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Sunday, April 2

A REFLECTION ON PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

From Fr. Albert Lakra

Why do we today, on Palm Sunday, read out the Passion of Jesus? It seems out of place, since Jesus did not die on Palm Sunday and it seems inappropriate, since Sunday is supposed to be a day of rejoicing and not a day of mourning. Yet, after the joyful episode of the palms, there follows the stark, terrible reality of the passion, and if we go deeper and delve into the paschal mystery, it is indeed fitting to read the Passion of our Lord Jesus today, for we must realize that the triumphant arrival of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem was one with his death on the Cross. Also, there is a sort of parallelism as well as contradiction between the two. On Palm Sunday, Jesus climbed up Mount Zion; in his passion, he climbed Mount Calvary. On Palm Sunday, Jesus was carried into Jerusalem; in his passion, he walked carrying his cross. On Palm Sunday, a crowd lined the streets to praise our Lord; a crowd lined the way of the cross too. On Palm Sunday, the crowd took off their cloaks and laid them on the road to honor Jesus; before the cross, Jesus was stripped of his cloak. On Palm Sunday, everyone praised Jesus, calling out "Hosanna!" In his passion, Jesus was insulted, mocked, and laughed at.

Moreover, Palm Sunday is the key to understanding the Passion of Jesus Christ, and also the Passion of Jesus Christ is the key to understanding Palm Sunday. We stand with palms in our hands because we want to worship God and give him the honor that is his due. We also stand as sinners. We are the reason that Jesus died on the cross. We praise God and ask his forgiveness. On the one hand, we imagine that we are already up in heaven praising Jesus. On the other hand, we allow the demons to pull us down to Hell. Are we part of the crowd praising Jesus or are we part of the crowd demanding that he be crucified? Both. Let us not imagine that we are so good that we would never have gone along with his death. Every time we commit sin, we stand with the crowd yelling, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Indeed, his blood is on us, and that blood saves us.

This Palm Sunday, the Gospel Reading of the Passion of the Lord is taken from St. Matthew's Gospel. Throughout his gospel, Matthew follows closely the storyline of his primary source Mark but still colors that story with themes characteristic of his gospel. The same is true of the passion story where Matthew's account absorbs virtually all of Mark's story; yet here, too, Matthew recasts the narrative to highlight his own distinctive themes:

- Matthew's Gospel was written for a Jewish circle of readers, therefore, there is insistence on the position of Jesus as the Christ.
- In meeting death Jesus fulfills his God-given destiny foreshadowed in the Scriptures and inaugurates a new age of history charged with resurrection life.
- Jesus is the obedient Son of God, tenaciously faithful even in the midst of abject suffering. Jesus' trust in God, tested in the savage fury of death itself, is not in vain.
- There are several fresh episodes possessing distinctive and marked characteristics. They include the washing of Pilate's hands and the dream of Pilate's wife.
- The resurrection of the saints after the death of Christ, with the earthquake and the rending of the tombs.

If we are to be disciples of Jesus, he invites us to walk his way, to share his sufferings, to imitate his attitudes, to empty ourselves, to live in service for others – in short, to love others as he loves us. This is not at all a call to a life of pain and misery. Quite the contrary, it is an invitation to a life of deep freedom, peace and happiness. If it were anything else, it would not be worth considering. And this is the Good News of today.

Monday, April 3

LET'S FACE IT

From the writings of Catherine Doherty

Let's face it. He who has been given the grace to follow Christ, who has understood that his heart is in love with God and that he has to follow Christ no matter where he goes, even into the immense mystery of rejection, will find that it will not be easy.

Christ entered into the mystery at an early age. His foster father and his mother, who were seeking him when he was preaching in the temple at twelve years of age, did not understand when he told them that he must be in his Father's house. They did not really reject him, but we hunger so much to be understood by our own. However, he never said anything and was obedient to their wishes until he left his mother's sheltering presence.

As he was gathering his apostles, they followed him. They could not do otherwise, for he who hears the voice of God so intimately in his heart, rises and follows him. They followed him, yes, but many times, they, too, rejected him. Whenever he told them a parable, they wanted it immediately explained.

When he spoke to his disciples about eating his flesh and drinking his blood to have life everlasting, many of them left him completely.

He preached the gospel to the poor but the poor did not understand, nor did the wealthy.

