

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

&

HOLY WEEK

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JESUS ENTERING US

A reflection by Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO

“The great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches from palm trees and went out to meet him shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’ Jesus is the model for all human persons, the universal human being, as it were. Jesus shows us the enormous potentialities hidden within us. By letting God enter our lives and very selves we make it possible for them to be realized. Jesus is coming to us and not just to an ancient city.

According to Paul’s great hymn to God’s humility, the divine Person of the Word, source of everything that exists, didn’t cling to the divine dignity or condition or prerogatives, but threw them all away. It is as though God had a need not to act like God.

In creating, God, in a sense, dies. God is not alone but completely involved in the evolution of creatures. God makes them so lovable! So Christ emptied himself of the divine power that could have protected him and instead opened himself in complete vulnerability. Think of his stretching out his arms on the cross to embrace all human suffering.

In the most real sense, we too are the body of God. We are a “new humanity” in which the Word becomes flesh. We too can be in the service of the Divine Word. God experiences human life through our senses, our emotions, our thoughts. Each of us gives the eternal Word a new way in which to disclose infinite potentiality.

God knows a human self from inside and experienced the human condition in all its ramifications. We are incorporated into this new creation that Christ brings to the world and so to experience the Father’s infinite concern. God transcends suffering and joy but manifests himself in both and Jesus wants us to experience God as He does. We leave behind every false self and become a new self.

Christ on the donkey is riding to his death. This reveals the heart of God once and for all and in such a way that no one can every doubt God’s infinite mercy unless by doubting that God has become human in Christ. At the Eucharist we hear the words: “This is my Body”. The power of that utterance extends to each of us. Christ enters into us and awakens and celebrates his great sacrifice, saying to each of us: “You are my body. You are my blood.” It is a question of our cooperating in these words coming true, more and more, day by day. Do we want Christ to enter into us? Do we want whatever that will mean—for us and for the entire human world?

THE CALL TO SHARE JESUS' PASSION

A reflection by Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO

“Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.” The dinner at Bethany was given at a time when the authorities were actively plotting Jesus’ destruction.

Everyone but Martha and Mary were reclining at the table when Mary walked in—the one whom everyone knew loved Jesus so deeply. She was carrying an alabaster jar in which there was a pound of extremely expensive perfume. We are told it was worth as much as an ordinary laborer could hope to earn in a year. She entered the room carrying the jar, came to Jesus, and, suddenly without a word, smashed the jar’s top and poured its entire contents over Jesus. John adds that she anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair.

Mary was aware of what was being plotted by the authorities; she wanted to affirm the depth of her faith in Jesus in a way impossible to misunderstand before it was too late. The anointing was a symbol of her love shown in the gift of herself. But the gesture’s deepest meaning was the totality of that gift. Not only did she anoint Jesus but she smashed the container, so to speak throwing away the person she had been and giving Jesus every last drop of herself. This is what moved Jesus to say that everywhere the Gospel would be preached this deed would be proclaimed. This gift of self is what Jesus did on the cross. Mary’s deed summons us to do it on our personal crosses.

Mary showed us the readiness to give self away entirely and Jesus calls us to do this. She learned from Jesus how to throw self away and let God make us new, one with God’s very self as revealed in Jesus. When Judas objected to the waste of money that could have been given to the poor, Jesus pointed out it was a one-time opportunity to give herself to God through Him; it must be accepted. If we have done it then we can anoint the feet of the poor by serving and helping them. That opportunity will always be present. So we are called to give our very self to God and let God so transform us that there will be no going back to the person we once were. Do we long to do it today? It is what Jesus calls us to do today.

TRUSTING IN GOD ALWAYS

A reflection by Fr. Thomas Keating & Fr. Benedict Groeschel

“In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. For you, O Lord, are my hope and my trust. Upon you have I leaned from my birth, from my youth, for it was you who took me from my mother’s womb.” Put these psalm verses with a text from the Gospel of John. *“Don’t let your hearts be troubled; believe in God and believe in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places; if it were not so would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you and then I will come again and take you to myself. Where I am you will also be.”* The two texts fit together to remind us of where we are in this Holy Week as we strive to remember constantly that Our Lord’s passion is our passion too. Recall how often we have been deathly afraid of what our passion might require of us.

From a personal point of view, these texts are among the most important in the Bible. They speak about our personal salvation and remind us that we can never simply escape from that concern. This is part of God’s plan and is not just a sign of egoism. We will have to die. We are now trying to accompany Jesus as he faces and passes through death. His death deeply shook his disciples, even those closest to him, and it can shake us as well.

