

HOLY WEEK

This week was known in ancient times as The Great Week. During Holy Week the Passion narrative comes to life as though it were being enacted before our very eyes. Step by step we follow the path which Christ trod during the last days of His mortal life.

PALM SUNDAY

Jesus is presented as the Messiah King entering the Holy City - not as a warrior king with a great army, but as a humble and gentle Messiah - "Humble and riding on an ass". (Zachariah 9:9). His Kingdom is not of this world. The ancients believed that if a King rode on a donkey to another King he was a harbinger of peace but if he rode on a horse he was going to war. Jesus brings us a 'peace which the world cannot give'. The donkey is a beast of burden. God burdened His Son Jesus with the sins of all mankind. "Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried" (Isaiah). The procession of palms is characterised by joy. Christ is our King - Hence the Red Vestments. The procession is not just pageantry. We join the procession with faith and devotion. Christ is our King - He reigns over us with love. We follow Him along the Royal Road of the Cross. We go out to meet and welcome Christ in a special way. The Victory of Easter is foreshadowed; the palm an emblem of that Victory. We don't just look back at a past event but pray "that we may reach one day the happiness of the New and Eternal Jerusalem".

The first reading is the "Story of the Suffering Servant" in Isaiah 50:4-7. His sufferings prefigure those of Christ. The humility of Christ in accepting insult and derision is brought out in both 1st and 2nd Readings. The second Reading Philippians 2:6-11 speaks about the "self-emptying" (kenosis) of Christ. He assumed the condition of a slave. The Gospel is an account of the Passion (Mt, Mk, or Luke). It never fails to make a deep impression. The figure of Christ towers above His accusers and persecutors. We can enter into the story and well imagine that we are witnessing the event for ourselves. On SPY WEDNESDAY as it is called, the betrayal of Judas is introduced. Judas offers to betray Him for 30 pieces of silver. The hour of darkness is at hand.

THE EASTER TRIDUUM

The Ester Triduum is the culmination of the entire Liturgical Year. It is celebrated as one feast - Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. It begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper and reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil. Lent ends on Holy Thursday morning.

HOLY THURSDAY

In ancient times public penitents were reconciled with the Church on this day. They were publicly absolved of their sins by the Bishop so they could fully celebrate the Pasch. Two Masses are celebrated on this day - One in the Cathedral Church of the Diocese and the other the Evening Mass of The Lords Supper in Parish Churches.

THE CHRISM MASS

The Chrism Mass takes place in the morning at the Cathedral where all the Priests of the Diocese are gathered round their Bishop. The Holy Oils which will be used throughout the year for Baptism, Confirmation and Anointing of the Sick are consecrated at this Mass. Each parish receives its own supply. The Bishop celebrating Mass with his Priests is a sign of unity and fellowship. The faithful also attend in large numbers. All the sacraments, especially those at which oil is used have a connection with Easter. Priests, on this day celebrate the gift of their Priesthood and renew their commitment to God. They are anointed with the Power of the Spirit to bring Good News to the poor. To Priests alone is the power given to remit sins and change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. On this day the Bishop asks the laity to pray for him and his Priests. The oils blessed are: Chrism, (used at Baptism, Confirmation and Ordination) oil of Catechumens :(used at Baptism), and oil of the Sick and dying.

THE MASS OF THE LORDS SUPPER

At this Mass we commemorate the LAST SUPPER and the institution of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is meant to perpetuate the Sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until He should come again. It is a sacrament of love and a sign of unity. It was in the context of a family meal in which Christ instituted the Eucharist. A spirit of joy characterises the Mass - the joy of total self-sacrifice. The GLORIA, silent during Lent is sung accompanied by bells. The Mass anticipates His self oblation on Good Friday. In the first Reading we see that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament figures, that He

was the True Lamb, slain in sacrifice, whose blood would save His people. The second Reading gives us St.Paul's account of the Last Supper - 1Cor 11:23-26. The Gospel Jn 13: 1-15 describes the washing of the Disciples feet. It embodies the theme of fraternal love and service. The words of the Gospel are enforced by symbolic action, Jesus asks the Apostles to copy what He has done - humble service to one another. Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you". During the Mass 12 people come forward to have their feet washed. Christ is the servant "par excellence" - He gave His life as a ransom for many. After Mass, the Priest accompanied by ministers carries the Blessed Sacrament to the altar of Repose. The faithful are encouraged to continue in adoration until midnight. Here, we join our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane. We keep watch with Him in prayer. The Sanctuary is now left completely bare.

GOOD FRIDAY

Good Friday is a day of intense sorrow. Our sins have been the cause of His death. The celebration takes place about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Priest and ministers approach the altar in silence and prostrate themselves for a few moments. Then there is an opening prayer followed by the Liturgy of the Word. The 1st Reading (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) presents us with a suffering servant. He is seen as prefiguring Christ. Christ was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief and humiliation. In the 2nd Reading from Hebrews, Christ is seen in a Priestly role as

reconciling men to God by the sacrifice of His own life. Christ has experienced our human lot in every way - He can therefore sympathise with us in our sorrow and wretchedness.