People were plotting his death. Walking in the shadow of death is a form of rejection.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees, the whole Sanhedrin, everyone in power, mocked him and questioned him. They followed him and listened to him for the sole purpose of rejecting every word that he said. Only the simple, the foolish ones, the *humiliati*, the ones who did not seem to matter very much in that society seemed to accept him.

The mystery encompasses us, and we understand that we have chosen to follow Jesus Christ. We have followed him through his pilgrimages, his wanderings across the Holy Land. We now know that we are rejected. We will face the ultimate rejection: Christ occupied one side of the cross. If we decide to follow and taste the bitter cup of rejection we must be crucified on the other side.

However, long before we are crucified we will experience that strange feeling of rejection by God the Father. Just like Jesus Christ, we will cry out and say, "Lord, let this chalice pass me by." Or, if we are already crucified, we will cry out one day, suddenly dark and frightening, "Father, why have you forsaken me?"

Yes, if we want to know Christ, we must walk with him – not only through his childhood, not only through the desert, not only through his years of preaching, but even further. We have to walk at his side and drink the cup of his rejection.

Tuesday, April 4

THE TRIDUUM, A THREE-DAY CELEBRATION

From Msgr. Arthur Holquin on his blog *Rector Emeritus*

The Triduum of Easter is the three-day celebration of Jesus' paschal mystery. It presents us with the central mystery of the Christian life, perhaps of life itself - - dying to rise, death to life. Even though the Church spreads the Triduum liturgies over three days (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil), what we commemorate is one single movement - - Jesus' passage through the pain, humiliation, and suffering of death to the glory and triumph of Resurrection and new life. Because Holy Week has so many implications for the Christian life, the Church savors its richness and complexity. The Church knows we need time, perhaps a lifetime, to make this dying and rising with Christ the central moving force in our lives.

The distinction of the Triduum cannot be emphasized enough. It is the year's principal liturgy, summarizing in marvelously rich celebrations what being Christian is all about. During these days, the Church's basic symbols are especially highlighted. These symbols appear again and again as we use them extensively to mark the passages of life and the ongoing flow of life. But their singular importance is underscored in the sacred Triduum.

On Holy Thursday, we commemorate the Last Supper – the first Mass – with a special Mass that also recreates the scene of Christ washing the disciples' feet. With the beginning of the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, Lent officially is ended and we enter into the “three-fold celebration of the Easter Mystery”.

Good Friday is perhaps the most difficult liturgy of the Triduum, because it commemorates the gruesome death of Jesus Christ. The tendency might be to overemphasize death to the point of having a wake service or funeral for him with the pounding of nails and taunts of "Crucify him, crucify him." But we must remember this death is not once and for all. Jesus is alive. So Good Friday must be celebrated with an eye to Easter Sunday's Resurrection. It is the premier day to highlight dying to selfishness and sin in order to live a new life.

On Saturday evening is the Easter Vigil, which is the crown of all liturgies. The Church outdoes itself tonight. This is what it's all about. This is what we celebrate in one way or another all year long. We light the new fire, proclaiming Jesus to be our light and our life. We hear the readings that tell the primal stories of who God is and of who we are and before that the exultant song proclaiming the night of nights when Jesus rose. We bless the waters of baptism through which new members are initiated into the Church. Along with these new members we celebrate the renewal of old members, insuring a Church alive and ever-new. Finally, the Eucharist celebrates our coming together to nourish ourselves at the font of all life - - the Lord's table.

The key to an authentic and fruitful celebration of the Triduum is not to restage historical events but rather to renew what these events mean for our lives. The historical occurrences took place centuries ago. Now our goal is to recommit ourselves to dying to the old way in order to rise with Christ to a new life.

Wednesday, April 5

THE SHADOW OF ST JOSEPH FELL UPON JESUS

From a reflection by Fr. Raymond DeSouza

In his apostolic letter for the beginning of the Year of St. Joseph, Pope Francis cites Polish author Jan Dobraczyński. The Holy Father explains that his novel, *The Shadow of the Father*, “uses the evocative image of a shadow to define Joseph. In his relationship to Jesus, Joseph was the earthly shadow of the heavenly Father: he watched over him and protected him, never leaving him to go his own way.”

Nevertheless, Joseph is not present in the Lord’s public life. Yet we might find St. Joseph during Holy Week, if we allow ourselves to imagine where his “shadow” may have fell upon Jesus in those most sacred days.