In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses compares God’s training of his people to the way an eagle trains its eaglets to fly. In ancient times it was believed that the eagle pushes its young out of the nest—which was ordinarily perched on the edge of a cliff. It is a marvelous image of what we feel is happening to us. God seems to push us into things we feel totally incapable of doing. We wonder if he really does love us. God pushes us out of the security we have and we feel like an eaglet desperately flapping its wings and trying to do something new before it hits the rocks below.

But like an eagle parent God swoops down and comes between us and disaster; we are buoyed and given time to learn to use the wings, the gifts, we have been given. This happens to eaglets again and again until they learn to fly. And after we’ve been treated like this more than once we may realize that it isn’t as dangerous as we believed. We become content with hair-raising escapes and trust God in a way no other experience could teach us to. We have to dismantle our fears and old ways of interpreting our selves and our experiences. Jesus did that even when he had to die in order to “fly” with God. Will we let him teach us to go on trusting, no matter what happens?

RISKING THE WOUNDS OF JESUS

A reflection by Frs. Thomas Keating & Benedict Groeschel

“I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I didn’t hide my face from insults and spitting. The Lord God helps me therefore I haven’t been disgraced...”.

The word ‘vulnerable’ is from Latin; it means “woundable”. Jesus let himself be wounded and hurt over and over again, seeking not to protect himself by loving less but only loving more. Divine love is sheer vulnerability—sheer openness to giving however one is treated. Hence, when this love enters our world—in the person of Jesus or of one of his disciples—there is certain to be persecution perhaps even murder. But love is strong than death, as the Song of Song’s teaches.

Being vulnerable goes with loving as Christ loved us. If we didn’t forgive others for wounding us we would have no way of experiencing or showing God’s kind of forgiveness. When we do that we pass on the mercy we have received. The best way to receive divine love is to give it away.

Wednesday of Holy Week was once called “Spy Wednesday” because Judas was seen as a kind of spy for Jesus’ enemies, telling him in the end where they could arrest him without causing public uproar. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss and some think of sin as another way of betraying Jesus’ love. But think of how the disciples betrayed Jesus—they didn’t stand with him when his enemies rejected his teachings, abused him verbally and physically and even tortured him. They were afraid of suffering what he did.

Have you ever avoided paying the price of loving and showing mercy as Jesus did? Isn’t this a sort of betrayal? We fade out and don’t stand with Jesus. A few women and his best friend (the Beloved Disciple) stood with him at the Cross. I’m not such a fool to think that if I had been there when Jesus underwent his passion that I would have stayed with him all the way. It is too easy for me to fail, especially when things are really dangerous or scary. Indeed, we need to watch and pray that we do not enter into temptation.

Now are all these unpleasant facts illustrations of our fear of vulnerability? The crucifix reminds us of Jesus’ vulnerability, and God’s. He opened his arms to embrace us, and the whole world, without running from the price he had to pay. His agony in the Garden shows us it wasn’t easy for Jesus to do this. What sorts of prices don’t we want to pay? We want to learn to stand with Jesus better than we ever have up to now.

GOD LOVES THAT NEVER QUILTS

A reflection using texts by Frs. Thomas Keating & Benedict Groeschel

“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his own outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and wipe them with the towel.”

It was the custom of the time to wash the feet of a guest, to offer a kiss of welcome, and to anoint the head with ointment. It was not the custom to kiss the feet or wash them with one’s tears or to anoint them with precious perfume. Why did some women disciples go to such extremes? They evidently wanted to show he was no ordinary guest.

Against this background, we can understand the meaning of Jesus’ act in washing the feet of his disciples—something a host never did himself. He wanted them to know they were very, very special guests. In receiving the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist we too have been treated as most special guests of a divine host. He wants us to know what special guests we are.

If he treats us like this, how should we treat one another? But think of what follows for him. Christ leaves the supper to be arrested and within 18 terrible hours he will be tortured to death. But any thinking Christian knows that Christ is betrayed, abandoned, humiliated, suffers hunger and thirst and is abused constantly—in his “members”. And this happens in places near where we celebrate the Eucharist.

Is there any single word that can sum up Christ’s gift to us and our response to Him? The word is love. *“Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”* That is how John puts things in his presentation of the Gospel. When later St. Paul was called to follow Christ, loving as we have been loved. He sums it all up by saying, *“The charity of Christ urges us on”*.

