

Sunday, December 18, 2016

Vital Vigils

The Coptic month of ***Kiahk*** is characterized by extended versions of the midnight psalmody called “**Seven and Four**” (*saaba wa arbaa* in Arabic) which refer to the four canticles and seven *Theotokias* (i.e. hymns relating to St. Mary). During this month, children are excited to spend the night at church and adults are eager to chant some of their favorite hymns of year. I am astonished every year by those who brave the cold weather and long hours of this midnight vigil out of their desire to praise our awesome God and the beautiful *Theotokos* St. Mary. As we prepare to celebrate the glorious Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, I would like to share a few encouraging thoughts regarding the importance and necessity of keeping vigils.



Our Lord Jesus Christ stressed the importance of vigils in many instances. The evangelist Luke mentions that our Lord “***went on a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God***” (Luke 6:12). If Christ, the incarnate *Logos* of the Father, spent all the night in prayer, how much more should we His weak and sinful disciples keep vigil?

In the garden of Gethsemane, our Lord asked his disciples, in possibly the most critical time of His earthly life, to keep vigil with Him, but in their weakness, they slumbered and slept. He even prompted them several times asking them, “***What! Could you not watch with Me one hour?***” (Matt. 26:40). Yet no matter how many times Christ tried to awake his disciples, their eyes were heavy. In the hours that followed, St. Peter committed some pretty egregious sins – he cut off the ear of Malchus and denied Christ three times. I wonder how these circumstances might have been different had St. Peter obeyed Christ and kept vigil? If St. Peter prayed that night, would he have acted so hastily? Although we will never know for sure, one thing I do know is that no matter how tiring vigils may be, at the end of the vigil, one feels indescribable peace and joy. I think anyone who attends the *Kiahk* vigils can attest to this fact. In this abrasive world, prayer and vigil provide the soul the lubrication necessary to squeeze through trials and tribulations. So the next time you face difficult circumstances, try spending your night in prayer and vigil.

Another purpose of vigils is to be on watch for the arrival of the heavenly Bridegroom. Interestingly, in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, it is mentioned that the bridegroom arrived after midnight! In conclusion of the parable, our Lord instructs us to “***Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming***” (Matt. 25:13).” Also in Matthew 24, our Lord exhorted us saying, “***But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect***” (Matt 24:43-44). St. Paul similarly warns the Thessalonians saying, “***For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night***” (1 Thess. 5:2).

Keeping vigil is an act of love to show the Lord that we are waiting His arrival. It is also the reason the church instituted daily midnight prayers and praises.

In the next article, through the grace of God, we will discuss how the church fathers kept routine vigils.**life.**

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