

THE LENTEN WORD

Holy Week

Monday

The Scent of Sacrifice

Is 42:1-7; John 12:1-11

All the public activity is over now. Jesus is on his last lap, and traditionally he withdraws into the closeness and intimacy of his family: not the earthly, human family, but that new community which his ministry has assembled. Today we are given a precious glimpse of the atmosphere in the house at Bethany, mysteriously and shockingly sweetened by the outpoured spikenard with which Mary suddenly anoints her Lord. Love is always shocking in its declaration, and its workings. Judas, who is moving inexorably towards his definitive exclusion from this hushed communion, finds it questionable and possibly repellent. Jesus, who is moving equally inexorably towards his sacrificial death, understands it and accepts it gracefully. Had Mary really foreseen the oncoming Passion? Did her insight lend her some inkling of the mode of his loving, and of the impossibility of his survival in Caiaphas' and Pilate's world? Or was she, like us, a tangle of emotional guesses and religious hopes and fears, governed above all by huge gratitude and wonder at the loving presence in her life? However unformed and intuitive, her love is acceptable to the Lord, because it was for him, and it was reverent towards the future which was already filling his mind. She is a model for us in Holy Week.

Tuesday

Where are you going?

Is 49:1-6; John 13:21-38

The drama of sign-language and hidden messages in today's Gospel is in sharp contrast to the intimacy and openness of the Last Supper scene. The cause of this is the presence of Judas, in whose heart are two evils: thievery, and the willingness to surrender to Satan. It is easy to get hooked up on Judas. He was a very minor operator in the overall story of the Passion. Jesus did not need a betrayer, being perfectly open in his behaviour; he was not in hiding from his future. But in all of us there is a betrayer, a part of us that would be willing to compromise with evil, if the reward were sufficiently engrossing. Each of our virtues is vitiated by an admixture of weakness, which could be subverted. Our love for truthfulness is sterling stuff in the abstract; but on the hoof we will let *a few, useful* falsehoods stand undisturbed if they bring us some benefit. We want to be loving, but when it gets *really demanding* we will make an excuse and leave. We are second to none in our concern for justice; but we won't *disturb the system* that keeps us comfortable; there's no need to *take things to extremes*. Our purity of heart is precious to us; but after all we are *only human*...it is circumlocutions like these that make us icebergs in the Last Supper. Like Judas, we are not wholly with Jesus: part of us still belongs to ourselves, or to the highest bidder, or, God forbid, to Satan.

Wednesday

Not I, Lord, surely?

Is 50:4-9; Matt 26:14-25

Yesterday's meditation continues today, and we cannot help feeling that it is greatly coloured by the feeling of the early Church about the martyrs who were betrayed by fellow-Christians for money. Thirty silver pieces is the price of a slave, and the reduction of Judas is pretty complete. Jesus is never, at any stage, ignorant about Judas. Even at his call, at his first meeting with Jesus, he is "the one who would betray him". It is a fateful description, and some people think of him as a doomed person, predestined to fail. But foreknowledge is *not* the same as control. Judas is free when he decides to betray, and we are free to decide on our own course. How "sure" can *we* be of ourselves? And how about the other eleven? All ran away and deserted, despite their firm professions of loyalty. Today's Eucharist should involve for us a solemn and honest look at ourselves, before we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

The Chrism Mass

is celebrated on Wednesday. The priests of the Diocese gather at the Cathedral, and the whole Eucharistic community is represented about the Bishop, who is its heart. Especially present, in some mysterious sense, are those who will share in the Sacraments in the year ahead: as the Oil of Catechumens is blessed, we look ahead to many new births in Christ, as the young and the old approach the waters of Baptism, at Easter and in the year that follows it. As the Oil of the Sick is

blessed, all the faithful suffering of the months ahead is anticipated. In the Consecration of the Chrism we hold in our minds the people who will be anointed in Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders. The keynote of this mass is of joy in our anointing, in our being “other Christs”.

Holy Thursday

Supper of the Lord

The Mass is on this evening completely at home. Our minds are aware of the arrest, the trial, and the execution of its terrible verdict: but it is in the setting of the Eucharist that we already lay hold of the glorious response of God, that is the Resurrection. In the Mass Jesus is raised from the dead, truly present with his Church, and this is as true tonight as on Easter Day. We can contemplate the Eucharist as his lasting legacy, a living presence in all our days. In the rite of the washing of feet, Jesus displays to us the freedom with which he accepts the humiliation of the Cross - “a death he freely accepted”.

Good Friday

The Cross

Jesus crucified looks like the ultimate casualty: the Stations of the Cross have a precious insight in their addition of three *falls*: the whole business could, and should, have been seen as a tragic accident. For God it is *the reverse* that is true. Evil is the accidental, and good is the purposeful; so Jesus moves through the story carrying the meaning of God for the world, his steps sure, his faithfulness unwavering. Though the flesh is weakened, exhausted, at last obliterated, the spirit remains willing, with the will of the Father; and so the body is at last sanctified, sacrificed, consecrated to God - in a word, *saved!* “You would not leave my live among the dead, nor let your Beloved know decay,” says Ps.15. What can give us the right to stand beneath his Cross? Only the way in which we have laid down our lives in love, and shared with him the burden of human weaknesses. What the world sees as our disqualification, is our likeness to Jesus today.

Holy Saturday

Waiting

What is the spirit of this day? It is the last *dies non* - a day without liturgy. We find it busy, pre-holiday style; but try to remember the silence of the Church with a break in the busyness. The silence of a new tomb, the impending numbness of new grief, and the mourner’s vagueness about the future all belong to this day with no words, no proper actions. It is a day of endurance, of waiting until the sun sets, the first shift of a disinherited life. But the hours of darkness hold for us the yet unspeakable joy of the Easter Gospel. So often our hopes have been denied, and the world has shaken its head and said: “No” to our desires. In this night there is the voice of God, speaking at last to our hearts, and giving us the gift for which we long. “May he find us waiting, our lamps lit, and our hearts alight with faith!”