

Vespers: In The Beginning
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The Divine Liturgy each Sunday is for us the most familiar of the Church's services. On this day Christ was raised from the dead, and on this day He comes to us in the Eucharist. In communion with Him, we become "the people of God," the Church. In this sacrament, we all mysteriously ascend to the Kingdom of God in heaven. We eat at His table, sharing in His glory, receiving His life.

The Church's traditional preparation for this ascension to the Kingdom is fulfilled by an evening service, the Vespers (in Greek *esperinos* means evening). Vespers for a long time formed the first part of the "all-night vigil" which Christians kept on Saturday night in expectation of the Coming of Christ. "Stay awake – stay alive" was the "philosophy" which the early Christians borrowed from the Roman army, for whom *vigilia* meant keeping watch at night, waiting in readiness.

In our time these "all-night vigils" have all but disappeared from Church life, for a variety of reasons. Instead most parishes celebrate only the Vespers, and so we shall make an attempt to decipher the "rationale" of this service only.

For the world, evening is the end of day; Saturday evening marks the end of another week. School. Work. Astronauts in space. Football games. The assassinations of King and the Kennedys. Jokes and jabs, love affairs and arguments. Biafra. The Black Panthers. Mod clothes and starving babies. Strikes. Politics. Vietnam and Czechoslovakia. Boredom and happiness. Sweet worlds and bitter words. TV. Somehow all of these things are mysteriously united as "our world" which we sometimes characterize as "the grind." Saturday night signals for many people the end of all this for a while, and calls out for Fun! Fun! Fun! Movies and parties, and talk about "pot" and ways to get money. Sunday is the "breather" when people go to church or synagogue and then read the newspaper while eating supper.

For Christians, Saturday evening means beginning, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (Genesis 1:5). Sure. We live and love and fight like everyone else – but then we come to church and stand before God. In us, the "world" (as described above) is present in the Church. And in the Church we again **rediscover** the world as "new" and the creation as God's. We know that there is Someone in whom all is as God wanted it to be. That Someone is Christ, and we assemble in His name. He is present in this assembly, and He "returns" the world to each one of us in a unique way. This is why vespers is the first service in our "cycle" and why it begins with the singing of the beautiful "creation psalm" from the bible (Ps. 104):

Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord my God, Thou art very great!
Thou art clothed with honor and majesty, covered with light as with a garment!
Thou didst set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be shaken!
O Lord, how manifold are Thy works! In wisdom hast Thou made them all!
The earth is full of Thy creatures!

May the glory of the Lord endure forever! May the Lord rejoice in His works!
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live!
I will sing praises to God while I have being!

While this is being sung, the celebrants in bright vestments cense the people and the temple and so the world. This “pleasing fragrance” of the incense is **beauty**, the beauty of God and His world. This is the first “theme” of the Vespers.

But this “world” is no imaginary fiction of our services, for next comes the litany in which we remember everything and pray “for the peace from above” and “for the peace of the whole world.” We pray for “the welfare of the holy churches of God” and for all the bishops and priests and presidents and governments and armies. We pray for seasonable weather, “for travelers by land, by sea, and by air: for the sick and the suffering; for captives and their salvation” and for God’s help. As we enumerate all of these things in our prayer, we confess that we live in a **fallen** world. This is the second “theme” of Vespers, and it is expressed by the singing of the vesperal psalms:

Lord, I call upon Thee! Hear me, O Lord!
Receive the voice of my prayer, when I call upon Thee!
Let my prayer arise in Thy sight as incense,
And let the lifting-up of my hands be an evening sacrifice!
Hear me, O Lord!

During these psalms, a second censuring is performed. But this time the celebrant has no vestments, is “naked” of God, and the incense (is not beauty) but a **cry** and a prayer:

Bring my soul out of prison, that I may give thanks to Thy name!
Out of the depths I cry unto Thee! Lord, hear my cry!
If Thou, O Lord, wouldst mark our iniquities, who would dare to stand?
But Thou art Forgiveness itself.

Between such verses, particular hymns about Christ are also sung. They gradually point to the third “theme” which is redemption:

O gladsome light of the immortal Father’s glory:
Heavenly, holy blessed Jesus Christ!
Now that we have come to the setting of the sun,
Beholding the light of evening.
We praise God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!
For it is right to praise Thee at all times:
Therefore all the world glorifies Thee!

In the midst of all the futility and sadness of this world, in the darkness of sin, a light has appeared. The decisive even has taken place! Christ has come and has revealed the “true wonder” of all life and all creation. By trampling down death, He has robbed it of its finality, giving eternal life **now**. And this leads naturally to the last “theme” of the

Vespers: the **end** of this world in Christ. The singing of the **Nunc Dimittis** announces this “end” of human expectation.

In the gospel it is ascribed to the old man Simeon. He had spent his whole life waiting for the expected Messiah, for he had been promised in a vision that he would not die before seeing the Lord. When Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the Temple to be presented to God, Simeon was there waiting – and when he received Jesus in his arms he said:

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word!
For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,
Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory to Thy people Israel!

He had been waiting all his life – and finally he had seen the Lord. Now he was ready to die. Death would not be the destruction of life, but the making-perfect of this vision of God. Simeon represented all of mankind, waiting and hoping for salvation. To him the “end,” the real “meaning” of life had come. His prayer has become our prayer. Our whole life is really like the “evening” of the Vespers, the darkness in which the Light has appeared. Christ announces the coming of the Day-without-Evening – and the “taste” of this is the Liturgy for which we are now somewhat better prepared. Christ will come again – as He always does – and when He comes He makes our life **salvation**.