

Great Week in the Armenian Church

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(as adapted in the Domar of the Armenian Church)

Great and Holy Week

In the Armenian Church, the final week of Christ's life is called "Great Week" [Arm. *Avak Shapat*; Grk. *Megali Evdomas*]. In the west, the traditional churches have termed it simply "Holy Week" which the Armenian Church finds satisfactory. During this week, a strict fast is observed until after the *Jrakalooys* Divine Liturgy. Each day of this week has a theme:

Great Monday - The sterile fig tree, which bears no fruit and is condemned by Christ.

Great Tuesday - The wise virgins who unlike their foolish sisters, were vigilant and prepared when the Lord came to them.

Great Wednesday - The fallen woman who repents and gives her wealth to Christ, as contrasted to Judas who betrayed Christ for money.

Great Thursday - The Passover meal [commemoration of the establishment of the Holy Eucharist], which Christ celebrated with His Twelve Apostles; also, Judas' betrayal and Christ's washing the feet of His Apostles. Late Thursday night [into Friday morning] also marks the arresting of Christ, His imprisonment, trial, torment and passion.

Great Friday - Commemorates the crucifixion, death and burial of Christ.

Great Saturday - continues the burial and at night proclaims the Resurrection at the *Jrakalooys* Divine Liturgy.

Easter Sunday - Resurrection [Pascha] of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Great Week is the culmination of the religious experience of the faithful who have just emerged from the long penitential period of Great Lent. Great Week is preceded immediately by Lazarus Saturday, wherein Christ offers us the hope of Resurrection. On Palm Sunday, He triumphantly enters Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophecies; and having chosen the way of the Cross, He invites the faithful to witness His passion that they might share in His Resurrection.

Saturday. Remembrance of the Raising of Lazarus. FAST

The joy that permeates and enlightens the service of Lazarus Saturday stresses one major theme: the forthcoming victory of Christ over Hades. "Hades" is the Biblical term for Death and its universal power, for inescapable darkness that swallows all life and with its shadow poisons the whole world. But now -with Lazarus' resurrection- "death begins to tremble." A decisive duel between Life and Death begins giving us the key to the entire liturgical mystery of Pascha [Resurrection]. Already in the fourth century Lazarus' Saturday was called the "Announcement of the Resurrection" [Pascha]. For, indeed, it announces and anticipates the wonderful light and peace of the next -The Great- Saturday, the day of the life-giving Tomb [Great Saturday].

Lazarus, the *friend* of Jesus, personifies the whole of mankind and also each man, as Bethany -the home of Lazarus,- stands for the whole world -the home of man. For

each man was created as a friend of God and was called to this friendship: the knowledge of God, the communion with Him, the sharing of life with Him: “in Him was Life and the Life was the light of men” [St. John 1:4]. And yet this Friend, whom Jesus loves, whom He has created in love, is destroyed, annihilated by a power which God has not created: death. In His own world, the fruit of His love, wisdom and beauty, God encounters a power that destroys His work and annihilates His design. The world is but lamentation and sorrow, complaint and revolt. How is this possible? How did this happen? These are the questions implied in John’s slow and detailed narrative of Jesus’ progression towards the grave of His friend. And once there, Jesus wept, says the Gospel [St. John 11:35]. Why did He weep if He knew that moments later He would call Lazarus back to life? The Armenian Church teaches that all the actions of Christ are both Divine and human in one and the same person, the Incarnate Son of God. He who weeps is not only man but also God, and He who calls Lazarus out of the grave is not God alone but also man. And He weeps because He contemplates the miserable state of the world, created by God, and the miserable state of man, the king of creation... “It stinketh,” say the Jews trying to prevent Jesus from approaching the corpse, and this “it stinketh” can be applied to the whole of creation. God is Life and He called man into this Divine reality of life and ...”he stinketh.”

