

**Spiritual Reflections for Holy Week**  
**by Very Rev. Anthony Barratt, STL, PhD, EV, ChD**  
*New York - Upstate Area*

## A REFLECTION ON PALM SUNDAY

I am sure that many of us cannot believe how quickly this time of Lent has passed, even in these difficult and uncertain times. Perhaps we feel that, despite no public Masses and with all the restrictions, we have journeyed through Lent with a new intensity. Whatever the case, it is certainly a Lent that we will remember! Perhaps now, we can reflect upon all the many and rich symbols that we associate with Holy Week and Easter. So, let us begin by delving into the signs or marks of Palm Sunday. In later reflections, we can look at Holy Thursday, Good Friday and, of course Easter.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday, or, to give it the correct title, “Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord”. Before the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, it had an even longer name: Palm Sunday of the Solemn Procession of Palms in Honor of Christ the King. It was also called the Second Passion Sunday because the *passion-tide* of the Lord (the time when we focus on Jesus’ passion: his arrest, trial, suffering and crucifixion) began a week earlier on the fifth Sunday in Lent. Incidentally, that is why in some churches crosses and statues are covered in a veil or cloth during these few weeks from the fifth Sunday.

Normally, the celebration of Mass on Palm Sunday takes the usual form, but with two key exceptions or marks. At the beginning of Mass, we have the commemoration of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem with the blessing of palms and then later, we have a lengthy reading of the Gospel connected with Jesus’ passion. Both these tell us of what is special about this day. Our main attention is drawn to Jesus’ entrance into the holy city of Jerusalem. We are given three different forms of this commemoration of the Lord’s entrance. This year because of the coronavirus crisis, apart from the Cathedral church, we must use the Third Form, which does not involve the Blessing of Palms. Of course, many of us feel very disappointed about not having our blessed palms. However, we can still think of the meaning and purpose of this once-a-year ritual of blessing the palms...

We imitate the crowds as we wave the palm branches as sing “hosanna to the Son of David”. Why do we do this and why bother with palms? The answer goes back to how we pray. We pray with our bodies and senses (waving palm branches and singing in this case!) and we use physical, tangible things such as palm branches, to put us in mind of spiritual realities. The prayers used to bless the palms make this clear: “sanctify these branches with your blessing, that we, who follow Christ the King in exultation, may reach the eternal Jerusalem through him”; or, “...that we, who today hold high these branches to hail Christ in his triumph, may bear fruit for you by good works accomplished in him.”

We can also be mindful of Jesus’ words: “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned” (John 15: 4-7). The palms that we would have used and received at the Mass today are green and supple. People make them into crosses or even more elaborate designs. However, with time, the palms dry out and become

brittle, because they no longer have the sap from the palm tree running through them. So too with us. If we become detached from our Lord, we dry out and become brittle, even dead.

The same idea of a deeper or symbolic meaning is true later on in the Mass when we meet our other mark or sign that is special to Palm Sunday: that very long Gospel! The Gospel reminds us that the purpose of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was to accomplish the Lord's *Paschal mystery*: that is for him to undergo his suffering and death...and to rise. This theme of fulfilment or completion of Jesus' mission is therefore made clear as we hear an account of Jesus "passion". This account varies depending on the year of our three-year cycle and so this year, as we are in Cycle A, we will hear St. Matthew's version. As well as having much in common, each of our gospel writers also gives a particular flavor of perspective with regard to Jesus' passion. What about St. Matthew?

St. Matthew directs us to see Jesus as fulfilling all the prophecies about the Savior, particularly that Jesus can be seen as the new Moses, bringing about the "new covenant" by his passion, death and resurrection. Matthew is unique in reporting the way of Jesus' betrayal (with a kiss) or the detail about Jesus being offered wine mixed with gall. He does this to show again and again, how the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus.

St. Matthew also does not sugar coat the terrible abandonment of Jesus by the disciples and only Matthew has Jesus calling Judas his "friend." The malice of the religious leaders is also brought out very strongly by Matthew, both during his trial and even after his death (only Matthew mentions the posting of guards outside the tomb, for example). Matthew also wants us to understand the total innocence of Jesus and so, for example, only Matthew reports Pontius Pilate washing his hands as a sign of this innocence. Matthew also highlights God's presence even in these terrible events. Like Luke and Mark, he reports the darkness that falls and the veil of the Temple being torn, but Matthew alone mentions the earthquake that opens the graves of the dead. A sign that even in this darkest moment, the power of the resurrection is happening.

