Armenian Church. Let us take up the challenge of reaching out to one another, in the loving embrace of the church, and under the eyes of God.



HOLY MONDAY

Holy Monday is dedicated to the creation of the world, of Heaven and Earth, as the foundation of Christ's Second Creation. On this day, we recall the fig tree that did not bear fruit and was condemned by Christ (Matthew 21:18–22). Christ was disappointed to find that the people of the covenant (Israel) bore no fruit. Like the barren fig trees, Israel had failed to bring forth the fruits of repentance. Nevertheless, Christ points out that faith can move mountains and overcome death and despair. According to the historian Stepannos of Syounie, living in the 7th century, the fig tree "is the people to whom hungry Jesus came and found no fruit on it, but only seeming life, so as the result of His coming the tree dried up."

HOLY TUESDAY

On Holy Tuesday, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens (Matthew 25:1–13) is recalled. 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, they could not go out and meet him. The wise maidens went prepared and joined him at the marriage feast. Similarly, we pray and wait, spiritually prepared to receive Christ while recognizing that we are all sinners. In humility, we ask that the Lord show us His compassion.

HOLY WEDNESDAY

On Holy Wednesday, we recall the fallen woman who anointed Christ with costly oil and kissed His feet, in contrast to Judas, who betrayed Christ for money. The apostles chastised the woman for wasting what might have been used for the poor. Christ defended her action as one of beauty and devotion, knowing that this anointing was in anticipation of his death (Matthew 26:3-16). Likewise, we strive to make our church building and worship of God as beautiful as possible, returning beauty to the creator of beauty.

HOLY THURSDAY

Holy Thursday marks the institution of Holy Communion, which Christ distributed to his disciples at the Last Supper. During the meal, Christ broke and distributed unleavened bread and passed the wine. He told the disciples that this was his Body and Blood of the New Covenant. Humankind is now invited to feast in the Kingdom of God.

IN THE EVENING: the service of the Washing of the Feet takes place in memory of the Lord's example on Holy Thursday. Jesus took a towel, girded himself and began washing his disciples' feet, setting an example of humility and love for all the members of the church.

AT NIGHT: On Great 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, eleven white and one black (representing Judas), are extinguished in pairs. The crucifixion hymn (*Daradzyal*) relates: "From hand to hand and foot to foot, stretched across wood upon wood, the bitter fruit (of Crucifixion) transfers life into death between two unrighteous ones."

HOLY FRIDAY

Holy Friday is the most solemn and somber day for Christians. The Crucifixion service recalls the suffering, crucifixion, and death of our Lord. At the entombment or burial service, a white tomb is placed in the chancel of the church. It is adorned with flowers, and during the service it is taken in procession around the church. The hymn is sung: "The Son of Righteousness, Christ, was placed in a dark pit, and the ray of glory from the Father was hidden under a stone in the midst of the earth." As they leave the church, the faithful approach the tomb, kiss the Gospel book, and take a flower.

HOLY SATURDAY

At the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, the mystery of salvation in the Resurrection of Christ is celebrated. The lights of the church are dim until the reading of Isaiah 60, when they are suddenly turned on. Already, in the dramatic candle lighting ceremony of *Jrakalouytz*, the joy of Easter Eve has begun.

EASTER SUNDAY

Easter Sunday celebrates the joy of the Resurrection; the choir and congregation exultantly sing out: *"Christ is risen from the dead! He trampled down death by death and by His Resurrection He granted life unto us. Glory unto Him for all ages. Amen."* The Resurrection of our Lord is the promise of salvation for all humanity. The faithful exchange the Easter greeting: *"Krisdos haryav ee merelotz"* and *"Orhnyal eh harootiunun Krisdosee."* The faithful share a joyous Easter feast, often including lamb and colored eggs (symbols of new life), and Easter bread (choreg).

St. Gregory of Datev considersed the egg to be a symbol of the world: the shell is the sky, the membrane is the air, the white is the water, and the yolk is the earth. Dyeing eggs red symbolizes the salvation of the world by means of the Blood of Christ.

On the Monday after Easter, Armenian families in some parts of the world visit the graves of loved ones, share choreg and eggs among themselves, and whisper to their departed loved ones, *"Krisdos haryav ee merelotz!"*

Easter Sunday is followed by a period of forty days, during which time there are no saints' days or fasting days. This period is dedicated to the glory of Christ's Resurrection and to the forty days He spent on earth after His Resurrection.

The fortieth day after the Resurrection is Ascension Day, commemorating our Lord's entry into heaven. Fifty days after Easter is Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and gave them the power to preach in various tongues. This is commemorated as the birthday of the Universal Church.

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