

HOMILY PALM/ PASSION SUNDAY YEAR A (Homily 02)

“The Last Temptation and the Temple Veil”

(Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66)

With this celebration of Palm/Passion Sunday, the universal Church around the world begins Holy Week, a week of more intense preparation for and celebration of the central mysteries of Jesus life, death and resurrection. Let us look over the horizon of this special week.

Today, we experience the shift from the joyful welcome of Jesus into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), to his betrayal by the crowds whose faith and commitment to him was only superficial (Passion Sunday). This celebration challenges our own faith. What would we have done had we been there?

Lent ends with Holy Thursday, the day when we celebrate the mass of the Last supper and commemorate the ministerial priesthood, institution of the Eucharist and Christian service symbolized by the washing of feet.

Good Friday is for us a day of fasting and abstaining from meat. Entering more deeply into the mystery of God’s selfless love for us in Jesus Christ, we listen to the Passion, venerate the Cross, and perhaps also walk the Way of Cross.

Holy Saturday is meant to be a participation in the Vigil of Mary, waiting at the foot of the cross. It should be a day of retreat, pondering this great mystery that we are celebrating, and readying ourselves to participate more fully in the great celebration of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

That celebration begins with the Easter Vigil, the greatest feast of the Church year. We review the history of salvation, sing the Exultet, proclaim that Jesus is risen, bless the Easter fire and water, initiate new members of the Church and share in the Bread of Life.

Easter Sunday we reflect on the meaning of the empty tomb and turn our attention to the appearances of Jesus to his friends. This is a time of grieving and mourning the loss of the historical Jesus, and opening ourselves up to receive the Spirit of the Jesus of faith at Pentecost one week after the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

Actually, this special time from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday is known as the Easter Triduum. It is seen as one great liturgical celebration, each event flowing

into and out of the other. That is why it is important for us to participate in every event of the Triduum

At Pentecost, we celebrate the birthday of the Church, the new people of God, and enter into the season of Easter which spreads out over the next 50 days before we return to Ordinary Time.

Two key elements in today's Gospel stand out for us: the last temptation Jesus faced and the tearing of the Temple veil. Both are pregnant with meaning for our lives of faith in following Jesus.

“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” This was the taunt that came from those passing by. The chief priests, scribes and elders also taunted him the same way: “Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.”

This last temptation of Jesus was to use his divine power selfishly, to save himself from suffering and death. It was the temptation to resort to an action that was sensational, spectacular and miraculous. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross, and then we will believe.” The irony is that the very persons who were taunting Jesus with this claim had already witnessed his many miracles yet had refused to believe. Why would one more miracle make a difference? In fact, they had even used the miracles he had performed on the Sabbath days as a pretext to kill him.

The truth of the reign of God which Jesus came to establish must be based on more than miracles. It must be based on a deep personal faith in Jesus as the Son of God, a prayerful intimate relationship with him, and a commitment to love as he loved.

That kind of faith, in fact, is tested and displayed in what could be called the apparent absence of God, which is what Jesus experienced on the cross as he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” That is actually the precise opposite of a miracle, and a more reliable proof of one's faith.

The last temptation that Jesus faced, then, was to do something spectacular to prove that he was Son of God. But Jesus, relying on his relationship of love and fidelity to the Father, resisted that last temptation. He stayed true to his mission to reveal to us the true nature of God which is a love that suffers, sacrifices and above all forgives.

That manifestation of true faith as fidelity to love despite the apparent absence of God was actually revealed by the lack of a miracle. Can we learn a lesson from this for ourselves? It is this deep faith to accept the cross that brings about the new life of Easter, symbolized by the tearing of the Temple veil.

At the moment of the death of Jesus, the Temple curtain was split from top to bottom. The ripping of this curtain effectively demolishes the Temple as the site of God's presence and is a foretelling of the Temple's destruction. With his death, the judgment begins, as do the eschatological events themselves. The tombs that open anticipate the tomb that Jesus will be buried in.

This is theology in narrative form, and not bare historical reporting, pointing out that already in the death of Jesus the eon-changing, dead-raising power of God breaks in. The Roman execution squad is converted by seeing these events and becomes a pre-figuration of the Gentiles who will be converted and form a large element of Matthew's own church. Christians saw in the tearing of the veil the abrogation of the Mosaic cult and the way opened up by Christ into the messianic sanctuary.

There is a miracle after all, but not the sensational one that the Jewish authorities were demanding. This miracle of the tearing of the Temple veil held deep meaning. The old Temple religious system which separated people from God as much as it led them to God was proven inadequate, torn into pieces, about to be destroyed. Faith in Jesus as God present in this world, and not as a miracle worker, was the new criteria for a true son and daughter of Abraham.

So, this week is a time of deep renewal for us; to follow Jesus; to grow in faith; to choose his way of love, of life, so that when Easter comes, we will have already experienced new life within us.