

Great Lent according to Sylvania

Holy Easter has been the feast of feasts and it was preceded by the fast of the Great Lent which lasted for eight weeks. In Jerusalem it lasted for forty one days only because it was forbidden to fast on weekends – except the fast on Holy Saturday – so the fast was broken for two days every week. The regular fast keeping included one meal a day, but there was great variation as the anchorites kept a very strict fast – some of them ate once every two or three days and others once a week. The latter were called the “weekly”, who ate only after having received the Holy Communion on Saturday and on Sunday. Sylvania notes that there was neither special praise for the strict fasters, nor blemish for those who fasted less, because the fast keeping was related to each one’s spiritual and physical condition. The services of Great Lent were as follows: On Sundays they had the usual Midnight office and Matins, followed by the Liturgy in Golgotha. On weekdays they added the 3rd Hour on top of the 6th and 9th and on Wednesdays and Fridays the 9th Hour (around 3pm) was held in Zion, where it was held any way all year round except from the occasion of having a Saint’s feast on these two days. During Great Lent, the preaching from the presbyters and the Bishop was done also on Wednesdays and Fridays in Zion. After the completion of the 9th Hour in Zion, the congregation accompanied the Bishop to the Church of the Resurrection singing praises on the way. Once in the Church, Vespers preceded the Vigil on Fridays, and the Liturgy was celebrated on Saturdays so that the “weekly” fasters would receive the Holy Communion. On the Friday of the 7th week of Great Lent, the Vigil was held in Zion, where also on Saturday morning they celebrated the Liturgy, and the deacon informed the congregation to be ready to go to Bethany

by the 7th hour. The monks had already gathered there to receive the procession with the Bishop in the first Church of Bethany where Lazarus' sister welcomed the Lord. There they sung one psalm and one antiphon, read the relevant part from the Gospel and singing praises they went to Lazarus' tomb. A great assembly of faithful filled the surrounding hills. After the preordained service, standing on a high place, one of the presbyters read the Gospel about the Passover celebration by the Lord and his disciples, and then in a procession they all returned to the Church of the Resurrection for the usual Vespers. The following day in the Church of the Resurrection after the Liturgy, the Archdeacon informed the congregation that the gatherings for the duration of the week would be kept at the church of the Martyrdom, but that day they would go to the Mount of Olives on the 7th hour (around 1:00pm). Indeed on that hour the Bishop would go to the Mount of Olives, they sang praises and antiphons, read the relevant Gospel parts, and after the service there, around the 11th hour (5:00pm) they read the Gospel about the glorious Entrance of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy City. This was followed by a marvellous and indefinable procession from the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem. Holding palm tree branches, the people, among whom innumerable children and their mothers, preceded the Bishop who was sat on a donkey surrounded by the presbyters. The jubilant march was proclaimed with children's exclamations "*Hosanna in the Highest, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, hosanna in the Highest*" (Matthew 21:9). Quite unhurriedly the procession passed through Jerusalem and concluded in the Church of the Resurrection where the Bishop would perform the usual Vespers service. This way, the commemoration of one of our Saviour's life incidents was taking place in Jerusalem three centuries after its actual happening. This ever-living reality was represented with such ceremonies in the Holy Land, and when the great catechist of the church of Jerusalem Saint Cyril was in need of actual proof about our Lord Jesus Christ, he only had to ask the

Catechumens to look around the Holy Land and see the living witness of the Lord's Presence. "The wood of the Sacred Cross is witness", he would tell them... "The palm trees in the gorge witness the children's praises to Him, Gethsemane witnesses Judas betrayal, Golgotha rising up is witness, the tomb of holiness is witness, as well as the stone that is still lying here present". The living monuments of our Lord's earthly presence were kept intact in Jerusalem, in and out of the city and every corner was somehow related to some tradition or memory, only the Lord's voice is not still echoing in Jerusalem where His teaching is however kept unadulterated. Therefore even if the truth of this was ever doubted, justly bewildered Saint Theodosius wrote to Emperor Anastasios: "How is it that after more than five hundred years after the Lord's presence, we are still learning about faith in Jerusalem"? With this phrase he strongly indicated the exceptional position of the Mother of Churches in the Christian world.