Do notice one other important mark or sign. Instead of having the usual form of the Gospel reading, we may have a number of readers and everyone joins in with the parts of the crowd. Sadly, this year, due to the various restrictions, that cannot be the case. However, the way that the Gospel is proclaimed does not undo the meaning and purpose of hearing this long narrative of Jesus' betrayal, suffering and death. So, once again, we must ask the question: why do this? Our answer is the same as before: we are drawn in to the mystery that unfolds as we hear the Gospel.

The Gospel, any gospel, but perhaps especially the Gospel on Palm Sunday that recounts what Jesus has done for us, is not then just some distant story, or something remote from us. It is about what God has done for us; it is about our salvation and our life. We are not just passive spectators, or onlookers, or listeners: all that we recall on Palm Sunday (and during Holy Week and Easter of course) is about what Jesus has done for *us* and does for us right *now*. This is such a welcome message as we continue to try and do our best in the strange and difficult situation that we face at the moment. The opening address at the Mass expresses this very well: "...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." Amen to that!

## HOLY THURSDAY & AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SACRED TRIDUUM

In our first reflection, we spent some time looking at Palm Sunday with all the many rich signs and symbols of that special day. We also saw that all the signs and symbols associated with Palm Sunday and what we might call the liturgical drama of that day, are there for a most important reason. They appeal to our head and to our heart, to our thoughts and to our imagination; to remind us in a powerful way of what God has done for us. We also realized that there is more... We are not meant to be like passive onlookers or spectators as the liturgy unfolds, even if we cannot be in church due to all the current restrictions. Rather, we are to be taken up into the drama or mystery, and become very much part of it.

All this is certainly also true of the incredibly deep and rich liturgy of what we call *the Sacred Triduum* (literally, “the sacred three days”); that is the *Holy Three Days* of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. There are so many signs or symbols during these days, that it can all be a bit overwhelming. Therefore, it is worth stepping back and reflecting on the liturgy of each of the days. However, even before we do this, we need to understand one other key thing. Although we speak of the three days, they are actually one whole event or liturgy. Yes, it is true that each day has its own distinctive flavor and focus, but they are parts of one mystery and one action. It is called the *Paschal Mystery*; that is the mystery of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection that brings us salvation. That is one reason why there is no blessing or dismissal at the end of the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday. At the Solemn Liturgy of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday, there is a prayer at the end of the liturgy that already points to Easter Sunday. There are three physical days then; but only one mystery and one liturgy and, in a way, one day.

So, in our reflections, let us take each of the days in turn. We can look at all the signs or symbols and see beyond them to the spiritual riches that they contain. We can do this whether we are watching a live-stream version or a recording at home, or whether we look at the different liturgies in our prayer book or missal.

The first great event in our holy three days is the *Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper* on Holy Thursday Evening. As with Palm Sunday, this liturgy has a particular focus that is then expressed in the various special marks or signs that we encounter during the Mass. We celebrate the institution of the “new covenant” between God and His people, above all in the sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as the institution of the ordained priesthood (those who are called to celebrate this sacrament on behalf of the Church). So, because we rejoice in this great gift of the Eucharist, the atmosphere during the Mass is one of joy and celebration: for example, with the use of white vestments, or in the ringing of bells during the Gloria.

On the other hand, if we were in the church for this Mass in normal times, we would see that two, very familiar signs or marks would be missing. There is no holy water and the tabernacle is empty and open. Our holy three days are about the birth of the church and new beginnings and also continue that Lenten idea of presence and absence. So we begin the three days with no holy water: the new, life-giving water of baptism will be blessed as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We have already had a taste of this absence with the removal of holy water from the fonts in our churches. We long for its return: it will indeed be a sign of new life! Since Holy Thursday is about

the institution, or, in a way, the beginning of the Eucharist, we also begin this day with an empty tabernacle.

We should not forget our Readings at Mass as they are, in a way, also signs or symbols. In fact, the readings have been especially chosen: they too point us to the institution of the new covenant in the Eucharist. In the First Reading (Exodus 12: 1-8, 11-14), the Eucharist is *pre-figured* in the “passing over” (that is Passover) of the angel; that is when the Israelites were freed from their slavery in Egypt. As a sign of this, the Israelites are told to sacrifice a lamb (that puts us in mind of Jesus, the Lamb of God) and put some of its blood on the door as a marker. God’s angel will then “pass-over” that house and not bring death to it.