THE GOSPEL

John views the Passion of Jesus more profoundly than the other evangelists - in the light of the Resurrection. In itself, the Cross is something cruel and barbarous but in John it is seen as an object of Veneration. For St. John, the Cross is a kind of throne. It is Christ, not the persecutors who are in control of the situation. Jesus freely goes to His execution. In John, Jesus appears in a threefold role as King, Judge and Saviour. The crowning with thorns only serves to underline His Kingship. So also it is Jesus, not Pilate, who is seen as judge. Jesus gathers His Church round the Cross as represented by the Robe, and Mary is given to us as Our Mother.

GENERAL INTERCESSIONS

This prayer is truly universal - it includes all categories of people. Christian people everywhere are gathered round the Cross of Christ. His prayer is extended to all because His love included everyone. The Cross in Christian tradition is a symbol of universality: its four corners point to the four corners of the world. Prayers include those of the Jewish people, those who do not believe in Christ, and those that do not believe in God. Christians form only a small part of the world's population. The Church is indeed a "little flock" - the summons to preach the Gospel is urgent. One of the great problems of today is atheism. The Pope has recently called for prayers for

the re-evangelisation of Europe. Last of all the Church prays for the sick, dying, travellers and prisoners.

THE ADORATION OF THE CROSS

The Mass is not said on Good Friday. Today, the Church's gaze is fixed on Calvary where Christ offered His life for our salvation. Standing at the altar, or as he processes up the church, the Priest uncovers the upper part of the Cross and sings, "Behold the wood of the Cross on which hung the salvation of the world". The people respond, "Come let us adore". This is sung three times as each section of the Cross is unveiled. The Cross is now placed in a position at the entrance to the Sanctuary so that all the people can venerate it by kissing it or genuflecting before it. As the people do this, the Reproaches are sung. The custom of kissing the Cross goes back to the fourth century. In the "reproaches" Christ is reproaching His people for their ingratitude - "My people, what have I done to you?" The choir may also sing the "*Pange Lingua*". This hymn has been likened to a victory march - Christ's victory over SATAN. The Cross is a stepping stone to glory (St.Leo) "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His Glory" (Gospel)

HOLY COMMUNION

"Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we are proclaiming His death" (1Cor 11:25-26). Today we are united with Christ in a special way because He died for love of us. The Liturgy comes to an abrupt end.

The Priest departs in silence. The Church keeps vigil by the tomb of the Lord. On no other day of the year are our Churches so austere in appearance. The Tabernacle is empty

and the Sanctuary devoid of flowers. Only the Crucifix remains on the Alter.

HOLY SATURDAY

This is a day of quiet waiting for the Resurrection. There is still sorrow even if it lacks the intensity of the previous day. "Today there is a great silence on Earth because the King sleeps". On the first Holy Saturday all seemed lost. The disciples were shattered. Only Mary kept faith and awaited the Resurrection of her son. That is why every Saturday of the year is devoted to Our Lady. Christ has died, but His death is like a sleep on which He will awake on Easter morning. Christ has entered the abode of the dead. In Baptism, St. Paul reminds us that we went into the tomb with Jesus and joined Him in death so that as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might live a new life.

THE EASTER VIGIL

With the approach of nightfall we have arrived at the heart of the Holy Week celebrations. St. Augustine describes this night as "The Mother of all Vigils". For Christians of antiquity, Easter was "The Feast of all Feasts". This is the Paschal Feast which includes all the other Christian mysteries. The name Pasch (Passover) is of Hebrew origin.

The Jewish Passover celebrated the deliverance of the Israelites from the oppression of Pharaoh. The destroying angel passed over the houses of the Israelites which were

sprinkled with the blood of the Paschal Lamb. (READ EXODUS CHAPTER 12)

This feast contained all the memory of all God's wonderful deeds in the course of their history - the giving of the covenant on Sinai, the wonders of the Exodus and the final entry into the Promised Land. It was not just a memorial of a past event but those who celebrated it felt themselves caught up and made sharers in the experience of their forefathers.

The Christian Pasch: It was at the same time in the year of the Jewish Pasch, that the Passover of Jesus from death to Life took place. Christ is our New Passover. He is the new Moses leading the people from the slavery of sin to freedom of the Promised Land of Heaven.

The Israelites ate Manna - the New Manna is Christ Himself. He gives us strength. He is the fountain of Living Water. He is the "bronze serpent" and all who look on Him with faith will be saved. According to John, it is at the hour of the evening sacrifice, when the Paschal Lambs were being slain in the Temple, that Jesus was crucified. Jesus our Paschal Lamb is sacrificed.

SERVICE OF LIGHT

Jesus is the Light of the World. By His death and Resurrection, the powers of darkness are overcome. The service begins outside the Church where a large fire is prepared. The fire is blessed and a large Paschal Candle is lit from it. The Candle represents the Risen Christ. The fire represents a new beginning for humanity and hope for the World. The Priest cuts a cross in the wax candle with a stylus.