There were other ceremonies associated with these but especially during Holy Week there was a constant local celebration which was not restricted to hymns and gospel readings, but it was a true worship and visitation of the shrines in and out of Jerusalem, a historical on the spot representation of the Saviour's passions and resurrection. Likewise, on Holy Monday on the Church of the Resurrection there was the usual annual service schedule until the time of the first rooster's crow, the third and sixth Hours the same as the rest of the days of the Great Lent, however at the 9th Hour they all gathered at Golgotha, where they sang praises and read prayers until the 1st Hour of the night followed by Vespers. With psalms and praises, accompanied by the faithful, the Bishop would go from Golgotha to the Resurrection where he read some prayers, blessed the people and let them go. On Holy Tuesday, after the end of the previous night Vigil, the Bishop would go to the Mount of Olives accompanied by the faithful, and there, at the cave where the Lord used to discourse with

this disciples, the Bishop read the narrative from Matthew's gospel "*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation*" (Matthew 26:41), at the end of the gospel reading he recited a prayer, blessed the people and dismissed them and late at night they all returned to Jerusalem. On Holy Wednesday, after Vespers in Golgotha, they went to the Resurrection and the Bishop would enter the holy Aedicule, while one of the presbyters standing by the railing read the gospel reading about Judas' betrayal, evoking contrite tears on the bystander pilgrims. On Holy Thursday, apart from the usual services, around the 8th Hour the people would gather at Golgotha, where most probably they celebrated the Liturgy, just like they did by the Cross, and around the 1st Hour of the night at the Archdeacon's call everybody would go to the Mount of Olives. There, after the relevant gospel readings and praises, around midnight they went up to the top of the Mount by the Altar and both the clergy and the people continued singing psalms and praises. At the first rooster's crow they went down to the other shrines of the Mount where they sang other praises and hymns and read the gospel part according to John on the Lord's prayer in Gethsemane. Following that, slowly they marched to the place where the Lord was arrested by the soldiers of the Jewish crowd; they read the gospel related to His seizing, while the cries and lamentation of the people echoed as far as Jerusalem. All that procession would go to the Temple of the Cross and kept an all-night Vigil in the presence of all faithful, men, women, old and young alike. Around dawn they read the gospel on Lord's first inquisition by Pilate, while the Bishop preached schematically on the Saviour's Passion. On Passion day, the people went to Zion early in the morning and venerated the part of the pillar on which the Lord had been tied and lashed. On that day the Episcopal throne was placed on Golgotha before a table where they put the silver casing with the Sacred Wood of the Cross; the Bishop held the Cross guarded by the deacons and the people would come to venerate it, together with other holy

items of Judaic antiquity which Constantine the Great recovered from Rome. This ceremony was accompanied by the singing of the Thrice Holy Hymn and was followed by the procession to the church of the Cross where from noon until the 3rd Hour they read all the Scriptures related to Christ's Passion, intermitted by relevant prayers. At the 3rd Hour the Gospel according to John was read, referring to the last agonizing moments of our Saviour on the Cross, and after the appointed prayer they went to Golgotha where they sang praises and read prayers to God. Following this, they went to the Resurrection to read the gospel part on the request of Christ's body to Pilate for its placement in the new tomb. On Good Friday night there was an all-night vigil until Holy Saturday morning, held by the monks and the rest of the clergy. On Holy Saturday the 3rd and 6th Hours were kept as during the other days of the Holy Week, but on the 9th Hour the neophyte Christians dressed in white clothes accompanied the Bishop to the Resurrection to receive a special prayer, then they went to Golgotha to join the rest of the crowd for the Liturgy. From there they went to the Holy Sepulchre to read the gospel part about the Resurrection of the Saviour, the Bishop celebrated the Liturgy and dismissed the people somehow hurriedly so as not to be overcome by the many vigils and long lasting prayers of the Holy Week. Needless to mention the joy and gladness of the congregation to celebrate the "Feast of feasts", Easter, to which all services were dedicated in the following days in all shrines, Resurrection, Cross, Mount of Olives, Bethlehem and Bethany.