St. Paul, in the Second Reading (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26), speaks of “handing on” what he has received (his account of the account of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist); but there is also the *handing on* or over of Jesus to betrayal and death. The Eucharist, we are reminded, is the sacrament of Jesus’ sacrifice for us that brings us life. Later on in the Mass, during the Eucharistic Prayer, we have another sign or mark that echoes this reminder about the nature and purpose of the Eucharist. We have some words that are included in the prayer *only* on Holy Thursday: “on the day before he was to suffer for our salvation and the salvation of all, that is today, he took bread...”

The Washing of the Feet is perhaps, the sign or mark that many of us most remember about Holy Thursday. It is often a very moving occasion, as we see the feet of various parishioners being washed. As with so many other elements of our Holy Week rituals, it is so sad that we will not be doing this, this year. However, we can still reflect on the symbolism of this special ritual. It is officially called the *mandatum* because it calls to mind the *mandate* or *command* of Christ to love one another. We are reminded that the Eucharist is intimately bound to love and service. We know of the Eucharist as a *real presence* of Jesus who is lover and servant. We are commanded or mandated to imitate and live this mystery. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest subject present to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor he is holy in almost the same way, for in him Christ...is truly hidden.” The washing of the feet is also linked to baptism (being washed clean), and to the cleansing action of Christ’s sacrifice. The sacrifice of Jesus is made out of unconditional love and obedience: the Eucharist is a real and living sign of this, and we must imitate it in our lives.

After the Mass there is a period of watching in silent contemplation. Again, this year, the Blessed Sacrament will simply be placed in the tabernacle. However, we can still pray at home silently together, keeping vigil together. **In our parish, let us try to do that in our individual homes for all or part of the time from 7.00 pm-8.00 pm on Holy Thursday.** We will be joined together in a holy communion. What a great thought and a great prayer! In the church, the altars are stripped and the candles removed or covered. This, for some, symbolizes the stripping of Christ for His crucifixion. Whatever the case, all our symbols for this Mass remind us that the Eucharist is a living and real symbol of the *Paschal Mystery*; that is the mystery of our redemption.

## REFLECTION ON GOOD FRIDAY AND HOLY SATURDAY

As with Holy Thursday, in *the Solemn Liturgy of the Lord's Passion* on Good Friday, we encounter some special signs or marks that help us explore the spiritual focus of this day. In fact, on Good Friday, we are presented with a powerful *theology or spirituality of the cross*. We can recall a central part of Jesus' teaching; that if we wish to be his disciples, we too must take up our cross and follow him (Matthew 16: 24). Given all that has happened over the last few weeks, we can certainly understand our Lord's words. We and our loved ones have had to carry many unexpected and heavy crosses with the coronavirus pandemic.

**Why do we say "Good" Friday?** What is good about Jesus' terrible suffering, as depicted in the Gospels, or in movies such as "the Passion of the Christ"? Perhaps we can see it this way. Good Friday is a day when we grasp just a little bit more, that "God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son" (John 3: 16). It is a day then of love and adoration of Jesus Christ, crucified for us. We can only bow down in wonder before such great love. He has been through everything...and, for us! This is movingly shown in another special mark or sign on Good Friday at the very beginning of the liturgy. The priest, deacon and any ministers enter in silence, go up to the sanctuary and then prostrate themselves before the altar (the altar being the symbol of Christ and his sacrifice) as a sign of love and devotion.

There is also, of course, a sense of loss on this day. Here we experience another one of our marks or signs, for on Good Friday we are required to fast as well as to abstain from meat. Why so? Because it is a time of fasting for, as Jesus predicted, the disciples will fast when the bridegroom is taken from them (Luke 5:33-35). This feeling of absence and loss is also echoed in the absence of certain familiar things in the church. If we look to the altar, we will see that it is bare, with no cloth, nor candles, nor cross; the tabernacle is still empty and there is no holy water. Again, this year we can readily identify with that sense of loss. Perhaps we have loved ones who are sick or who have died, we miss the Eucharist or adoration, we miss the sense of community when we go to Mass etc. etc.

The special **readings** for Good Friday have, of course, been chosen to help us deepen our understanding of the meaning of Jesus and the cross. The First Reading (Isaiah 52: 13-53:12) is almost like a poem or song. In fact, it is known as one of the four *canticles*, or songs, of the suffering servant of God. Written a number of centuries before the birth of our Lord, these canticles are understood as prophecies about Jesus: who he is and what he goes through for us. In the Second Reading (Hebrews 4:14-16, 5: 7-9), Jesus is our great "high priest." He is not remote from us, but rather has been tested in every way and so he is what we might call a sympathetic "high priest" for us. The account of the Passion in St. John's Gospel is read every year. As we have noted before, each Gospel writer offers us his particular and inspired insights. St. John wishes us to hear about the victory of the cross: Jesus is both the lamb sacrificed and king; he is both victim and conqueror.

