

Triduum 2025 Talk I: A Liturgy of Hope

Almighty, ever-living God,
who as an example of humility for the human race to follow
caused our Saviour to take flesh and submit to the Cross,
graciously grant that we may heed his lesson of patient suffering
and so merit a share in his Resurrection,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

(Collect for Palm Sunday)

We are doing something rather unusual. I don't know if any of you tried to explain to work colleagues or to friends what you were planning to do with your Easter Bank Holiday weekend before you arrived here this afternoon – but I strongly suspect that if you did, you might have been met with some pretty puzzled looks. It seems a little odd now that our British society seems (mostly) pretty comfortable with the idea of Ramadan – it even made it on to “The Archers” this year, with Linda and Robert Snell being invited to share an Iftar meal with their neighbours (and please don't ask me how I know that!) – but seems to have forgotten all about Easter, except insofar as there are two Bank Holidays and a good deal of expensive chocolate!

Even within our Christian communities, though, for whom Easter is the greatest celebration of the Liturgical Year, what we are doing here together is *still* pretty unusual. I did a very, very rough calculation as I was preparing this talk, and I reckon that if you attend *all* the liturgies of this weekend, along with the three retreat talks and two supplementaries, and also spend some time before the Blessed Sacrament this evening and go to Confession tomorrow or Saturday, you will spend approximately 17 hours and 20 minutes either *in* the Abbey Church itself, or reflecting on what is happening in the Liturgy of the Triduum. Of course, that is very much an approximation, since one can never quite tell just how long Fr Abbot will preach for! And that 17-plus hours works out at approximately 25% of the whole weekend – a quarter of our time together. Whilst I suspect that our Orthodox cousins might still consider us to be “liturgical lightweights” and that our ceremonies are short and rushed, I think we've probably got the “Benedictine Balance” about right.

But to the “world outside”, to spend a quarter of one's Spring Holiday weekend in church would probably seem insane, a complete waste of time. So what do we think we are doing here? What is it that we are hoping for?

The origins of our Triduum liturgies lie very early in the history of the Church. Already in the early to mid-2nd century, there was a strong Christian intuition that – while every Sunday was to be celebrated as a “feast” of the Resurrection – the Sunday nearest the Jewish Passover was, in some way, “special”. The Gospel narratives all associated Jesus’ death and resurrection with the Passover – even if the chronologies of the Synoptic Gospels and that of John varied slightly. Equally, Paul – writing to the Corinthians in the early 50s AD – could write as follows:

“Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth...” (1 Cor. 5: 7-8)

He is taking the two most important elements of the Passover ritual – the Paschal lamb and the unleavened bread – and re-interpreting them in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection. Some of the early Church Fathers – people like Melito of Sardis, who wrote in the late 2nd century – continued this theme of Paul’s, re-interpreting the whole of the Old Testament Exodus narrative as a “foreshadowing” both of the life of Christ and the life of God’s “New Israel”, that is, the Church. Such a “typological” reading of the Old Testament – already strongly present in Matthew’s Gospel with its regular refrain of “this was to fulfil the prophecy...” – is one of the reasons why the Old Testament books have always been cherished by the Church, and used in her liturgies, and especially during the Triduum. The basic idea is clear: God’s saving plan for the restoration of humankind, prefigured in the Law and the Prophets, is brought to completion through the life, death and resurrection of Christ his Son.

But there is another important element which we draw from Judaism, from Israel’s relationship with the LORD, from Israel’s *experience* of God’s saving power. This evening at the Mass of the Lord’s Supper we will hear that familiar reading from Exodus 12 – the account of the institution of the Passover on the night Israel escaped from Egypt. I’d like to draw your attention to two short passages from that reading:

That night, the flesh [of the Passover Lamb] is to be eaten, roasted over the fire; it must be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. You shall eat it like this: with a girdle round your waist, sandals on your feet, a staff in your hand. You shall eat it hastily; it is a Passover in honour of the Lord (Ex.12: 8, 11)

The second comes from the end of the reading:

This day is to be a day of remembrance for you, and you must celebrate it as a feast in the Lord's honour. For all generations you are to declare it a day of festival, for ever (Ex.12:14)

The key word there is *remembrance* – or, as our new translation more correctly renders it – *memorial*. ‘*This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute for ever, you shall keep it as a feast...*’ (Ex.12:14).