At the grave of Lazarus Jesus encounters Death -the power of sin and destruction, of hatred and despair. He meets the enemy of God. And we who follow Him are now introduced into the very heart of this *hour of Jesus*, the hour, which He so often mentions. The forthcoming darkness of the Cross, its necessity, its universal meaning, all this is given in the shortest verse of the Gospel - “and Jesus wept.” We understand now that it is because He wept, i.e., loved His friend Lazarus and had pity on him, that He had the power of restoring life to him. The power of Resurrection is not a Divine “power in itself,” but the power of love, or rather, love as power. God is Love, and it is love that creates life; it is love that weeps at the grave and it is, therefore, love that restores life... This is the meaning of these Divine tears. They are tears of love and, therefore, in them is the power of life. Love, which is the foundation of life and its source, is at work again recreating, redeeming, restoring the darkened life of man: “Lazarus, come forth!” And this is why Lazarus Saturday is the real beginning of both: the Cross, as the supreme sacrifice of love, and the Common Resurrection, as the ultimate triumph of love. On Saturday evening [the eve of Palm Sunday] a hymn of the Armenian Church relates:

*With the raising of Lazarus by which the dead were given hope,
the descendants of Adam were [also] raised...*

Thus, as we emerge from our Lenten penitence, we are first greeted by Christ’s promise for the Resurrection of all mankind.

Palm Sunday. FAST

Palm Sunday [Arm. *Dzaghazart*; literally "Girded with Flowers"] is the feast of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Having raised Lazarus from the dead, Christ was hailed by the people as the Messiah and new king of Israel. By entering Jerusalem, riding on the white ass, the Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled [Zechariah 9:9]. The people

hailed him shouting "*Hosannah! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*" And they spread flowers and palm branches before Him. The ode [Arm. *dagh*] for Palm Sunday brightly illustrates His coming: *Today, the created rejoice, with gleeful blessing. Heaven and earth come together, Resound in applause. Today on Mt. Zion, the Nard has spread its fragrance. The rose glows with color, of intense red violet.*

On the morning of Palm Sunday, palms are blessed in church and distributed to the faithful. The faithful follow in procession as they celebrate the great and triumphal victory of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. With this, we also enter into Holy Week and accompany the Lord through His passion by saying, "*Cry aloud, Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

In the evening, after the Palm Sunday Divine Liturgy, the faithful gather at the Doors to accomplish the Service of the Opening of the Great Doors [Arm. *D'rnpatsek*]. Just as, through the raising of Lazarus, Christ opened the doors for the resurrection of all mankind; and, in like manner He showed us the way of the Cross and invited us to witness His passion and share in His resurrection, so also, the Church symbolically opens its doors that the faithful may enter into the kingdom of God and come before His throne. In this manner, the faithful follow Christ [the second Adam] who redeems our sins and leads us back to into Paradise from whence Adam was expelled due to his disobedience.

The faithful gather at the porch of the Church while the priest kneels before the great doors [in Western countries this is done inside the church, on the bema, before the drape of the apse].

As he raps heavily on the door three times, the priest laments:
Open to us Lord, the door of mercy.

From within a voice demands:
Who are they to open the doors of the Lord?

The priest answers:
Not only the just, but also those who confess and repent.

And the voice from within exclaims:
But this is the door of haven from all troubles -the House of God!

And the priest concurs, saying:
Truly, the Holy Church is our Mother, hope of life, truth and salvation, and the way to Christ.

After the priest has again pleaded to "Open the Doors", the voice from within arouses the faithful saying:

There! I see Our Lord Christ seated upon the Holy Throne calling his servants, saying: "Where I am, so also shall my servant be."

Following another plea from the priest, the voice answers:

The tremendous trumpet of God calls in a tumultuous sound announcing: There comes the groom -gather yourselves before Him!

The priest calls out anxiously:

Here! I and my children with me, listen to Christ with one will and heed His word!

And the voice bursts forth:

Come ye, who are blessed by the Father. Inherit the kingdom which was prepared for you from the beginning of the world.

And the priest cries out:

Open the doors of justice for I would enter and confess to the Lord...

