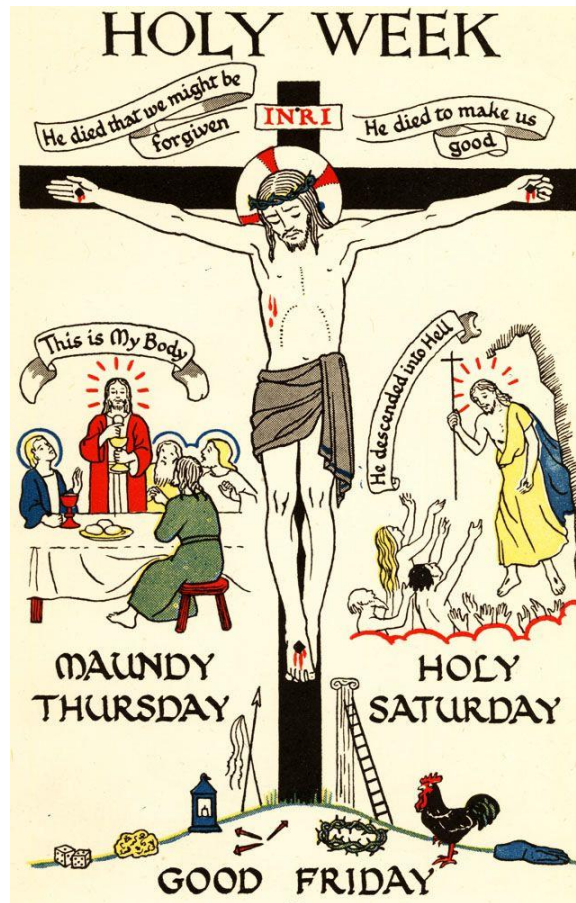


HOLY WEEK PREPARATION AND REFLECTION

In previous years, it has struck me how much is crammed in such a short time frame during Holy Week. Trying to digest it all in the course of 8 days is a bit like trying to get a sip of water from a fire hose. Sure, you might get some water, but you just as easily get blown away in the process.

So let us look ahead just a bit to prepare ourselves that we may savor the deep moments when they each come in due time. This material is offered as a primer to the services of the week and as a reflection to help us journey with Christ in his Passion, Death, and Resurrection.



PALM SUNDAY

Palm Sunday begins with the blessing of palms and our procession into the church. Palms are quite appropriate for the occasion of Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, as they were a sign of victory brought out to welcome the victor.

Those who welcome Jesus see him as a savior but not the one that they are expecting. Many think the Messiah is come to overthrow the Roman oppression and restore the glory of the Temple like unto the days of David and Solomon.

Jesus fails to meet their expectations, and we see the mob turn on the Lord. Those who shouted "Hosanna" now cry out "Crucify him." In the course of our liturgy we see this link as we transition from the Liturgy of the Palms to solemnity of the Passion narrative. Victory seemingly gives way to defeat.

But there is more than meets the eye in the story of Palm Sunday. In Revelation 7:9-10, we hear:

*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and **were holding palm branches in their hands**. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*

The fullness of the Gospel shows us that the triumphant entry foreshadows the ultimate triumph that will occur just one week later in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And just as the palms which are waved have a greater significance than is first imagined, Jesus has indeed come to triumph over the oppressor, overthrowing an even greater enemy than Rome in his victory over sin and death. And he has indeed bestowed a new glory on the chosen people of God, not in the form of a building, but on those who rightly worship God as he makes them a Temple of the Holy Spirit.

But it is not for us to rush through the events of Holy Week on a tear towards Easter, because there is no resurrection without their first being death. So, we slow down that we may see and hear anew the cost of this great victory. We remember once more the fullness of the Passion of our Lord.

Palm Sunday, triumph to tragedy.
Easter Sunday, tragedy to triumph.

HOLY WEEK: MONDAY, TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, TENEBRAE?

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday see us touch base on the events between the Triumphant Entry and the Garden of Gethsemane. It is a time for getting our bearings. Each year we cover the whole of Jesus' life and ministry, 33 years lived out in the space of 1. But during Holy Week, we slow down from the breakneck pace. One week lived out in real time walking day by day, moment by moment.