One of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver, and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over.

In some traditions today is called “Spy Wednesday” because the plot against Jesus has gathered a betrayer, a spy in the midst of the apostles. Judas is on the lookout for an opportune time.

The price was thirty pieces of silver. In ancient Israel it was the amount that the master of a slave ought to be paid if his slave was killed by another’s ox. Jesus was sold for the equivalent of the damages paid for a dead slave.

The Passover was at hand. The chief priests were eager to complete their plot against Jesus in haste; they did not want to provoke an uproar during the feast. Some Jewish families were likely purchasing their Passover lambs when Judas went the chief priests and offered the Lamb of God for sale.

It is Passover. The great feast is at hand.

The disciples approached Jesus and said, “Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?” He said, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The teacher says, My appointed time draws near; in your house I shall celebrate the Passover with my disciples.’”

It will be the last Passover Jesus celebrates. It will be in Jerusalem. Jesus is familiar with the pilgrimage. Joseph and Mary “went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover.” Some of Jesus’s fondest childhood memories would be of those pilgrimages at Joseph’s side, gathering with others to live again the central events of the Exodus. The Jewish ritual of Passover assigns various tasks – prayers and solemn readings – to various men of the family. Joseph would have taken his part; perhaps the Boy Jesus first heard the Passover story from Joseph.

Now the time of fulfilment is at hand. Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple many times; now in sight of that very Temple Judas brings the cohort to arrest Jesus. The journeys of Holy Week, from Bethany to Mount Sion, from Gethsemane to the Sanhedrin, in the Temple precincts – all of this Jesus would have learned years earlier at Joseph’s side.

Joseph is there no longer, but his memory would have been strong in the places and prayers, the rhythms and rituals of Passover in Jerusalem.

Every detail of Holy Week speaks profoundly of the prophecies of old. The cups of wine, the psalms sung, the timing of the movements, even the clothes that Jesus wore. All this had been handed down, generation after generation, in faithful Jewish families. Joseph handed it down to Jesus. Now Jesus, on the threshold of being handed over, is ready to fulfill it all.

Thursday, April 6

TODAY LET US ONLY THINK OF GOD'S LOVE

From the 2017 Holy Thursday homily of Pope Francis

Pope Francis delivered this homily in the Prison of Paliano. He then washed the feet of 12 prisoners among them were three women, a Muslim, who would be baptized in June; an Argentine, an Albanian, and the rest Italians. Among these, two had been sentenced to life and all the others would finish their sentence between 2019 and 2073.

Jesus was having supper with them, the Last Supper, and as the Gospel says, he “knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.” He knew he had been betrayed and that he would be handed over by Judas that very night. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” This is how God loves: to the end. He gives his life up for each one of us, and he is proud of this and wants to do this because he has love; “to love to the end”. It is not easy because we are all sinners. We all have shortcomings, defects, many things. We all know how to love but we are not like God who loves without thinking of the consequences; to the end. And he gives an example. To show this, he who was the “boss”, who was God, washed his disciples’ feet. It was a custom of that time to wash feet before lunch and supper because there was no asphalt and people walked about in the dust. Therefore, one of the gestures to receive someone at home, also for a meal, was to wash their feet. This was done by slaves, those who were enslaved. But Jesus overturns this and does this himself. Simon did not want him to do it, but Jesus explained that it was so, that he had come into the world to serve, to serve us, to make himself a slave for us, to give his life for us, to love until the end.

Today, as I was arriving, there were many people on the street who were hailing [my arrival]; “The Pope is coming, the boss. The head of the Church...”. The head of the Church is Jesus, no joking around! The Pope represents Jesus and I would like to do the same as He did. In this ceremony, the parish priest washes the feet of the faithful. There is a reversal of roles. The one who appears to be the greatest must do the work of the slave in order to sow love; to sow love among us. I do not say to you today to go and wash each other’s feet. That would be a joke. But the symbol, the example yes: I would say that if you can offer some help, provide a service here in prison to your companion, do so.

Because this is love. This is the way to wash feet; it is being at the service of others. Once, the disciples were arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest, the most important one. And Jesus said: “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.” And this is what He did. This is what God does with us. He serves us. He is the servant. All of us who are “poor things.” Everyone! But he is great. He is good. And he loves us as we are. For this reason, let us think about God, about Jesus, during the ceremony. It is not a ceremony of folklore. It is a gesture to remember what Jesus gave. Following this, he took bread and he gave us his body. He took wine and he gave us His blood. This is how God’s love is. Today, let us only think of God’s love.