Another mark or sign of the liturgy on Good Friday is the extended **General Intercessions**. They are some of the most ancient prayers we have in the Church. They remind us of the universal effects of Jesus' passion: Jesus suffered, died and rose for all. There are normally 10 intercessions, but, this year, Pope Francis has asked that we add an extra one. It is offered for our nation and the world at this time of difficulty. The one we are using here in the Albany Diocese has been specially written for our Diocese.

We then have a further mark or sign particular to this day, as we **venerate the cross**. It is a symbol of the sacrifice of Jesus that has given us life. The veneration is seen as an act of faith, hope and love; not in a thing or a corpse, but in Christ who reigns supreme through the cross. In fact, we can say that the cross becomes the tree of life for us, undoing the sin of Adam and Eve who ate from the forbidden tree. Some commentators on this part of the liturgy also remark that in venerating the cross, we should also remember to allow the cross into our own lives. However perhaps the real stress here is on what God has done for us, rather than on our response. As the words at this moment of the liturgy say: “behold the wood of the cross on which hung the salvation of the world...come let us adore.” This year, as we cannot venerate the cross in our church, perhaps we could make some sign of veneration to a cross or crucifix that we have in our home.

On Good Friday, because our Saviour is taken from us, no Mass is celebrated. Instead, we would usually receive the Eucharist that has been reserved from the Mass on Holy Thursday. This may seem a strange custom: if there is no Mass, why receive the Eucharist? It is done as a sign or mark of the link between Calvary and the Last Supper. The Eucharist is indeed a memorial: a *representation* of Jesus’ sacrifice for us. Again, this year, we cannot receive Holy Communion on this day, but we can still enter into a spiritual communion with our Lord and with each other. Finally, we can notice the simple and silent end of the liturgy. There is no blessing for example, since the author of all blessings has died for us and we have not yet completed the holy three days as Good Friday will lead to Easter Sunday...

Perhaps it is worth adding a footnote about **Holy Saturday**...This day is often forgotten, or it becomes the busy day on which all the necessary arrangements are made for the Easter Vigil. This is a pity, since the day is full of marks or symbolism. It is a day of waiting by the tomb. We fast, waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. We meditate of Jesus’ descent among the dead, searching for those who were lost before the coming of the Messiah. This year, the idea of watching and waiting may seem all too familiar to us. We have spent so much time, watching and waiting during the pandemic. As the month of April draws on, let us renew our efforts to use this time of watching and waiting wisely and well.

The theme of “rest” comes up quite often in what is called the *Divine Office* for the day. Jesus rests in the tomb and we await His resurrection. The readings recall that God rested after His work of creation; we think of the work of recreation accomplished in Christ. We are reminded of our final rest in union with God in Heaven. There is also a sense of anticipating the resurrection of Jesus in this resting: “awake sleeper and arise from the dead.”

## THE EASTER VIGIL

The Easter Vigil is the climax of the whole liturgical year and is, as Saint Augustine once remarked, “the mother of all sacred vigils.” The Vigil is long and complex: it is very rich indeed with many signs and lots of symbolism. It finds its fullest expression in the Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion of the catechumens, the full communion of the candidates and in the renewal of the baptismal promises and the Easter communion of all the baptized. This year, due to the pandemic, we will have a somewhat truncated Vigil. Sadly, the celebration of the sacraments of initiation is postponed and the Blessing of the Easter Fire and the Preparation of the Easter Candle are to be omitted. Despite all this, we can still enter into the sense of awe and joy on this most holy night. So, let us look at all the elements of the Vigil...

As mentioned, the Blessing of the **Easter Fire and the Preparation of the Easter Candle** will not happen this year. It is still worth saying a few words about these once-a-year rituals. Even before the Vigil begins, we would encounter a special mark or sign outside the church: The Easter fire. While a towering inferno is not needed, the rubric does ask that the fire be “large”. The original reason for having a fire may have been simply a practical one, but it has become full of symbolism for centuries. The fire reminds us of the need for purification: fire purifies and it burns away the old. The church then on this night is purified and reborn, especially in those who will be baptized and with all who will renew their baptismal promises. As the prayer to bless the fire says: “sanctify this new fire and grant that by these paschal celebrations, we may be so inflamed with heavenly desires, that with minds made pure, we may attain festivities of unending splendor.” Well, even though we will not have an actual fire this year, we can still pray for that spiritual fire within us!

