

St. Vincent de Paul

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Reflection for Palm Sunday & Holy Week 5 April 2020 by Fr Robin Burgess

DURING the week of 9/11 I was leading a retreat at a house in a remote corner of Berkshire. Since it was an area with a small population there was not much light pollution and it was therefore possible to see something I had not seen for many years - the brilliant display of stars in the night sky - the mystery and wonder of creation laid out in the heavens for all to see. (Near the house there was another remarkable phenomenon of multiple tiny shapes skittering and glittering as they moved together at high speed, which turned out to be a flight of bats - something else I had rarely seen).

It sometimes needs an absence of the usual elements that fill up our lives to bring into focus things that we can easily overlook, so it may be that this Holy Week and Easter (the oddest any of us can remember, without any of the ceremonies with which we mark the time) will be an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the meaning of what we celebrate in this season. The key to understanding what Jesus does is found in the second reading at Mass on Palm Sunday, from the letter to the Philippians chapter 2, in which it is believed Paul is quoting an early Christian hymn:

*Though he was in the form of God,
Christ Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Jesus' self-emptying of his divine nature in order to enter fully into and take upon himself our human nature, begins with his birth at Bethlehem, continues with his ministry of service to others and reaches its climax in the events of Holy Week. He allows himself to be greeted as a triumphant king as he enters Jerusalem to the plaudits of the crowd. He gives himself in the sacrament of the Last Supper and literally enacts the laying aside of his divinity by taking off his outer robe to bend low and wash his disciples' feet, like any menial slave - thereby giving us an example of how we should be to

each other. Then in the Crucifixion he gives himself to the uttermost of pain and endurance in order to show his glory as Lord and the glory of God in him.

I believe it is the case that in the throes of childbirth there can be a moment where the pain is so intense that a woman goes beyond the pain into an almost ecstatic state just before the actual time of birthing, smiling through the tears - and when the child is born the joy is so overwhelming that instantly all the pain is forgotten. May this have been so with Jesus as he reached his end on the cross knowing that he was giving birth to the new life of Resurrection both for himself and for the whole human race?

There is a prayer in the Mass said quietly by the priest at the altar which well expresses the purpose of what Jesus does:

*By the mystery of this water and wine
may we come to share in the divinity of Christ
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.*

The early Church used to say that God became human so that human beings might become God. This is what Jesus' self-emptying makes possible for us, and there is no other way than by entering into the same movement of emptying and letting go that we see in him - the grain of wheat must die in order to bear fruit. New life can only come through dying, letting go of everything we are now so that we can be reborn in the new life of God's eternal kingdom. As Jesus puts it in the Gospels, we must lose our life in order to find it.

We will lose our life when we die, the supreme moment of letting go, but in the meantime we can prepare ourselves and practise for that new birth by learning in the here and now how to let go. The experiences of life itself will teach us how to do this, whenever we are made to let go whether we want to or not, but perhaps the extraordinary state of isolation and inactivity we find ourselves in just at present will have a special lesson for us in this way. Holy Week and Easter will seem strange indeed without being able to come together in the church for the ceremonies of this time, but we can celebrate on our own as best we can, by for example reading the Scriptures and praying in whatever way we want.

On Palm Sunday, for instance, we could read the account of the entry into Jerusalem in St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 21: 1-11, and be there with the crowds greeting Jesus, and then the Passion as we would have it in the Mass in chapters 26 and 27. On Holy Thursday read the account of the Last Supper in John chapter 15 and imagine yourself as one of the disciples: do you identify with Peter shrinking back or can you allow Jesus to wash your feet and know that he must do this service for you so that you can learn how to give yourself in service to others? At 3 pm on Good Friday we could read St. John's story of the Passion in chapters 18 and 19 or pray the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary. Then early on Easter morning read the story of the first Easter Day in John chapter 20 and be with the women in amazement at the tomb, seeing it empty, hardly daring to believe that Christ

is risen. (Please use these suggestions if they help: if you have a missal all the readings will be there laid out for you. I believe there is advice on keeping Holy Week coming also from our bishops).

We can look forward to being together again next year, but for now must be content with whatever we can do, and thankfully there are signs around us to encourage and give hope. Jesus says go to the natural world if you want to see God at work: the sound of birdsong, the splash of running water, blossom and buds on the trees, the stars at night (if you can see them) - all these are given to us and can bring delight in knowing that God is constantly present and working to bring deadness back to life.

In our current state we are all longing for normality to return and no doubt some time it will, but in the meantime we might consider what really is normal. Is it the hectic bustle and noise of the modern world that we are used to and consider normal, or is it the simple quiet enjoyment of being in God and knowing God is in us? Our present circumstances could be a God-given opportunity to reconnect with that, and if we can get just a little further and deeper into our truly normal state of being loved by God then Easter 2020 will not be just something to get through, regretting what we cannot have, but a joyful celebration of the new life God offers us in Christ.

At any rate I wish you all, in whatever way you can enjoy it, a very happy Easter in the joy of the risen Lord,

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