The great doors of the church open and the people enter with resounding joy, singing:

Open to us the gate of your mercy Lord, and make us worthy of your dwellings of light together with your saints.

Undoubtedly the emotion and spiritual deepening caused by this beautiful service is equally as inspiring today as it has been throughout the centuries, filling the faithful with the grace of the Holy Spirit and with anxious anticipation to participate in Christ's passion and resurrection on the great day of Easter.

Great Monday. FAST.

The theme of *Great Monday* is that of the sterile fig tree that did not bear fruit and was condemned by Christ. [Matthew 21:18-22]

In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. "

Christ was disappointed in finding that the people of the covenant [Israel] bore no fruit. Israel, like the barren fig tree, failed to bring forth the fruits of repentance. Nevertheless, Christ points out that faith can move mountains...and can overcome death and despair.

Great Tuesday. FAST.

The theme of *Great Tuesday* is the wisdom of the wise virgins who, unlike their foolish sisters were prepared for the Lord when he came. The reading [Matthew 25:1-13] clarifies what it means to be ready for Christ's return [Second Coming] and how we should live until He comes again:

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The message is clearly identified at the end of the passage wherein Matthew records: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour"... when the Lord shall come.

Great Wednesday. FAST.

Great Wednesday carries the theme of the sinful woman who repents giving her wealth to Jesus and kissing His feet, unlike Judas, who betrayed Christ for money. The Gospel [Matthew 26:3-13] relates:

Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head, as he sat at table. But when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for a large sum, and given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. In pouring this ointment on my body she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

The sinful woman, unlike the apostles who were preoccupied with the imminent danger surrounding Christ, demonstrated the fullness of her repentance in anointing Jesus and kissing His feet. The apostles did not understand, and chastised her for wasting what might have been used for the poor. Christ defended her action as one of beauty and devotion knowing that this anointment was in anticipation of His death.

Great Thursday. Remembrance of the Last Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. (39) FAST.

Morning -The Last Supper

Great Thursday marks the Lord's Supper. It was at the Passover meal wherein Christ broke and distributed unleavened bread, and passed the cup of wine telling the disciples that this was His Body and Blood of the New Covenant:

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain one, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the passover. When it was evening, he sat at table with the twelve disciples; and as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful, and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me, will betray me. The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Is it I, Master?" He said to him, "You have said so." Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Matthew [26:17-30]

Through this covenant Christ demonstrated that man [a creature of God] could participate in the kingdom of God -indeed could be in communion at His table in His eternal kingdom. In the Gospel according to Luke [22:28-31] he relates: "*You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.*"

Evening-Washing of the Feet

A stirring part of Great Week is accomplished at this time when the people gather at the door of the church [in the narthex; Arm. *kavit*] and the priest comes to his knees, as did Christ, and washes the feet of twelve men, as was done to the disciples. The hymns and mood are spell-binding as the priest anoints their feet with oil and washes them. The Gospel gives us this account in John [13:1-17]. (40) The services continue uninterrupted into Great Friday

GREAT FRIDAY. FAST.

Commemoration of the Passion, Crucifixion and Burial of our Lord Jesus Christ.

During the night there is a vigil and the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Night-Khavaroom

The last evening services are dedicated to the betrayal, arrest, torture, passion, and trial of Christ up to the hour of crucifixion. On this late evening, perhaps the most beautiful and stirring music of the entire Christian Church is chanted. The mood is deeply

silent and mournful. The Church witnesses the passion of Our Lord in almost complete darkness as twelve lighted candles [one of them black, symbolic of Judas the traitor] are lit representing the twelve Apostles. The hymns are ethereal and filled with passion and faith. Six sets of laments are chanted, each followed by a Gospel reading depicting Christ's betrayal, imprisonment, torture, trial, sentence and finally his crucifixion. As each one of these chants is accomplished, two candles are extinguished. In the end, with the exception of one candle symbolizing the light of Christ, the church is plunged into total darkness as the bishops, priests, deacons and people pour forth their very spirit and resound with an earthshaking voice the Chant of Crucifixion - *Daradzyal*.

