

## *The Triduum, the Great Three Days: a Meditation for Holy Week and Easter*

The way the Christian year is divided into seasons can sometimes make it seem as though we jump sharply, like someone coming too quickly off the clutch while changing gears. Sometimes this is true: Ash Wednesday comes with penitence and literally ashes after the 'growing' season of Epiphany, the season celebrating the widening of the mission to the Gentiles.

The same is not true of the end of Lent. The darkest day of the Christian year marks the end of Jesus' life but the beginning of something new, and this liminal quality, the quality of a threshold, is reflected in the name the Triduum, Latin for 'three days'.

The three days—Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Day—form their own liturgical unit. Their unity is often obscured because secular society is not interested in Good Friday (except perhaps as an occasion to wolf hot cross buns) and does not know what Holy Saturday is. As for Easter Day, it's only grounds for more wolfing, this time of tooth-rotting quantities of sweets.

For Christians, however, the Triduum represents a pilgrimage, a journey in three days from death and grief to life and hope, from the despairing unknowing that Jesus is gone forever to the sure knowledge that he told the truth when he said he would rise in three days and when he said 'I am with you always' (Mt 28.20), the very last words of Matthew's Gospel. The Triduum is a rollercoaster emotional ride—for those who truly keep this, the shortest of all seasons in the church year.

### *Good Friday*

The journey begins on Good Friday. Like all journeys, though, the beginning began earlier. The walk to the cross did not begin for the Beloved Disciple, Mary and the other women on that day, but long before. For Mary, when she heard the angel Gabriel's strange message and replied 'Let it be for me as you have said', accepting the winding road she would walk before she had any idea of what it would entail. For John, the road led through the miracles, the preaching, the disputes, the intimate moments with the man he eventually watched die a horrible death, to his own lonely death on the island of Patmos, inflamed by the visions he saw, recorded for us in his gospel, with its discourses about the Bread of Life, and in the haunting poetry of the last book of the Bible.

For those of us who do not live in first century Palestine, the journey ultimately began when faith first stirred in us, but more proximately, perhaps, this past Ash Wednesday and through the days of Lent that follow. The Sunday gospel readings reminded us that Jesus was tempted, and so are we. We try to lay up treasures for ourselves in this world, thinking these will ensure a comfortable life, though Jesus told us this is pointless. Jesus feeds us, though we can scarcely trust that he is what we most deeply need. The readings for the Eucharist during Lent keep reminding us of these things, yet like witless sheep, we somehow need to be reminded of them year after year. We are to live, as Jesus says to Satan, by the words that proceed from the mouth of God but we keep looking for

fulfilment in the shiny objects that Satan offered Jesus and the world offers us: pleasure, power, thrills, the admiration of others. Lent offered us a chance to recalibrate, to ground ourselves in the things that truly matter and here we are at the end of the journey: Golgotha.

The Triduum truly begins, as all major Christian celebrations begin, on the eve or vigil of the day. The bleakness of Good Friday begins after the memorial of the last Supper on Maundy Thursday with the stripping of the altar. The church will now remain in bareness and darkness until the first celebration of Easter and in many parishes, it is the custom for parishioners to keep watch through that night before the reserved sacrament in a side chapel, waiting in silence in place of the sleepy disciples who could not watch with Jesus as he agonised in the garden of Gethsemane. Whether or not we keep vigil in church, this is a time of anticipated sadness and foreboding.

This grief-even-before-death reminds us that death is God's great enemy. At creation, God gave life and with the estrangement from God at the Fall came death. Just as sin was not God's purpose for us, death is not God's purpose for us, not for us and not for his Son.

In some circles, it is common to hear that Jesus *had to die*. That's one theology. A different way of looking at the matter is that actions have consequences and so do habits. In rejecting God, Adam and Eve brought sin and death into the world: physical death ends physical life, but sin is a living death, corroding our real life, life in communion with God. Jesus dies, not because his bloodthirsty Father wants to sacrifice him on the cross, but because the only way to rescue humanity from the mess we created for ourselves was for God to enter our world as one of us, as the eternal Word who becomes flesh. However all who are born must die and in that sense, it was necessary that death eventually followed the manger in Bethlehem.