And then we have the unique service of Tenebrae on Wednesday evening. Tenebrae is rooted in liturgy of the hours, what we would know as the Daily Office. Based on the night and morning offices of Matins and Lauds, the service was celebrated Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. In time, the service was simplified so that the three days services were collapsed into one, and the morning offices were anticipated so that they were observed the evening before.

But the most notable aspect of the service are the visual and auditory aspects. There is a special candelabra, called a 'hearse' which holds 7 or 15 candles. In the course of the service candles are extinguished after Psalms and Canticles. Eventually there is only one candle left on the hearse and all other lights are extinguished in the church.

As the Passion unfolds in Holy Week, it seems to us that darkness is overcoming the light, and even the last candle is taken away and hidden in the darkness just as the light which has come into the world was hidden from view for a brief while.

And there we wait, the passing moments seeming longer than actually are. The silence seems to grow palpable as we begin to wonder, as the disciples wondered, what if this is it? What if there is no more? What if the story ends on Good Friday?

But then suddenly, the silence is shattered. There is an unexpected crash, as if an earthquake has ruptured the fabric of the earth. As if a stone was rolled away from a tomb. As if darkness and death have been conquered as light and life shine forth once more in the world bidding us to go forth by the light of the same.

Is it a bit dramatic? Yes.

*But is there a greater drama than the ultimate triumph of
good over evil, life over death, light over darkness?*

MAUNDY THURSDAY

As we enter the last day of Jesus's life on Maundy Thursday, there are four notable components that make up our observance on that day.

1. Footwashing - Following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, the priest washes the feet of those present. While none must participate, we do well to remember the objections of Peter and to consider what prevents us from receiving this sign of love and service. We learn to serve others by accepting the service which Christ freely offers to us.

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. - John 13:3-5

2. Institution of the Eucharist - We can become accustomed to the regular celebration and reception of the Eucharist given its prominent role in our regular schedule of worship. On Maundy Thursday, we remember the Last Supper of the Lord with his disciples. But like the Footwashing, we do more than remember fondly this great event. We come to the table bidden by the Lord to enter in and participate in it.

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

3. Stripping of the Altar - After Supper, Judas betrayed the Lord. In the hours which follow the disciples flee, Peter denies, and Jesus is abandoned. In time, even his clothes will be taken from him.

As our liturgy draws to a close, we symbolically abandon Christ as we remove the fine appointments which beautify the sanctuary. We strip the altar which is itself the principal symbol of the Lord. And the tabernacle which houses the Blessed Sacrament the rest of the year round is emptied, its door left ajar, and the candle of the presence is extinguished so that we are left with a dark and empty sanctuary save the outline of the cross veiled in black.

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'...Peter declared to him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples. - Matthew 26:31,33-35

4. Vigil Watch - After the Eucharist and before the Stripping of the Altar, we reserve the Sacrament for its use on Good Friday. And as we end the liturgy of Maundy Thursday, we stand on the eve of the Crucifixion. On that night after supper, Jesus went to the garden of Gethsemane and prayed to his Father in heaven. As he returns, he finds the disciples asleep, unaware of the magnitude of what is about to transpire.

We know well what awaits us on Good Friday, and as the Sacrament reposes on the side altar of the church, we are invited to sit vigil with the Lord. We watch, and we wait, mindful of our Lord's question to his sleeping disciples:

So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. - Matthew 26:40-41

GOOD FRIDAY

The Good Friday liturgy begins where Maundy Thursday left off, in silence.

Whereas the blessing and dismissal are conspicuous in their absence Thursday, the opening acclamation is nowhere to be found Friday. This is because the liturgies, though they are separated by a day, are in essence one liturgy spread over three days. What began Thursday continues Friday and concludes with the Great Vigil of Easter. And so we open by moving directly to the collect and lessons which climax in the solemn reading of the Passion.

In response to what we have heard, to the completed work of the cross, we offer a series of solemn collects because it is through the Passion that we have access to such intercessions. We boldly claim that right and use it to intercede for the church, the nations, those in need, those who do not yet know Christ, and finally for ourselves and the faithful departed as the merits of Christ and his completed work are set between us and our sins.

Then, having heard the story of the cross, having called upon the strength and mercy of the cross, we turn our attention now to meditate upon it. The cross is brought forth as we adore the shameful instrument of death which has become the beautiful symbol of our life and our salvation. We glory in the cross.

