

PASSION SUNDAY

13th March 2016

With your indulgence, dear friends, I thought it might be justified to depart from the usual custom of explaining the day's Gospel in order to say a few words about the sacred season we are about to celebrate. St. Paul in today's Epistle tells us, "Christ, being come an high priest of the good things to come ... by his own blood, entered once into the [Holy of] holies, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11-12). If we think of the liturgical year as a sort of Temple, we also are at the threshold of the holy place. In the seasons of Septuagesima and Lent we cross through the outer courtyards, and the veils on all the statues now tell us that another threshold has been crossed. The second half of Passiontide is Holy Week itself, which culminating in the Sacred Triduum, brings us to the inner sanctum of the liturgical year. As you know, the ceremonies of these days – so archaic and so strange they seem – make present to us the graces won by Our Lord at each stage of the mystery of the Redemption, that great work by which God-made-man offered himself to the Father in order to restore our fallen race to God's friendship.

Especially at a holy time like this, the Church asks her ministers to practice what is called *mystagogy*: an unusual word which simply means explaining the meaning of the Church's ceremonies. Many of the oldest sermons we have from the Church Fathers – men like St. Ambrose of Milan or St. Cyril of Jerusalem – are mystagogical talks, explaining to new converts the meaning of the ceremonies in which they are now able to take part.

Holy Week, as you know, will begin next Sunday, with the celebration of Palm Sunday. This day of course celebrates the triumphant entrance of Our Lord into Jerusalem at the beginning of that week which was to be consummated in his death and resurrection. We have an echo of Palm Sunday at every Mass, just before the consecration when we make our own the cry of the crowds: *Benedictus qui venit*, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Perhaps it would also be useful to remind ourselves as we sing these words that the same mouths who proclaimed these words on the first Palm Sunday also cried out on the first Good Friday, "Crucify him, crucify him!" And so we should examine our own consciences: are we fair-weather Christians, or are there still aspects of our own life which crucify the Lord? Our Lord's Palm Sunday was on the 10th day of the holy Jewish month of Nisan: this was the day when the paschal lambs who were to be slaughtered four days later were brought into the holy city.

The best known part of Palm Sunday, of course, is the blessing and procession with palms. When we come to the church door – or while we wait in the porch if it is raining – we sing the lovely hymn *Gloria Laus*, "Glory, praise and

honour to thee Redeemer King.” It was composed by the holy bishop St. Theodulph while he was unjustly imprisoned. Then, once the subdeacon taps on the door with the foot of the cross, the doors open and we enter the church. This ceremony reminds us that the gates of heaven, closed by sin, could only be opened by the cross of Christ.

In English, each day of Holy Week has its own traditional, quaint name. There is Fig Monday, when Our Lord cursed the barren fig tree; Temple Tuesday, the date of a final altercation between Our Lord and his enemies in the Temple; Spy Wednesday, when Judas arranged his evil commerce with the Jewish leaders. Then begins the Sacred Triduum, with the all-holy days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday.

One of the most distinct ceremonies of Holy Week is *Tenebrae*, the name given to the office of Matins and Lauds for these three days. Matins and Lauds are the midnight and dawn prayer of the Church, generally anticipated to the preceding evening during the Triduum. After each of 14 psalms is sung, a candle is extinguished from the large triangular candlestick, called the *Tenebrae Hearse*, recalling the deaths of the 14 just men from Abel to Zachary killed by their brethren. After the nine psalms of Matins and the five psalms of Lauds, therefore, only one of the fifteen candle remains. The Lamentations of the Prophet Jeremiah are sung to a hauntingly beautiful tone. The service derives its name, meaning “darkness” in Latin, from the fact that the church is progressively left in darkness as the candles are extinguished. At the end of the ceremony the remaining candle is hidden behind the altar while the singers bang on the benches with their choirbooks, representing the tremors which shook the earth at Our Lord’s death. The candle is then exposed once again, with its flickering light shining in the darkened church as a symbol of Christ’s Resurrection.

Maundy Thursday, of course, commemorates above all the institution of the Blessed Eucharist. The Mass on this day has a mix of joy and foreboding sorrow: and these must indeed have been the sentiments filling Our Lord’s heart on this day. At the *Gloria* all the bells are rung, and then they are silenced till the Easter Vigil, giving rise to the old-fashioned children’s legend that the bells “fly to Rome” until Easter. The kiss of peace is not given on this day, as the Church recoils in horror from employing this gesture of friendship which Judas used to betray his Master. The Collect of today’s Mass brings home to us the drama, the mystery, the only two possible outcomes of our own relationship with Christ: “O God, from whom Judas received the punishment of his guilt and the thief the reward of his confession, grant us the effect of thy clemency.” That strange word *Maundy* comes from the Latin word for commandment, *mandatum*, because Our Lord gave his new commandment of

brotherly love at the Last Supper. The altar is stripped after Mass, in a ceremony which naturally recalls the stripping of Our Lord.

Good Friday, with its black vestments and disconcerting silence, is the day when the world stands still at the death of the Redeemer. In England, the ceremony of venerating the cross is called the “creeping to the cross,” and we genuflect three times on our way to kiss the cross, the sign of our redemption. The priest and servers even remove their shoes to do so, like Moses when he stood on holy ground in the Book of Exodus. The world washed in the blood of Christ has become holy ground. The Church then prays for every class of person – for those inside and outside the Church, for the hierarchy and the laity, for heretics, pagans and Jews – that all might be saved by the blood of Christ. On this one day of the year, the divine sacrifice is not offered: in the rite called the Mass of the Presanctified the priest carries the additional host he had consecrated the day before back to the high altar and then consumes it.

Holy Saturday, with its mixture of triumph and mournful waiting, reminds us that already at the moment of his death, Our Lord’s soul went triumphantly to limbo: the mystery which medieval artists loved to depict as the harrowing of hell. Fire is lit outside the Church doors, and then there is the whole rite of lighting the Paschal Candle. Traditionally there was a very beautiful ceremony, unfortunately discontinued some decades ago, of processing into the church with a triple-branched candle, which of course, represents the Trinity: each of the three divine Persons bears the light of the divinity. Inside the Church the Easter Candle would be lit from the second candle, which of course represents the Incarnation: the second person of the Trinity takes on a human nature: the wax of the candle represents our Lord’s human body and the wick is his soul; the flame, of course, is his divinity. The five grains of incense nailed into the candle figure his Passion. Then we listen to a series of Old Testament prophecies, reminding us of the long series of promises that God is about to fulfil. In ancient Christian Rome, this part of the Easter Vigil filled a large part of the night, as the 12 prophecies were sung in both Latin and Greek, while the catechumens about to be baptised received their final preparations. When the priest blesses the font by plunging in the Paschal Candle and mixing in the holy oils, he recites a prayer which refers to the font as the womb of our Mother the Church. From this font, the catechumens are about to be born again to new life. Then the priest and ministers will process to the altar for Mass, clothed now in the white vestments of new life, and as the bells return during the *Gloria*, all the sacred images are uncovered. Lent is over! Before the Gospel, the Alleluia, the song sung by the saints in heaven, is solemnly announced for the first time in two months. Our exile is now over: Christ has brought us into the promised land.