The Service of Light would normally continue by focusing our attention on another sign: “Christ our Light,” symbolized in the Easter Candle. As the Israelites had a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them on their journey, so we have the risen Christ as our guide and our light. The ritual is also packed with signs. As we enter the church in darkness, we can be reminded of that very primordial symbolism of light and darkness, that is of good or evil. Indeed, with the ease of electric light, it is very easy for us to forget the powerful symbolism of light...and darkness.

Normally, the **Easter Candle** would be prepared in front of everyone. This year, it will have been prepared before the Vigil. See if you can catch a glimpse of the Candle and its special markings if you are watching the Vigil on the TV, or a computer, or smart phone. The markings on the Easter candle are symbolic and an important reminder that God’s plan of salvation is fulfilled in Christ. A special prayer is said as the candle is prepared: “Christ yesterday and today, the alpha and the omega...all time belongs to him...to him be glory and power...” In other words, God’s plan continues through all ages, including our own and, what is more, we are very much involved in that plan. This is why the Easter candle also has the year “2020” on it. We can also recall that the Easter candle is lit during the ceremony of our baptism as our life’s journey begins and it will also be there at our funeral when our journey is complete.

Five grains of incense are placed into the cross on the candle (recalling the five wounds of Christ: his hands, his feet and his side) with the words “by his holy and glorious wounds, may Christ the Lord guard us and protect us.” Once again, we are reminded that we can never be passive spectators in the Christian life, nor is the liturgy a simple remembering; but rather it is a real making present of the saving power of God. Then we then complete the first part of the Vigil by



hearing another special mark or sign: The *Exsultet* or Easter Proclamation. It is a great song of praise and joy, recalling all that God has done for us over the many centuries of God's plan of salvation.

The **Liturgy of the Word** that follows also recalls the great events in the history of our salvation, read in the light of Christ who fulfills God's promise. Notice that the Easter Candle is placed right by the ambo. The light of the risen Christ is the fulfillment and full meaning of the Scriptures and, of course, he is, the Word of God. We read or hear the Scriptures always in and through the light of Christ. In a way, the readings are the last instruction given to the elect before their baptism, and they are reminders for those already baptized of the great things God has done for us. A more detailed account of the readings appears in the Easter edition of "the Evangelist."

There is also dialogue or conversation in all these readings. We hear the history of our salvation, and then we respond in the psalm or by a prayerful silence, and also by the prayer after each reading. Then the great hymn of praise, the Gloria, is sung, and the three-fold Alleluia is proclaimed: what has been absent during Lent is now present again! We sing the last of what are called the Hallel psalms, which is the Easter psalm *par excellence*: (Jesus) "the stone rejected by the builders has become the corner stone." Then we hear again the Easter Gospel and are presented with *the* potent Easter symbol or sign: the empty tomb.

A great absence this year will be the **Liturgy of Baptism** that follows the readings. It reminds us that we approach each Easter just as we might do if we were about to be baptized. It is worth just saying a few words about what would normally happen during this Rite. The Rite of Initiation is really packed with signs and symbolism: water that brings life and refreshment and that washes clean; oil that is a mark and seal of the Holy Spirit; candles that remind us of the light of the risen Christ and the baptismal robe that reminds us that we are to put on Christ as our clothing. We can follow along as the new members of the church receive the sacraments of initiation. In so many ways, these new members of the church are a living mark or sign of Easter and all that it brings.

Since this initiation is delayed this year, let us pray for all those in our parish and Diocese who now have to wait patiently to receive these great sacraments. Let us hope that this will be very soon. At least we can renew our baptismal promises. If we are following and praying along with the Vigil through the media, let us join in with great gusto and passion as the various questions are asked of us during the profession and renewal!

Another great absence this year will be receiving the **Easter Eucharist** as a community: the newly baptized and received into the church, along with all the continuing community of faith. However, as we have done for a number of weeks now, we can still enter into a "spiritual communion." We do have a communion with the Lord and each other, even if it is not the actual Eucharist. Let us also remember that when we partake of the Eucharist, we do indeed receive "Christ our Passover, sacrificed for us", and pray that we too may pass from death to new life. Indeed, may the Easter season be for all of us, our families and friends, a special season of life, light and hope, even in this continued time of anxiety and difficulty.