Jesus said 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself' (Jn 12.32). Traditionally, the reference here has been taken to be the crucifixion, not the Ascension. The cross, then, the instrument of torture and shameful death that lies before him, is portrayed by Jesus, not as a means of blood sacrifice, but the supreme sign of the Trinity's love for humankind. What is necessary is that we, his beloved children, understand the breadth and height and depth of this love. Good Friday shows us that, in the most starkly possible way. The cross does not show us the victory of death, but the triumph of love.

What the Triduum allows us to experience, in a pale reflection of what the apostles and disciples experienced long ago in Palestine, is the bleakness following the death. Unlike Jesus' first followers, we today know without a doubt that Jesus rises from the dead and we cannot experience the confusion and loss that the first disciples did. But the words at the end of the Apostles' Creed, 'was crucified, dead, and buried, He descended into hell', remind us that Jesus did not rise from the dead immediately. The traditional doctrine of the Descent into Hell (or the Harrowing of Hell) explains what happened between the sealing of the tomb on Good Friday and the discovery of the empty tomb with its rolled-away stone on early on Easter morning: Jesus 'descended' to the place of the dead and

brought out the righteous who died before Christ, such as the patriarchs and prophets. While this doctrine provides comfort for us, in the sense that it tells us Jesus was working salvation even immediately after his death, it is not derived from the writings of the New Testament and was therefore probably not known to Jesus' followers. All they knew was that he died on the cross. He was gone, beyond saving—so they thought.

Holy Saturday commemorates, not so much the events of this day, centuries ago, but the desperation that fell upon the tiny, beleaguered Christian community. It is one of only two days in the church year on which the Eucharist may not be celebrated (Good Friday is the other). Some churches have Holy Saturday services of the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified, communion using wafers reserved after the service on Maundy Thursday and it always seems very austere, without the Eucharistic prayer recalling the liturgy of the angels, crying 'Holy, holy, holy'.

The bleakness ends as night ends, gradually. The Great Vigil of Easter, the first Eucharist of the Easter Season, begins in darkness. The lighting of the Easter fire outside the church provides the meagre light and warmth a small campfire can provide, but inside the church, only a few candles provide enough light for the liturgy of readings that tell the story of the Fall, the Exodus and the prophecies of the coming Redeemer. This slowly unfolding, dramatic saga climaxes in the final lesson, the account of the Resurrection, when all the lights suddenly come on and whatever bells a parish can muster (including little handbells people bring with them to church) burst out in an exuberant surge of sound. When the Gloria is sung, after being absent for Lent, it feels as if a merry, long-absent friend has suddenly returned.

The joy of Easter Day takes on a different quality, however, when we allow ourselves really to experience it as the last of *three* days. Living through the horror and grief of Good Friday and the blank absence of Holy Saturday prepare us for the surprise of joy on Easter Day—not just joy, but the *surprise* of joy. Our calendars have long told us that Easter Day is just around the corner and quite possibly we have been making preparations for the celebration. If we really enter into the drama of the Triduum, though, we can know something of what the Jesus' followers experienced two thousand years ago: death is, for now, inevitable—but it does not get the last word. Sin is depressingly omnipresent in our world and in our own lives—but Jesus, who suffered by it, also nullified it.

To say that Easter is not about bunnies, chicks and chocolate is not enough. It is about the *astonishing* triumph of life over death and the *astonishing* triumph of holiness over the living death of sin. This Easter, try keeping keep Holy Week and especially Good Friday and Holy Saturday, so that on Easter Day, you will truly be surprised by joy. What God did in the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection was not the repetition of something that with dreary predictability returns every year, like paying taxes. At each stage of the story, there was a surprise that could have been the unexpected twist that ended the tale. Instead, the climax is not the story's last word but the resounding proclamation of a moral that tells us its ultimate meaning, the meaning it will still have when all the dead are raised on the last day:

*Alleluia. Christ, being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death that he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So also consider yourself dead to sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Alleluia.*