

Reflection For Holy Week

CHRISTIANS make much of Holy Week. The crucifix is a symbol of sorrow as Holy Week recalls the last days of the life of Our Lord. It is a week of high drama. It begins on a Sunday with a great demonstration of popularity for Christ. People sing, carry palm branches and hail Christ as leader. But by Friday what a change! The same people are demonstrating again with new leaders. The man they honoured on Sunday, they dishonoured on Friday. That die he died. We now reflect on some of the events of this week.

Every day a Holy Thursday: The Upper Room.



THE FIRST HOLY THURSDAY raised two challenges. The first came to Jesus, the second to His Apostles. The challenge to Jesus? He had to go and He wanted to stay. On the morrow He would have to leave the Apostles; it was His Father's will. But never had he loved His favourite friends as dearly as at this supper. How could He possibly leave them?

JESUS SOLUTION, He will go, and He will stay; He will leave us, and He will remain with us. He will take from His disciples, from us, the sensory charm of His presence. No longer will His friends hear the thunder and the music of His voice, sense the fascination of His smile, or be touched by His tears. And yet He will stay, will leave with us the reality, the truth of that presence.

HOW? Jesus took bread, blessed it and gave it to His disciples saying. "Take, eat: this is my Body"; then the cup, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My Blood of the covenant". [Matthew 26: 26-28] In the Eucharist the Jesus of Palestine indeed remains with us – not only a real presence, but the realisation of Jesus' promise some months earlier: "Whoever eats Me will live because of Me" [John 6: 57]

NOW we move to Holy Thursday's second challenge, the challenge to the Apostles. Jesus rose from the table, took off His robe, tied a towel around His waist and washed the feet of the Twelve. Only Peter, as usual, protested. But surely all were surprised, even embarrassed; for it was an act that could not be required of the lowest Jewish slave.



BACK AT THE TABLE, Jesus challenged His disciples: *“You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I ... have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do what I have done to you”*. [John 13: 13-15] **The challenge is to be women and men for others.**

ALL OF WHICH leads neatly to you and me. The same two challenges: Eucharist and foot washing. A subtle peril lurks in daily communion – the peril that haunts almost anything that we experience time and time again – within clergy and laity, in the pulpit or almost any other ministry we find ourselves. Early on sheer delight; with time, mere routine! We must try to recapture every so often the glow that lights up a First Communion, the Communion at an Ordination, the Communion at a Religious Profession.

BUT our Eucharist is not a private party, a ‘Me and Jesus’ experience. The Jesus who told His disciples *“This is my Body which is given for you”* [Luke 22: 19] told the same disciples that they must wash one another’s feet. The same Jesus gives you and me His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, and insists that we be women and men in service to others, loving as He loves. Yes, Communion and compassion go together, not only on Holy Thursday but every day.

The Garden of Gethsemane

BUT HOLY THURSDAY did not end there. When Jesus and His disciples left the Upper Room, their destination was Gethsemane, an olive orchard on the western slope of Jesus’ beloved Mount of Olives: *Gethsemane* for Matthew, Mark and Luke: John calls it a ‘garden’. Joining Jesus in His garden, let’s listen to His prayer, and discover His Fathers’ response.

FIRST, the prayer of Jesus. He had just confessed to Peter, James and John, *“I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me”*. Moving away a piece, He falls prostrate and prays: *“Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what You want”*. [Matthew 26: 38-39]. And a little later, with a slight change in emphasis, *“If this cup cannot pass unless I drink it, Your will be done”*. [v.42] Obviously in this prayer we see Jesus’ total submission to the will of His Father. And yet, more striking to me is how utterly human His prayer reveals Him to be. He is well aware that He is about to be arrested, that cruel death will follow. But for this He took our flesh; for this He lived. This death He predicted time and time again. When Peter protested that nothing like this should happen to His Lord and Master,

Jesus turned on Him almost fiercely, “Get behind me Satan”. And still at this critical hour in Gethsemane’s garden, something deep in His humanity cries out to His Father: “*Don’t let me die!*”.

SECOND, the response to Jesus’ prayer. Only one response is recorded, two verses – which I suspect many of us remember: “*Then an angel appeared to Him and gave Him strength. In His anguish He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground*”. [Luke 22: 43-44]. Hence this episode is referred to as His agony. It is Luke alone who records these words.

Good Friday: for me?

DURING MY TIME as a priest, Good Friday afternoon was often the time to reflect [over a period of time – or during the afternoon liturgy] on the *Seven last “words” of Jesus from the Cross*. Here, I want to reflect on just two monosyllables: “***For Me?***” There will be three stages in it’s development. 1. Jesus was born ***For Me***. 2. Jesus lived for me. 3. Jesus died ***For Me***.



THE FIRST stage we discover in the little Town of Bethlehem. There is a shelter adjacent to a crowded Inn, a young woman gives birth to a male child. The child, soon to be named Jesus, was the unique divine Son of God the Father. The child born “for us” to offer salvation to the whole human race. I urge you however to get used to thinking and saying: “*Jesus was born **for me***”.

SIMILARLY for stage two. In theological theory little Bethlehem could have sufficed for our salvation. But a far-reaching Trinity had much more in mind – not only would Jesus be born as we are born; He would live much as we live. He would walk and talk, smile and weep, eat and drink, tire and sleep. Not because he had to, but because He wanted to share our life as much as possible. “All this”, each one of us can say, “All this *for me*”.

The THIRD STAGE tops all else: Jesus died *for me*. True Jesus died for *all humankind*. Each one of us is as well known to Jesus as was the crucified thief whom He promised from His own cross a special privilege: “*Today you will be*

with me in Paradise". [Luke 23: 43]. He died for all of us, that was the reason He came to this earth. He died not only for His Faithful Apostles but for Judas as well. Not for His mother alone but for the woman who was hustled before Him for adultery. His death on the cross for each one of us, which He had predicted so often, accomplished our redemption. Through the cross we have been "*ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven*".... Yes, He died on the cross for me and for you.

*The Cross is the victory cross – the cross of victory:
Death the prelude to life.*

CHRISTS' FOLLOWERS had not expected the Resurrection. For them all was over when the soldier stuck his spear into Christs side and found Him dead. To them resurrection of a dead man was incredible. Only the fact made them believe. Thomas insisted in putting his had into the wound before he would be convinced. Once they saw it was true, everything fitted into place. All that baffling talk about eternal life... here was the evidence in Christs rising, beyond suffering, beyond death. And that strange talk of destroying the temple and rebuilding it in 3 days ... Christs death also was the death of a system which resides in the Temple. In it's place the new Temple of His Body, the new system, His Church, the body composed of Christ and His followers. All this and much more is lit up on the morning of that glorious Easter Sunday.

SPRING is the hope of the reviving year, and hope is the finest blossom of the resurrection. With Christ risen, we His followers have everything to hope for. Easter not only is the climax of redemption, it is the climax of creation.

WE ARE AN EASTER PEOPLE – AND ALLELUIA IS OUR SONG [St. Augustine]