Which leads us to the altar of the Lord. While we do not celebrate the Great Thanksgiving on this most solemn of occasions, we are not left without the comfort of the Sacrament. Christ, his body broken and blood poured out on the cross, nourishes us by the same. We are fed by the fruit of the Lord's Passion as we depart to await the celebration of his glorious resurrection.

Passion, prayer, and paten.

Christ, cross, and cup.

Good Friday.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

HOLY SATURDAY

The Lord's descent into hell

A reading from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday

"What is happening? Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages. God has died in the flesh, and the underworld has trembled.

Truly he goes to seek out our first parent like a lost sheep; he wishes to visit those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. He goes to free the prisoner Adam and his fellow-prisoner Eve from their pains, he who is God, and Adam's son.

The Lord goes in to them holding his victorious weapon, his cross. When Adam, the first created man, sees him, he strikes his breast in terror and calls out to all: 'My Lord be with you all.' And Christ in reply says to Adam: 'And with your spirit.' And grasping his hand he raises him up, saying: 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light.

'I am your God, who for your sake became your son, who for you and your descendants now speak and command with authority those in prison: Come forth, and those in darkness: Have light, and those who sleep: Rise.

'I command you: Awake, sleeper, I have not made you to be held a prisoner in the underworld. Arise from the dead; I am the life of the dead. Arise, O man, work of my hands, arise, you who were fashioned in my image. Rise, let us go hence; for you in me and I in you, together we are one undivided person.

'For you, I your God became your son; for you, I the Master took on your form; that of slave; for you, I who am above the heavens came on earth and under the earth; for you, man, I became as a man without help, free among the dead; for you, who left a garden, I was handed over to Jews from a garden and crucified in a garden.

'Look at the spittle on my face, which I received because of you, in order to restore you to that first divine inbreathing at creation. See the blows on my cheeks, which I accepted in order to refashion your distorted form to my own image.

'See the scourging of my back, which I accepted in order to disperse the load of your sins which was laid upon your back. See my hands nailed to the tree for a good purpose, for you, who stretched out your hand to the tree for an evil one.

'I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side, for you, who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side healed the pain of your side; my sleep will release you from your sleep in Hades; my sword has checked the sword which was turned against you.

'But arise, let us go hence. The enemy brought you out of the land of paradise; I will reinstate you, no longer in paradise, but on the throne of heaven. I denied you the tree of life, which was a figure, but now I myself am united to you, I who am life. I posted the cherubim to guard you as they would slaves; now I make the cherubim worship you as they would God.

"The cherubim throne has been prepared, the bearers are ready and waiting, the bridal chamber is in order, the food is provided, the everlasting houses and rooms are in readiness; the treasures of good things have been opened; the kingdom of heaven has been prepared before the ages."

THE GREAT VIGIL OF EASTER

The Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom

If any man be devout and love God, let him enjoy this fair and radiant triumphal feast. If any man be a wise servant, let him rejoicing enter into the joy of his Lord. If any have labored long in fasting, let him now receive his recompense. If any have wrought from the first hour, let him today receive his just reward. If any have come at the third hour, let him with thankfulness keep the feast. If any have arrived at the sixth hour, let him have no misgivings; because he shall in nowise be deprived thereof. If any have delayed until the ninth hour, let him draw near, fearing nothing. If any have tarried even until the eleventh hour, let him, also, be not alarmed at his tardiness; for the Lord, who is jealous of his honor, will accept the last even as the first; he gives rest unto him who comes at the eleventh hour, even as unto him who has wrought from the first hour.

And he shows mercy upon the last, and cares for the first; and to the one he gives, and upon the other he bestows gifts. And he both accepts the deeds, and welcomes the intention, and honors the acts and praises the offering. Wherefore, enter you all into the joy of your Lord; and receive your reward, both the first, and likewise the second. You rich and poor together, hold high festival. You sober and you heedless, honor the day. Rejoice today, both you who have fasted and you who have disregarded the fast. The table is full-laden; feast ye all sumptuously. The calf is fatted; let no one go hungry away.

Enjoy ye all the feast of faith: Receive ye all the riches of loving-kindness. let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior's death has set us free. He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it. By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive. He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh. And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry: Hell, said he, 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 slain. It was embittered, for it was overthrown. It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains. It took a body, and met God face to face. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.

O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your 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 the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. To Him be glory and dominion unto ages of ages. Amen.