Judaism is not a “sacramental religion” – at least not in the way we would understand the sacraments. But this idea of *memorial*, of remembrance, is at least proto-sacramental, and far, far stronger than mere remembering or calling to mind. Let me try to explain what I mean.

Israel, the people of God, knew they had *become* his people through the deeds God had done for them – their liberation from slavery in Egypt at that first Passover, their passing through the waters of the Red Sea when God had saved them from the Egyptian army, their reception of the Law at Sinai, and finally their entry into the Promised Land after the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They had *experienced* God’s saving action in those events, those events which had forged their relationship with the LORD. But those salvific experiences were not intended for that one generation alone. When God commands them to hold that day – the 14th Nisan, the Passover – as a *memorial* day, he gives them two things: the first is the *narrative* of the event, the story of what God had done for them; the second is a *ritual* – they must eat it in haste, with a girdle round their waist, sandals on their feet and a staff in their hands. That combination of a narrative to be recited and a ritual to be performed means that – because God’s actions are eternal, unlike merely human actions – this is *not* a mere re-enactment. Rather, it means that *every* generation can have some share, and a *real* share, in the relationship that was formed between God and his people at that first Passover, that *every* generation can truly *become* and *remain* God’s people through their sharing in this narrative and ritual. This Jewish idea of “memorial” allows what we might call a *transhistorical participation* of every generation in the saving power of God, so that all might share in his goodness.

Now that might all sound a bit complex, but actually it’s probably more familiar to us than we might think. Our liturgy is peppered with this *strong* idea of “memorial”, sometimes explicit, sometimes in a more hidden fashion. It’s what liturgists like to call the *anamnetic* aspect of the liturgy, from the Greek word αναμνησις - calling to mind or remembering. In each one of our Eucharistic Prayers there is an explicit mention of this immediately after the “Consecration” – we celebrate the *memorial* of the blessed Passion, the Resurrection from the dead and the

glorious Ascension into heaven of Christ your Son our Lord (Roman Canon), the memorial of [Christ's] Death and Resurrection (Prayer II), the memorial of the saving Passion of your Son (Prayer III) or the memorial of our redemption (Prayer IV). Interestingly, this *memorial* idea also works both ways. In Eucharistic Prayer II, the oldest of the four prayers in common use in the Roman Rite, drawn from the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus c.220AD, we actually pray that God himself might remember, might keep *us* in mind: *Remember* Lord, your Church... *Remember* your servant whom you have called to yourself... *Remember* also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep.

And of course there is one exemplar above all, which Paul draws to our attention in this evening's second reading from 1 Corinthians – that reading which is the fulfilment of our first reading from Exodus. Paul writes:

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you; that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' (1 Cor.11:23-25)

Slightly strangely (at least to my mind) our new translation has chosen to change the word “memorial” to “remembrance”, which slightly blurs the reference Paul is making; but rest assured, Paul's Greek is very very clear – *εις την εμνην αναμνησιν*. And it is worth stressing again, this remembrance, this *anamnesis*, is *not* about just “pious recalling”. Like the Jews at Passover, we have a narrative – Christ's own words of self-giving love – and a ritual – the breaking and sharing of bread, the outpouring and sharing of wine, which make this a *true* memorial, a true source of God's grace, a true and *transhistorical* sharing in the salvific work of Christ. Paul emphasises the concrete reality of this at the close of that same reading from 1 Corinthians: *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes* – that is, our very sharing in the Eucharist is a witness to the fact that we are saved through the Paschal Mystery, through the death and resurrection of Christ.

