

Holy Week Reflections 2017

Chrism Mass

On Tuesday of Holy Week we celebrate the Chrism Mass. It is a wonderful occasion as people from around the Palmerston North Diocese gather, around their bishop, to acknowledge God's presence, in our midst, through the sacraments. With the blessing of the oils for the coming year we celebrate, in advance, how God is at work in the lives of those who will receive those sacraments. In many ways, however, the most important sacramental sign is the Church itself. *Lumen Gentium*, from Vatican II, states: "the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG, 1) We will be, in microcosm, the wider reality of the Universal Church linked with all the other dioceses around the world including Pope Francis and the diocese of Rome. This gives us courage in continuing to live out the mission of the Church even as we face the contrary currents of secularism and persecutions of different sorts. Many people, especially in the mass media, strive to silence the voice of the Church through mockery, blasphemy or, as in the Middle East, martyrdom. In New Zealand, the greatest threats to the Church are relativism, indifference and materialism. These insidious toxins threaten the living faith we have received and are commissioned to pass on to others. By gathering as one we are edified and strengthened to stay true to what we have been given: "Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised ... But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." (Heb 10: 36, 39)

Holy Thursday

It always amazes me how the Gospel of John does not have an Institution Narrative. Surely, you would think, for the sake of completeness, that this gospel would have an account of the Eucharist. Yet, what we are given is the washing of the feet and the "farewell discourses." John may well respond to such a critique asking why the disciples left out the washing of the feet! John would also point to the fact that he uses the term for Eucharist in the feeding of the five thousand (Jn 6: 11) and follows this with the Bread of Life discourse. The feeding reference was so important that the early Christian document *The Didache*, most likely dating from the 1st Century, used it in its Eucharistic Prayer: "Over the broken bread say: "we give you thanks, Father, for the life and the knowledge which you have revealed to us through Jesus your servant. To you be glory for ever. As this broken bread scattered on the mountains was gathered and became one, so too, may your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. For glory and power are yours through Jesus Christ for ever". From this we can understand that the act of washing feet, distributing food and Eucharist are all interlinked - service, charity and sacrifice. Pope St John Paul II wrote in his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis*, from 1979: "It (the Eucharist) is at one and the same time a Sacrifice-Sacrament, a Communion-Sacrament, and a Presence-Sacrament." (RH, 20) Hence, it is difficult to sum up the mystery of the Eucharist in any single homily, lecture or blog post. Rather, it must be prayed, received and lived just like the washing of the feet.

Good Friday

On Palm Sunday, we listened to the Passion reading from one of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark or Luke) and today we hear the Passion according to John. The Church places such emphasis on the Passion of Christ that it desires us to hear two versions of it every year. Maybe, with some justification, the Church was sceptical that all Catholics would make it to all the ceremonies and so decided to maximise the possibilities of getting to hear the story at least once! In any event, the story of the last days of Jesus' life is pivotal to the Christian faith. What they show is that Jesus knew that the Jewish authorities wanted to kill him and yet he stayed in Jerusalem anyway; with that knowledge he chose to communicate to his disciples the meaning of his death; this meaning was to be perpetuated and re-lived by obeying his instructions at the Last Supper; as the innocent Lamb of God he refused to defend himself in the presence of his accusers who had to testify falsely; despite his innocence he was unjustly convicted by the Romans and sentenced to death; this death took the form of crucifixion between two other criminals; Jesus truly died and was placed in a tomb; when his disciples came to the tomb on Easter morning it was empty.

Later, a writer summed up the significance of the Passion in these words: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." (Heb 5: 7-10)

Good Friday (cont)

The execution on the Cross was not seen as a futile death of a slave or criminal rather: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Heb 10: 12-14) What does this mean for us today?: "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he has opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb 10: 19-25)

Holy Saturday

A great silence descends on the Church. No sacraments, unless in cases of necessity eg. in danger of death, are to be celebrated on Holy Saturday. How often do we get inquiries about getting married on the Saturday before Easter Sunday? No, the Church rests, waits and anticipates as the disciples did all those centuries ago. Yet, for them, there was no hope only bitterness and recriminations. What would they do with their lives now - those who had left everything to follow Jesus? Sometimes our lives, too, are stripped bare. We descend into the tomb of loneliness, failure and futility. We have been betrayed by others or even inflicted the damage on ourselves through our own stupidity, sinfulness or selfishness. Abandoned by friends and relatives all we have is silence. The great spiritual writers tell us that in the darkness that God is closer to us than ever. We should never doubt that God is there for us even when we have had cause to cry out in anguish: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mtt 27: 46) After all, St Paul reassures us: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. " (Rom 8: 37-39)

Easter Sunday

"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come see the place where he lay." (Mtt 28: 5-6) Fear turns to amazement and despair to joy! On this happiest of days we are heirs to both the promise and the mission given to the disciples of Jesus. Just as Jesus died for them he dies for us; as he rose for them he is risen for us. The only reason the disciples, who were all practising, monotheistic Jews, could proclaim Jesus to be the Son of God was because he did what only God could do. John starts his gospel speaking of the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word ..." (Jn 1: 1). That was when the spirit hovered over the waters (Gen 1: 2). Throughout his ministry Jesus worked seven signs to reveal the work of God who created the world in seven days. Jesus brings this creation to completion from the Cross: "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (Jn 19: 30) In the Resurrection, therefore, he shows forth an eighth sign and a new creation. It is the eighth day - the Lord's Day. Again, the Spirit is poured out, this time upon the disciples who are commissioned to take this new reality, unconstrained by fear of sin and death, to a world in desperate need of the Good News. "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they are retained'. " (Jn 20: 21-23) For the Jews it was only God could forgive sins: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2: 7) Now, with the gift of the Spirit, the disciples can do what previously only God could do. In other words, we share already in the resurrection! The Church continues the mission of the risen Christ and we are the heirs to his risen power. Let us use this as we journey throughout Eastertide to bring God's forgiveness to those we meet.