

Great and Holy Friday—Vespers-Taking Down of the Body of Christ

Good Friday is the holiest and most solemn day of the year for Orthodox Christians. On Great and Holy Thursday, we remember the crucifixion of Jesus. On Great and Holy Friday, we celebrate the burial of Jesus. On Good Friday, Great Vespers is celebrated in the afternoon. It is like a regular Vespers service in many ways, yet so different in others. One difference is that it includes a Gospel reading (made of passages from Matthew, Luke and John). Towards the end of the Gospel reading (or in some parishes at the very end of the Gospel) the priest, holding a white cloth, comes out to the cross that holds the crucified Lord and takes down the body from the cross and wraps it in the cloth. “And Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb...” (Matthew 27:59-60).

A troparion, or special hymn, is sung with these words:

“The Noble Joseph, when he had taken down Thy most pure body from the tree, wrapped it in fine linen and anointed it with spices, and placed it in a new tomb.”

During some special hymns, called the aposticha, a procession takes place. A special “shroud” called the epitaphios or plaschanitsa is carried in procession. The holy shroud is a large cloth with an icon of Christ’s burial painted or sewn on it. The clergy process with the shroud to the tomb, which has been placed in the area in front of and in the center of the iconostasis. In some churches, the tomb is beautifully decorated with flowers and greens. We now are ready to bury Jesus. This service, the Matins of Holy Saturday, will be done in the evening.

Activities:

- 1.** Read and learn to sing the troparion sung at this service. Listen to what it tells us. Read Matthew 27:57 to find out who Joseph of Arimathea is.
- 2.** Invite your priest to show the students the epitaphios or shroud. Have students note the words and figures on the shroud. Discuss the significance and have your priest explain how it is carried at Holy Friday Vespers. Encourage students to observe this during the Vespers.
- 3.** Plan to have students help decorate Christ’s tomb for Holy Friday evening.