This “memorial” idea is at the very heart of the Triduum liturgies. Very early in the Christian West, the celebration of Easter became associated with Baptism. Just as Christ passed from death into new life through the events of the first Good Friday and the first Easter Sunday, so the Church understood that she too took her origin from those events, and that there was something truly fitting – truly right and just – that the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist – should be associated with the night of the Easter Vigil. In this again, they were following the

early theological understanding of St Paul. As we will hear in the Epistle of the Mass at the Vigil, Paul wrote to the Romans that:

When we were baptised in Christ Jesus, we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life. If, in union with Christ, we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection... you too must consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive for God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6: 3-6, 11).

All our new life in Christ thus springs from the darkness of that empty tomb, echoed in the darkness of the Abbey Church at the beginning of the Vigil, a darkness dispelled by the light of the risen Christ as the Cantor sings three times: *Lumen Christi* and we respond: *Deo Gratias*. And as the Church is filled with that new light, the Exsultet cantor continues: *This is the night that with a pillar of fire banished the darkness of sin... This is the night of which it is written: The night shall be as bright as day, dazzling is the night for me and full of gladness (from the Exsultet, cf.Ps.138).*

And of course it does not stop there. In 313 AD, the Emperor Constantine lifted the legal ban on the Church as an organisation, and allowed Christians to celebrate their liturgy publicly for the first time. From that point onwards until his death in 337 AD, Constantine also committed a good deal of imperial money to the building of churches – including the great basilicas in Rome, like St Peter's and St Paul's-outside-the-Walls. Perhaps most significantly, however, was his building of the Basilica of the Anastasis – the Church of the Resurrection – in Jerusalem, what we now know as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. That church was enormous, far bigger than the current mediaeval fragment, and contained within it not only the empty cave of Christ's tomb, but also the Hill of Golgotha, near which Constantine's mother, St Helena, had found the relics of the True Cross. Those relics were first venerated at the dedication of the Basilica on the 13-14th September 335 AD – a day which is still celebrated in both East and West as the Feast of the Holy Cross.

That great Church became the focus of the next level of liturgical memorialisation. The establishment of a date for Easter Sunday (fixed by the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, whose 1700th anniversary we keep this year) allowed the beginning of the development of a Calendar – a framework of "sacred time" as it were. From Easter Sunday, one could work backwards to fix a celebration of the Passion on Good Friday, of the Lord's Supper the night before, and of Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. One could also count forwards and fix a date for the celebration of the Ascension forty days after Easter, and for the Christian Pentecost ten days after that. Just as Jesus, the incarnate Son of

God had lived in our human time, so now his Body the Church could live, quite literally, in “Gospel time” – since all these celebrations are drawn straight from the gospel narratives themselves.

Still more, the very fact of being in Jerusalem meant that these celebrations could take place in what was now understood as a “sacred geography”. For example, on Palm Sunday the faithful could assemble with palm branches at Bethany outside the city, and with their Bishop seated on a donkey walk the same road as Jesus had taken, singing Hosanna as they entered the Basilica. On Good Friday, they could venerate the True Cross, themselves standing on the very rock of Golgotha. In short, and as the Introduction to our modern Palm Sunday Mass puts it:

With all faith and devotion

let us commemorate the Lord’s entry into the city for our salvation,

following in his footsteps,

so that, being made by his grace partakers of the Cross,

we may have a share also in his Resurrection and in his life.

This new sense in the 4th century Church of both *sacred time* and *sacred geography* proved incredibly powerful, and gradually the liturgies of the Jerusalem Church were imitated around the Christian world, even when they were physically separated from the Holy Places in Jerusalem. Ultimately, they resulted in the evolution of our Triduum liturgies of today.

These liturgies which we will celebrate together over the next few days are dramatic – and intentionally so. They have evolved in the Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to *draw us in* to the dramatic events of our salvation at every level of our human experience – through words and music and silence, through elaborate ritual and through the starkness of the stripped altars, through the often-experienced pain of prolonged standing or kneeling, through the exhaustion of late nights and early mornings. They have evolved in the Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to capture our every human emotion – they are almost poetry incarnate – but only because at their heart is our incarnate God who longs to draw us, through them, closer to his own heart, that heart so full of love for his Creation, for *us*, that he was willing to give away everything he had to pay the price of our redemption.