Friday, April 7

THE LUMINOUS SIGN OF GOD'S IMMENSE LOVE

From the 2011 Good Friday homily given by Pope Benedict at the Coliseum

This evening, in faith, we have accompanied Jesus as he takes the final steps of his earthly journey, the most painful steps, the steps that lead to Calvary. We have heard the cries of the crowd, the words of condemnation, the insults of the soldiers, the lamentation of the Virgin Mary and of the women. Now we are immersed in the silence of this night, in the silence of the cross, the silence of death. It is a silence pregnant with the burden of pain borne by a man rejected, oppressed, downtrodden, the burden of sin which mars his face, the burden of evil. Tonight we have re-lived, deep within our hearts, the drama of Jesus, weighed down by pain, by evil, by human sin.

What remains now before our eyes? It is a crucified man, a cross raised on Golgotha, a cross which seems a sign of the final defeat of the One who brought light to those immersed in darkness, the One who spoke of the power of forgiveness and of mercy, the One who asked us to believe in God's infinite love for each human person. Despised and rejected by men, there stands before us "a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, one from whom others hide their faces."

But let us look more closely at that man crucified between earth and heaven. Let us contemplate him more intently, and we will realize that the cross is not the banner of the victory of death, sin and evil, but rather the luminous sign of love, of God's immense love, of something that we could never have asked, imagined or expected: God bent down over us, he lowered himself, even to the darkest corner of our lives, in order to stretch out his hand and draw us to himself, to bring us all the way to himself. The cross speaks to us of the supreme love of God and invites, today, to renew our faith in the power of that love, and to believe that in every situation of our lives, our history and our world, God is able to vanquish death, sin and evil, and to give us new, risen life. In the Son of God's death on the cross, we find the seed of new hope for life, like the seed which dies within the earth.

This night full of silence, full of hope, echoes God's call to us as found in the words of Saint Augustine: "Have faith! You will come to me and you will taste the good things of my table, even as I did not disdain to taste the evil things of your table... I have promised you my own life. As a pledge of this, I have given you my death, as if to say: Look! I am inviting you to share in my life. It is a life where no one dies, a life which is truly blessed, which offers an incorruptible food, the food which refreshes and never fails. The goal to which I invite you ... is friendship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, it is the eternal supper, it is communion with me ... It is a share in my own life."

Let us gaze on the crucified Jesus, and let us ask in prayer: Enlighten our hearts, Lord, that we may follow you along the way of the cross. Put to death in us the "old man" bound by selfishness, evil and sin. Make us "new men", men and women of holiness, transformed and enlivened by your love.

Saturday, April 8

AN ANCIENT HOMILY ON HOLY SATURDAY

From the Office of Readings for Holy Saturday

Something strange is happening — there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and Hell trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and the Son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the Cross, the weapon that had won him the victory. At the sight of him Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone, 'My Lord be with you all.' Christ answered him: 'And with your spirit.' He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: 'Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.'

I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in Hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I in you; together we form one person and cannot be separated.

For your sake I, your God, became your son; I, the Lord, took the form of a slave; I, whose home is above the heavens, descended to the earth and beneath the earth. For your sake, for the sake of man, I became like a man without help, free among the dead. For the sake of you, who left a garden, I was betrayed to the Jews in a garden, and I was crucified in a garden.

See on my face the spittle I received in order to restore to you the life I once breathed into you. See there the marks of the blows I received in order to refashion your warped nature in my image. On my back see the marks of the scourging I endured to remove the burden of sin that weighs upon your back. See my hands, nailed firmly to a tree, for you who once wickedly stretched out your hand to a tree.

I slept on the Cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in Paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in Hell. The sword that pierced Me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you.

Rise, let us leave this place. The enemy led you out of the earthly Paradise. I will not restore you to that Paradise, but will enthrone you in heaven. I forbade you the tree that was only a symbol of life, but see, I who am life itself am now one with you. I appointed cherubim to guard you as slaves are guarded, but now I make them worship you as God. The throne formed by cherubim awaits you, its bearers swift and eager. The Bridal Chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The Kingdom of Heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.