What does Christ’s charity urge us to do? First, we are called to pray that we will stand with Christ-in-His-members, as he stands with us, throughout event of our lives. Second, we are called to live out what he has done by way of loving all his members. We see the reality of this love acted out in our Eucharist today. But this Eucharist is also a banquet which begins here on earth and which will last through all eternity. We are invited and called to welcome God’s other guests just as we have been welcomed!

THE REALITY THAT IS FORGIVENESS OF SIN

A reflection by Fr. Thomas Keating

“He was despised and rejected, a person of suffering and acquainted with weakness; like one from whom others hide their faces he was despised and held to be worth nothing. Surely, he has born our weaknesses, carried our diseases, wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our evil deeds. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole and by his bruises we are healed.” Isaiah’s words are explained in the New Testament: He who was without sin became sin. But what does that mean for us?

To sin is to distance oneself, more or less, from God. When I sin I opt for something other than God as the good central to my life. To become sin is to experience the complete absence from my awareness. On the conscious level one would no longer be God’s son or daughter or to experience God as a loving Heavenly Father. This ultimate death-of-God experience is what Jesus knew as he died on the cross. *“My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”*

The crucifixion was much more than physical death and the mental-physical anguish that accompanied it. It was an experience of the absence of Jesus’ relationship with the Heavenly Father. This wasn’t the death of a false self, one whose heart and center was something other than God; Jesus never had a “false self”. It was the death of his awareness of his true self, one that has love-for-God as its cornerstone and center. That is what made it the dying of God a dying to his being aware that he is God.

The loss of one’s personal identity is the ultimate self-emptying. *“He emptied himself, taking on the condition of a slave, and accepting even death on a cross!”* At some moment on the cross his relationship with the Father disappeared along with his experience of who the Father is and who He is as a gift from the Father. He accepted this trusting in the One He no longer experienced. That is why the fact that the words of abandonment are a prayer is so important.

The forgiveness of our sins is not merely the taking away of a false self with its orientation to something other than God. It is turning completely and wholly to God. To do this is to have no self, no identity, except in and through God. But God knows that we cannot have such a self until we have surrendered even our awareness of God’s being-there-with-us and giving us our self and God’s self—as Jesus did was asked to do, and did, on the cross. That is ultimate reconciliation with God and God’s plan of love for our eternal sharing in divine life, the life of total gift of self. God asks this of us.

RESTING & EXPERIENCING HALLELUJAH!

A reflection inspired by texts of Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO

“There was a good and righteous man named Joseph from the town of Arimathea, who went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. He took it down, wrapped in a linen cloth and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb. The Sabbath was beginning.” Jesus was attacked for what he did on the Sabbath. Now it required his body be taken down hurriedly and laid “to rest”. The Sabbath commemorates the seventh day of creation, the day on which God rested from all his works. At God’s command, the Sabbath was observed as a day of complete rest from all the labors people do to make a living and make life better. Its most profound meaning is shown by the Sabbath when Jesus “rested”.

Jesus had given his very self into God’s hands: “Into your hands I commend my spirit” he had said as he died. Our self and sense of self is the source of all the things that we do. When we have surrendered it to our God there is no self-created sense of direction for us. We rest from all our plans and projects and efforts to make things happen according to our wishes and dreams. All now depends upon God. This is the first part of Sabbath rest. We tried to create a world in which we, and those we love, could flourish and have life. We’ve surrendered all that into God’s hands. We rest in waiting for God’s call.

To wait on the Lord is to wait for the Lord to send a task that will make you a new person. After giving our spirit into God’s hands it all depends on God. If we believe in Providence then we can see whatever demands are made on us as calls from God to participate in the work of bringing a New Creation into being. It is the creation of a world order governed by Jesus’ New Commandment: *Love one another as I have loved you*. We wait for God’s Providence to call us to this.

Have you ever experienced something like a volcano exploding inside you in a tremendous burst of joyful energy coming from the deepest place inside you? That is the experience of Hallelujah! It is the Easter call of God to begin loving as Jesus loves in a particular situation and toward particular persons. It is an experience of oneness with Christ and with God and the experience of your new self in God. God is calling you to this experience. The Spirit dwells within you. Your sins are forgiven. You are healed of your old weaknesses. It only remains for us to become who and what we are by God’s grace and through God’s providential calling. You only have to act it out today to see who God would have you become and rejoice in it.