Our liturgies are dramatic, but they are *not* dramas, not historical reconstructions, not re-enactments. No one will be reclining at table in the Abbey Church tonight. No one will dress up in 1st century clothes at any point this weekend, as if we were in the “Sealed Knot”. No one will be crucified on Friday, not even theatrically, since this is not Oberammergau. There is no “pretending” here. Fr

Abbot will not be pretending to be Jesus as he washes the feet of twelve of us this evening, even as he will not be pretending to be Jesus as he takes the bread and wine, blesses them and speaks the words of the Lord over them, then gives them to us to be our spiritual food. And there should be no pretending on our part either. There may be some things that move you deeply this year – whether to tears of sorrow or of joy – but almost inevitably, some things may simply leave you numb. Do not worry. I imagine that is how Mary and the Apostles felt for much of these three days. You may feel your life is in chaos – so many problems, so many anxieties for yourself or for those you love. Do not worry. Lay all those things at the foot of Christ’s Cross, and let his unbounded love and life pour over them, his wounded but now glorified hands touch them and begin to heal them.

In the little blurb for this talk, written what seems like centuries ago now, I mentioned that in one of the great Prefaces of Easter, we address Christ as the Priest, the Altar and the Lamb of Sacrifice. Those are very ancient words, drawn from some of the earliest Preface texts we have in the so-called Leonine Sacramentary, probably from the 5th century. And they remind us of something very important. Christ is our new Passover Lamb, the one whose blood poured out on us marks us out as belonging to God, that we might escape the Angel of Death. Christ is the Altar – that place where the reconciliation of God with humankind is achieved, through his self-offering for us to His Father. But above all else, Christ is our Priest. It is Christ himself who is at the very heart of the liturgies we celebrate – not just as an idea, not just as a historical figure we commemorate, but *present* with us, alive and active amongst us, speaking to us and sharing his life with us. It is Christ himself who is the true Celebrant at each of our liturgies – our great High Priest, the one who has been tempted in every way that we are, but without sin, the one who does not disdain to be called our brother as well as our Lord. As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* so beautifully puts it:

Christ is always present to his Church, especially during the liturgy, so that this great task can be accomplished. He is present through the sacrifice which is the Mass, at once in the person of his minister – “the same one who then offered himself on the Cross now making his offering through the agency of priests” – and also most fully under the Eucharistic elements. He is present through his power in the sacraments; thus when anyone baptises, Christ himself is baptising. He is present in his Word, in that he himself is speaking when the scripture is read in church. Finally, he is present when the church is praying or singing, he himself who promised: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Mt.18:20)

In fact, throughout this great process by which God is being perfectly glorified and human beings become holy, Christ is uniting the Church, his dearly cherished wife to himself, the

*Church who calls upon her Lord, and worships the eternal Father through him.
(Sacrosanctum Concilium, §.7)*

In a very real sense, the Church is most truly what she is – the Body of Christ, united with Christ her Head – in these most holy days of the Triduum, when we literally “live the Gospel” with Christ himself at our side.

There are many “mini-pilgrimages” in each Triduum – many times when we walk alongside each other towards a common goal – whether it be our procession from the High Altar to the Crypt for the “watching” with Jesus tonight, or our procession to venerate the Cross tomorrow, or our procession through the darkness following the light of the Risen Lord on Saturday, or our procession to the Altar again to receive the Risen Lord in Communion on Sunday morning. In each of those processions, those “mini-pilgrimages” we walk by faith and not by sight, but we walk *together*. And in each of those processions, those mini-pilgrimages, Jesus walks alongside us, unrecognised, gently guiding us towards a deeper understanding of His life and our own – just as he did with Cleopas and his friend on that first Easter Day. And *that* is why our Triduum liturgies, these holy days when we walk with Christ, can truly be called a *liturgy of Hope*.

O God, who by the pages of both Testaments
instruct and prepare us to celebrate the Paschal Mystery,
grant that we may comprehend your mercy,
so that the gifts we receive from you this night
may confirm our hope of the gifts to come, through Christ our Lord.

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