

The Six Psalms

The reading of the Six Psalms at the beginning of Matins are one of the most penitential parts of the Divine Services:

The All-Night Vigil held the evening before Divine Liturgy consists of Great Vespers and Matins. Vespers marks the beginning of the Liturgical day at sunset & its main themes are from the Old Testament: Creation, loss of Paradise, & hope in the coming of our Savior. Traditionally read before dawn, Matins celebrates the arrival of Christ's light to the World.

The Six Psalms mark the beginning of Matins. The typicon calls for all candles and lights in the church to be extinguished & the Royal Doors closed, signifying the world in spiritual darkness before the coming of Christ. The bell tolls, marking the transition from Vespers to Matins. Church rubrics instruct the reader to read slowly, without haste. Both reader & faithful are to read and hear the words as their direct prayer to God: King David's words are the words of our spirit. This is a time for absolute stillness. There should be no moving about the church. This is one of two times during Matins, the other being the reading of the Gospel, when all must stand. All is dark & motionless, we do not even cross ourselves & bow during the Glory...Alleluia...Glory after the first three Psalms.

Some say the length of the reading of the Six Psalms will be the duration of the Last Judgment. We are to stand with our arms crossed, as if we are in our coffin, contemplating our sins, repenting, and hoping in God's mercy. The first Psalm (3) declares our trust in God amidst a host of spiritual enemies, the demons, who mock us. The second Psalm (37) is our cry of repentance to the Lord. The third Psalm (62) reprises the morning theme of Matins as we rise at dawn to seek after God. The priest exits the Altar to pray for the congregation at this point. The fourth Psalm (87) is the most penitent. The fifth Psalm (102) that follows is the most joyful, praising the Lord; thereby we see joy follows true repentance. The sixth Psalm (142) expresses our hope in the Lord. Note that a verse or two of each Psalm is repeated at its conclusion in order to emphasize and reprise that particular Psalm's theme.



Fr. Daniel
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