Palm Sunday Homily 2020

Today we begin our journey through Holy Week, following Jesus spiritually, as the Evangelists tell of the events.

We do this personally as Christians, and also liturgically as the Church.

We begin in festive mood with the blessing and carrying of Palms in procession, rather restricted this year of course, and then we enter into the Passion according to Matthew, the longest of the Passion Narratives.

The Passion according to Mark is recited on Tuesday, according to Luke on Wednesday and according to John on Good Friday.

Maundy Thursday is the Mass of the Lord’s Supper, at the end of which the Blessed Sacrament, which is the presence of Christ with us, is ceremonially carried to the ‘Altar of Repose’ accompanied to the hymn Pange Lingua (Of the glorious Body telling) and venerated.

The Sacrament will be returned to the Altar on Good Friday and consumed by the Celebrant, as there can be no celebration of the Eucharist on that day.

In monastic houses and cathedrals, the superior or bishop then washed the feet of chosen people. Her Majesty the Queen does the same but substitutes Maundy coins for foot-washing.

The Altar is then stripped, accompanied by the recitation of Psalm 22.

Then on Good Friday the Mass of the Pre-sanctified begins with the celebrant prostrating himself, then two ancient scriptural prophecies are recited before the Passion according to John.

Then nine very ancient Collects are recited, each with a particular introduction, praying in order for different conditions of people.

The veiled Cross is then progressively revealed and set down so that all can come and venerate it with a kiss.

Then the Reproaches are sung, a very ancient set of accusations that Christ makes to his people for what they have done to him, which ends in the 6th Century hymn Pange Lingua (Sing my tongue, the glorious battle).

Then the sacramental presence of Christ is brought, with ceremony, to the Altar while the hymn Vexilla Regis (The royal banners forward go) is sung.

The priest then continues the truncated Liturgy adding the sacrament of the Body of Christ to un-consecrated wine in the chalice, thus consecrating it. The day is a strict fast.

The ceremonies of the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, the most special day for the Church are really impossible to perform at home.

The Anglican and Catholic traditions bear witness to the ancient liturgical practice of the Church, that worship is an action, it is seen and visual, it impacts all the senses, it involves moving our bodies into different positions. It is also heard and experienced. It is not the private reflections of the individual.

The last three days of Holy Week, the Triduum Sanctum, are the most sacred for us as they recall the Institution of the Eucharist, the suffering and death of our Lord and then the Transitus – this is sometimes called the Harrowing of Hell, the moment that Christ descended to the Dead to redeem the souls caught there by the devil and to destroy his kingdom which is death. This is often overlooked but it is attested to by St. Peter who wrote:

*It was then that he went and preached to the imprisoned spirits who were once disobedient* and again*:*

*For that was why the good news was told to the dead also, that after they have been judged in the body, as men are judged, they might live in the spirit as God lives.*

St. Matthew also writes about this:

*The Temple curtain was torn in two from the top to the bottom, the earth shook, and the rocks were split, the tombs opened and the bodies of many of God’s people who had fallen asleep, rose. And they, leaving their tombs went, after the resurrection of Jesus, into the Holy City and appeared unto many people.*

St. John Chrysostom put it like this:

*Hades is angry because it seized a body, and lo! It discovered God!*

This is what we look forward to celebrating once we have spiritually associated ourselves with the agonies the Lord suffered. Amen.

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