*From hand to hand and foot to foot,
stretched across wood upon wood,
the bitter fruit [of crucifixion]
transforms life into death
between two unrighteous ones.
Here was the naked figure of the law-giver
whom the blind [unbelievers] could not see,
Except for one of the thieves.*

This hymn continues to depict the final hour, telling us how He [Jesus] was given vinegar to quench His thirst for water, and His wound inflicted by the spear of the soldier. And as His mother watched, the heavens roared and the ground heaved, giving forth the skull of Adam, and saving the thief in the final hour.

The thundering roar of the chant *Daradzyal* suddenly ceases. With the church almost in total darkness the clergy and clerks sing with great lament the hymn *Ardzat-sirootyamp* [For the Love of Silver] painfully reliving the betrayal and passion:

*-Obsessed with a greed for silver,
Judas betrayed his great teacher
To the Jews, for thirty pieces of silver.
- "The one I kiss, " he said; "Arrest Him ".
Oh, treacherous kiss,
Signal and cause of death.
-He [Judas] divested himself
Of the Divine Holy Spirit;
And, he vested himself in Satan,
And took Satan upon himself and wore him.
-On that night when our Savior was betrayed,
To die upon the cross,
He ascended the Mount of Olives
And praying, he said this:
"Father, take this cup from me."
-You, who sits with the Cherubim,
O Word of God
Today, for us, you sat in humility*

*At the Mount of Olives.
We praise you with unceasing songs.
-You who are consubstantial.
To your paternal Mystery,
You revealed to your disciples,
The mystery of your coming,
We praise you with unceasing song.
-You, who are the Creator and
Giver of Life to all,
Today, you revealed the hidden
Mystery of your Trinity,
To Your Holy Church.
We praise you with unceasing song.*

A disturbing silence seizes upon the faithful. Then with the light of Christ hidden from the faithful...in a trembling, distant and lamenting sound the voice of a young tortured male cries out the words of Christ to His mother. This touching lament is found nowhere in the recorded ledgers of the liturgical books of the Armenian Church and was apparently introduced through pious provincial Armenian tradition. And here are the heart rendering words of Christ to His mother as expressed only in the Armenian Church, on this one night of the year, at the moment of Christ's crucifixion

Where are you my Mother - Oor es Mayr im

*Where are you my mother, sweet and tender?
Your love consumes me.
My eyes have filled with burning tears,
I have no one to wipe them.
They spat upon me, beat and whipped me.
And they put a crown of thorns on my head.
They affixed me to a wooden cross,
I am covered with blood.
I asked for water, and was given vinegar
By the hand of the unrighteous.
Take heed, my mother, whom I love
With all my heart.
As long as there is life in me,
I shall wait anxiously for you,
Lest you should arrive too late,
And find me dead.*

At noon on Friday the Church in deep sorrow commemorates the Crucifixion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ with readings, psalmody and hymns. The readings from the Old Testament refer particularly to the Messianic prophecies, which reflect upon Christ's

being the awaited Messiah. The Gospel readings deal with Christ's passion, crucifixion and death upon the Cross.

The services in the evening concentrate on the entombment of Christ. Herein is read the Gospel of Matthew [27:57-61]:

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own tomb, which he had hewn out of rock. And he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and departed. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there sitting opposite the sepulchre.

And a white tomb is placed in the chancel of the church adorned with flowers. In many churches during the services the tomb is taken in procession around the church, whereafter the faithful approach to venerate: and kissing the Gospel, take a flower from the tomb.

GREAT SATURDAY - *Jrakalooys*- Lucernarium of Easter (41)

The Evening Services of Holy Saturday inaugurate the Paschal celebration, for the liturgical cycle of the day always begins in the evening. Saturday evening, the Church takes off its penitential nature, opens the curtain of the altar and begins to pray in great anticipation of the Resurrection.

