

Dear Friends,

Last year we were beginning a Holy Week without any public worship at all, as our churches closed in the first pandemic lockdown. At least this year we can celebrate the Mass together in church, though without the special ceremonies which mark this week: the procession on Palm Sunday, the washing of feet and watch by the sacrament on Holy Thursday, the lighting of the Paschal Candle on Holy Saturday evening. There will be palms and candles available for people to take, but we will have to imagine the accompanying rituals. It is a pity, but there is nothing we can do about it, so we can only look forward again to Holy Week next year and a return to normal service.

It is sometimes suggested that what we are doing in Holy Week is being with Jesus in these last days of his earthly life, going with him through all that he endures. The ceremonies can suggest that we are re-enacting the events: for instance, on Palm Sunday we can play at being the crowd that was there watching Jesus ride on a donkey into the holy city; on Holy Thursday we are there with him and his disciples in the upper room, watching as he washes their feet.

There is a certain element of this in our worship, as there is every time we do in the Mass what Jesus himself did at the Last Supper, taking bread and wine, blessing them and giving them to each other as his body and blood. On the whole, however, this is not how the liturgy of the Church works. We are not so much remembering past events or re-enacting them as we might in a dramatised performance, but recalling them to make their effects present to us now. We cannot literally suffer with Jesus on the cross, and we do not need to. He has already done it for us! What we need to act out is what it makes possible for us in our lives now, today.

By giving himself back to the Father, Jesus enables all of us who share our human life with him to re-unite ourselves with God, or better to know that we are united with him. At the climactic moment of Jesus' death on the cross, the Gospels tell us, the veil of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom. This was the heavy curtain enclosing the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the Temple in Jerusalem, in which the glory of God (the shekinah) was present in a special way. It was so holy that nobody was allowed to go into it, except the High Priest, and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.

We are being invited to see that by his self-offering to God, by his dying on the cross, Jesus has removed any barrier that may stand between us and God. God is making himself totally, unreservedly available to his people. Nothing separates us from him anymore. As Saint Paul says, the Spirit of the God has been poured into your hearts. It is not something that will happen in the future, or might happen if we behave ourselves and please God into favouring us. It has already happened! It is for us to realise that it is so.

We can of course in a sense separate ourselves from God, cut ourselves adrift by the way we behave and believe that we are cut adrift, but that does not alter the gift of himself that God has made to us. This is why one writer says that the only thing that separates us from God is the *thought* that we are separate from God. So we need to lay aside our thinking, our ideas and desires, and simply be what we are - people in whom the Spirit of God dwells. Lose your life in order to find it, is how Jesus puts it. This is what we find difficult, getting out of our own thinking and imagining; but if we can find time just to rest and be quiet in the knowledge that God is in us and we are in him, then we can come to know that he is with us always, in all things and times and circumstances.

In celebrating or commemorating the events of Holy Week, therefore, we are not just remembering things that happened 2,000 years ago, but entering into what those events make it possible for us to be. As Jewish people do when they keep the Passover, we can say, I recall these events in order to know that I am the one whom God is now releasing into freedom, freedom to be who and what I am.

Over the last few weeks I have been following readings from the Letter to the Hebrews, thought to be written for Jewish converts to Christianity who had become nostalgic for their old ways. So, to give encouragement, the writer assures them that the death of Jesus, the shedding of his blood, is not just a better version of the old animal sacrifices, made to satisfy the anger of a vengeful, bloodthirsty God. This is the pagan notion of sacrifice, offering a pleasing gift to avert the anger of the gods. Jesus' self-sacrifice is something new, the supreme act of loving obedience, as everything in his life is. He is undoing the disobedience of the human race in Adam and Eve by giving himself totally, and thereby showing the example of what we can be and how we can be it - giving ourselves away in order to receive back what we most truly are - people created in love, held in love, and destined to know the fullness of love in the kingdom of God.

IT IS ACCOMPLISHED! the last word of Jesus on the Cross proclaims that he has completed the work God gave him to do. We remember it not for the sake of looking back, but of being now what God makes us to be and looking forward to enjoying more and more of what he enables us to be.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.