Then he traces the Greek letter ALPHA above the cross and OMEGA below. Between the horns of the cross, the numerals of the current year are inscribed. (This means that Christ is King of all ages). The Priest says,

"Christ yesterday and today,
The beginning and the end,
Alpha and Omega,
All times belong to Him
And all ages
To Him be glory and power
Forever and ever, Amen.

Five grains of incense are now inserted in the Candle representing the five wounds of Christ, and a prayer is said. With the lighted Candle carried in front everyone enters the darkened Church. Three times "The Light of Christ" is sung. The people respond "Thanks be to God". The people's candles are now lit from the flame of the Paschal Candle. This conveys the idea that the Light is communicated to others. This happens when people respond to the Gospel in faith and are baptised. The Candle is now placed on its high perch in the Sanctuary. The ancient Christian Hymn the "EXULTET" is now sung. It is a Hymn of praise and joy to the Risen Christ.

LITURGY OF THE WORD

After the "*Exultet*" the people put out their candles and sit down for the Reading, nine in all. For pastoral reasons, the number of readings may sometimes be reduced. The whole atmosphere in which the Readings are carried out should be relaxed and unhurried. Good readers make Scriptural text come alive. In a true sense the Readings on this Holy Night set before us is a whole synopsis of salvation history. In the Old Testament it finds realization.

FIRST READING: Gen 1:1-2:2.

This is the account of creation. There is a connection between the first creation in Genesis and the New Creation which comes about at Baptism. In the Baptismal ceremony the Priest addresses the newly baptised and says, "You have become a new creation". The first creation was disfigured by the sin of Adam. But Christ is the new Adam who restores all things. As we are baptised into his death, we are born anew and become heirs to the New Paradise (Heaven), the First Paradise being forfeited by Adam. In the Creation account, the Spirit of God which "hovered over the waters" is the same Holy Spirit who sanctifies the waters of Baptism. The Creation of Light also suggests Baptism which is the Sacrament of Enlightenment. Man was made in "God's image and likeness". Through faith and Baptism we are renewed in "the image of our Maker". (Col:3:10) The prayer after the Reading sums up the theme.

SECOND READING (Gen 22:1-18)

Abraham is known as our Father in Faith. In obedience to the Lord, he was prepared to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At the last moment the Angel stops him and a ram is sacrificed instead. Abraham's son is saved but "God did not spare His own son but gave him up to benefit us all". Abraham prefigures Christ who was obedient unto death. Isaac is also a "type of Christ" he is the "innocent lamb" who allows himself to be sacrificed. As a reward, Abraham was promised that his descendants would outnumber the stars. We are his descendants in Faith.

THIRD READING

This Reading is obligatory. It describes the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites. This was an event of decisive importance for them - a breakthrough from slavery to freedom. It symbolises the victory of Christ over the powers of evil. Like the Israelites of Old, the newly baptised pass through the waters of the Red Sea. They leave behind them the world of darkness - they set their sights on the Promised Land of Heaven. Christ is the New Moses. The Responsorial Psalm, following the Reading is in the form of a victory song.

THE EASTER ALLELUIA

This acclamation makes its dramatic return with full gusto after the season of Lent, during which it was muted. This Hebrew word like none other is most characteristic of the Easter season. It is a loud acclamation of praise, joy and victory to the Risen Christ, as St. Augustine says, "It anticipates the Heavenly Liturgy". It heralds the Gospel of the Resurrection. It is the response to the psalm (117)

THE GOSPEL

This Gospel is the most joyous of the whole year. It describes the events of Easter morning. The Angel said to the women, "He is not here, He has risen". This great event is the foundation of the Christian Faith.

THE BAPTISMAL LITURGY

From as early as the second century the baptism of adult Catechumens was linked with Easter. The Priest invites the congregation to pray for the adult converts if there are any. The Litany of the Saints is sung. We invoke their Heavenly

assistance. The water to be used is blessed by a beautiful prayer which dates back to the sixth century. The Baptismal Font is a "tomb" in which we are buried to sin. It is also "a womb" from which we are reborn as children of God. The imagery of water in the Old and New Testament is brought out in the prayer of blessing. The Holy Spirit is evoked by lowering the Paschal Candle into the water. After renouncing Satan and professing their faith, the candidates are baptised. The rest of the congregation now renew their Baptismal Vows while holding lighted candles. We have been preparing for this moment throughout the period of Lent. The grace of Easter is a grace of a faith newly found. The priest then sprinkles the people with Holy Water - again reminding them of their Baptism.

THE EUCHARISTIC LITURGY

If there are any newly baptised, they bring bread and wine to the altar. This will be the Mass of their First Communion. The Eucharist is the final Easter sacrament and completes Christian initiation. Through this Eucharist we are united more closely with the Risen Christ who has died for love of us. We also look forward to His coming in Glory. As Christians we have the privilege of spreading God's love into the World.

MARY AND THE RESURRECTION

According to ancient belief, Jesus first appeared to Mary, His Mother, after His Resurrection. In some Monasteries, at the conclusion of the Easter Vigil Mass, as the Monks file out of the Church, they stop before an Icon of Mary and chant the "*Regina Coeli*". This Hymn replaces the Angelus during the Easter Season.