Prior to the Divine Liturgy, the Old Testament readings of creation and the prophecies are read and the faithful prepare to enter the rapture of the Resurrection. These lessons from the Old Testament are all centered on the promise of the Resurrection, all glorifying the ultimate Victory of God, prophesied in the victorious Song of Moses after the crossing of the Red Sea, the salvation of Jonah, and that of the three youths in the fiery furnace.

Finally, at the *Jrakalooys* Liturgy the altar curtain opens, and the clerks proclaim the introit for Easter, "*Christ is Risen from the Dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.*" This phrase gives great meaning to Great Saturday because Christ's repose in the tomb is an "active" repose. He comes in search of His fallen friend, Adam, who represents all men. Not finding him on earth, He descends to the realm of death, known as Hades in the Old Testament. There He finds him and brings him life once again. This is the victory: the dead are given life. The tomb is no longer a forsaken, lifeless place. By His death Christ tramples down death. The entire Church then elatedly resounds with the rapture of joy and love in His Resurrection exclaiming, "Hail Jerusalem-the Lord is Risen."

EASTER (42)

Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. (43) *It is non-fasting until the Ascension.*

In the center of our liturgical life, in the very center of that time which we measure as a year, we find the Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Resurrection is the appearance in this world, completely dominated by time [and

therefore by death], of a life that will have no end. The one who rose again from the dead does not die anymore. In this world of ours, there appeared one morning someone who is beyond death and yet *in* our time. This Resurrection, is the central theme of Christianity and it has been preserved in its purity in the Armenian Orthodox Tradition. (44)

The center, the day, that gives meaning to all days and therefore to all time, is that yearly commemoration of Christ's Resurrection at Easter. This is always the end and the beginning. We are always living *after* Easter, and we are always going *toward* Easter. Easter is the earliest Christian feast. The whole tone and meaning of the liturgical life of the Church is contained in Easter, together with the subsequent fifty-day period, which culminates in the Feast of Pentecost, the coming down of Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. This unique Easter celebration is reflected every week in the Christian Sunday, which we call in Armenian "Harootyan or" (Resurrection Day). If you open a calendar, you will find that all Sundays are centered in that paschal mystery, the day of Resurrection. In fact, the English word Sunday is translated into Armenian as *Giragi*, which comes from the Greek *Kyriaki heemera*, meaning the Day of the Lord. Thus, in the Eastern Church tradition, the very name of the day [*Giragi*] represents the Paschal mode of its celebration as Resurrectional.

Tied into this mode is the fact that Pentecost is the fulfillment of Easter. Christ ascended into heaven and sent down His Holy Spirit. When He sent down His Holy Spirit into the world, a new society was instituted, a body of people, whose life, though it remained of this world and was shared in its life, took on a new meaning. This new meaning comes directly from Christ's Resurrection. We are no longer people who are living in time as in a meaningless process, which makes us first old and then ends in our disappearance. We are given not only a new meaning in life, but even death itself has acquired a new significance. In the Introit at Easter we say, "He trampled down death by death." We do not say that He trampled down death by the Resurrection, but by *death*. A Christian still faces death as a decomposition of the body, as an end; yet in Christ, in the Church, because of Easter, because of Pentecost, death is no longer just the end but it is the beginning. It is not something meaningless which therefore gives a meaningless taste to all of life. Death means entering into the Easter of the Lord. This is the basic tone, the basic melody of the liturgical year of the Christian Church. Christianity is, first of all, the proclamation in this world of Christ's Resurrection. The spirituality of our church is paschal in its inner content, and the real content of the Church life is joy. We speak of feasts; the feast is the expression of joyfulness of Christianity.

If we have a message, it is that message of Easter joy, which finds its climax on Easter night. When we hear, "Christ Is Risen," then the night becomes in the terms of St. Gregory of Nyssa, "lighter than the day." This is the secret strength, the real root of the Christian experience. Only within the framework of this joy can we understand everything else. (45)

And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; --it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a

white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen..." [Mark 16:2-6]