

A brief Introduction to The Holy Qurbana

(The Liturgy of St. James)

The Liturgy of St. James originated in Jerusalem and is said to have been composed by St. James the first archbishop of the holy city and the brother of the Lord. It was in extensive use in Syria and in course of time underwent several changes, which were introduced by certain Church Fathers, such as Jacob of Edessa (d. A.D. 708) and a shorter version was prepared by Bar Hebraeus (d. A.D. 1286). It is this shorter version which is currently the basis of the liturgy adopted in the Malankara Orthodox Church.

The Liturgy envisages a cosmic worship, involving the heavenly hosts. All of creation, and the Church constituting of all its believers, those who have departed, the living and those yet to come. The worship has as its model the worship of the God in heaven (see Rev. Chap. 4). And to create this effect, the Church uses physical gestures. (Such as bowing one's head, drawing the sign of the cross. and raising one's hands), the use of incense and the beautifully embroidered altar covering and vestments of the celebrant. Along with its simplicity and brevity. This liturgy remains one of the most beautiful expressions of worship in all of Christianity.

The Liturgy can be divided into four main sections:

- a) The Service of the Word,
- b) The Anaphora Offering.
- c) The Elevation of the Mysteries and the Communion of the Saints and.
- d) The Post-Communion Prayers and Final Blessing.

The liturgy commences with the procession of the celebrant and the acolytes around the altar and the praying of the Trisagion (Holy art Thou. O God!). This is followed by the two readings (from the Acts of the Apostles or the Catholic Epistles standing for the preaching of the gospel to the Jews, and a reading from one of St. Paul's Epistles, symbolising the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles) and the gospel reading (itself indicative of the universal reach of Jesus' preaching). The blessing of the censer (a symbol of our prayers rising as a sweet-smelling offering to God (see Ps. 141:2: Num 16:41-48; Rev 5:8) and the reciting of the Nicene Creed concludes this first section.

The anaphora (=offering) begins with a prayer for and the kiss of peace, the waving of the Sosafo the white embroidered cloth covering the chalice and paten) and focuses on the re-presentation of the main events of the passion of Jesus Christ, especially the institution of the Eucharist and the Epiclesis (the invoking of the Holy Spirit). Subsequently the six diptychs (a diptych means a two-panelled picture, but here stands for the prayers for the departed and the living). These are prayers for the Patriarch and bishops, the leaders of the nation, for the faithful requiring our prayers, the Saints, especially St. Mary, the Apostles and the Martyrs, the fathers of the Church and finally the departed. This brings to a close the second section of the liturgy.

The drawing of the veil for the second time marks the third section of the Liturgy which is centered on the praying of the Lord's Prayer, the elevation of the Mysteries (raising up of the Chalice and Paten) and the prayers for St. Mary, the Saints and the Departed. The last time the veil is drawn symbolises the second coming of Jesus Christ, represented by the celebrant processing to the front of the altar with the Chalice and the Paten. Communion follows and the final prayers and the final blessing brings the liturgy to a close.

There is no private celebration of the Eucharist in the Eastern tradition and so the prayers and hymns are arranged keeping in view the active participation of the congregation. The prayers themselves are oriented to the second coming of Christ and are intended to evoke in the participant a sense of his/her sinful condition and need to provide a reckoning to God for the lapses. The offering of the bread and wine, therefore, are symbols for the best offering--the free and total offering up of his or her own life to Christ. However, there is also the strong emphasis on Jesus' Mercy and grace and appeal is constantly made to Jesus, the Lover of Humankind, to condone human frailty and to endow the believers with the blessing to become a part of the eternal Kingdom of God.

While the liturgy concludes with the blessing to "Depart in Peace!" this injunction is the commencement of the believer's own liturgy or service to others and the world. Having received the necessary provisions for his/her journey, the participant is expected to utilise God's blessings to be a firm witness and to serve his/her brothers and sisters so that all of them can experience the reality of God's Kingdom. The believer thus becomes a priest/ priestess as he / she embarks on his/her personal witness to transform all creation to become an acceptable offering to God.

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