



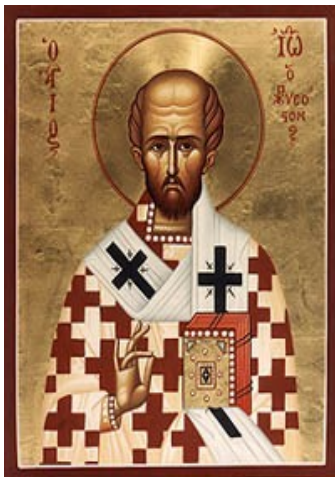
J.J.

In the ancient and traditional celebration of the Jewish Seder, that is the Passover meal, the youngest child asks the time-honored question: "Mah nish-tah-na hah-lai-la-ha-zeh me-kol hah lei-lot?" "Why is this night different from all other nights?" The child's question triggers one of the most significant mitzvot (rituals or commands) of the Passover celebration: the Haggadah or the telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt and the redemption of God's people.

In a way, it is a theme that we pick up tonight as we observe the vigil of Easter, and that is no accident. It is a theme which permeates that ancient Easter Vigil hymn—The Exsultet—a hymn which dates back to the 5th Century . . . a hymn which was so gloriously sung by our Cantors tonight. Did you hear the words:

- ***"This is the night,*** when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land."
- ***"This is the night,*** when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life."
- ***"This is the night,*** when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave . . ."
- ***"How holy is this night,*** when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. It restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord."
- ***"How blessed is this night,*** when earth and heaven are joined and we are reconciled to God."

Now, why is this night so different from all other nights? Once again, like last Thursday, we turn to the early Church Fathers to hear what they might have to tell us (as Episcopalians, you know, we have a love affair with tradition). Why is this night so different from all other nights? Well, probably no one answers that better than St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, in his Easter Sermon, which also dates back to the 5th Century . . . a sermon traditionally read in Orthodox Churches every Easter . . . and a sermon which is traditionally read in many of our own Episcopal Churches . . . and so, tonight, I give you The Pascal Homily of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople:



St. John Chrysostom

If anyone is devout and a lover of God, let him enjoy this beautiful and radiant festival.

If anyone is a wise servant, let him, rejoicing, enter into the joy of his Lord. If anyone has wearied himself in fasting, let him now receive his recompense.

If anyone has labored from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If anyone has come at the third hour, with thanksgiving let him keep the feast. If anyone has arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; for he shall suffer no loss. If anyone has delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near without hesitation. If anyone has arrived even at the eleventh hour, let him not fear on account of his delay. For the Master is gracious and receives the last, even as the first; he gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour, just as to him who has labored from the first. He has mercy upon the last and cares for the first; to the one he gives, and to the other he is gracious. He both honors the work and praises the intention.

Enter all of you, therefore, into the joy of our Lord, and, whether first or last, receive your reward. O rich and poor, one with another, dance for joy! O you ascetics and you negligent, celebrate the day! You that have fasted and you that have disregarded the fast, rejoice today! The table is rich-laden; feast royally, all of you! The calf is fatted; let no one go forth hungry!

Let all partake of the feast of faith. Let all receive the riches of goodness.

Let no one lament his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed.

Let no one mourn his transgressions, for pardon has dawned from the grave.

Let no one fear death, for the Saviour's death has set us free.

He that was taken by death has annihilated it! He descended into Hades and took Hades captive! He embittered it when it tasted his flesh! And anticipating this Isaiah exclaimed, "Hades was embittered when it encountered thee in the lower regions." It was embittered, for it was abolished! It was embittered, for it was mocked! It was embittered, for it was purged! It was embittered, for it was despoiled! It was embittered, for it was bound in chains!

It took a body and, face to face, met God! It took earth and encountered heaven! It took what it saw but crumbled before what it had not seen!

"O death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is thy victory?"

Christ is risen, and you are overthrown!

Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!

Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!

Christ is risen, and life reigns!

Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in a tomb!

For Christ, being raised from the dead, has become the First-fruits of them that slept.

To him be glory and might unto ages of ages. *Amen.*

John of Antioch was chosen as Bishop of Constantinople in 398 A.D., largely on the reputation of his devotional and inspiring sermons (the Greek soubriquet 'Chrysostom' means 'golden-mouth'). Despite opposition to his attempts to reform the lives and morals of the citizens by the Empress Eudora (and his eventual exile by her in 404 A.D.), John became regarded as a father of the early church, and was canonized shortly after his death. Among his surviving works are his Easter sermon, which is traditionally read in Orthodox Churches each Easter.

S.D.G.

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