

EASTER TRIDUUM 2024

Maundy Thursday

On Palm Sunday we began a journey, setting out waving branches and singing 'Hosanna'. Tonight, the journey continues and the question for all of us is "can we see the journey through?"

We need to ask the question because the journey is always going to be one of contrasts. Branches and Hosannas at one turn, ashes, crosses and cries of pain and anguish at the next.

Even tonight's liturgy shares in those contrasts. Beginning with a joyful *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, turning to a foot washing that symbolises both the depth of human need and heights of humble service, then uphill to the joyful mystery of the Eucharist and our sharing in a foretaste of the heavenly banquet before the mournful decent downhill to the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Our opening hymn reminds us however, that this is not a journey we take on our own: "*We are companions on the journey*". We travel together, we break bread together, we are fed and nourished together, we are gifted with each other, and together we are called to act with justice, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God.

And that acting with justice, loving tenderly, and walking humbly is tonight symbolised and played out in the ritual of foot washing – of being prepared to be the humble servant of others as a sign of our quest for justice and the good of the other.

Jesus, having washed his disciples' feet, issues a command:

"So I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you."

The common title for today is Holy Thursday. A relatively new innovation that has nothing to recommend it for minimises and sterilises the meaning of the day. For most of my life I've known it as Maundy Thursday, a title that is now officially back since the introduction of the new translation of the Mass about 13 years ago – but you still rarely hear it used.

The proper title for today has a lot to teach us. Maundy, from the Latin, Mandatum, means it is mandated, it is ordered, it is obligatory. It refers to the symbolism of the foot washing and Christ ordering us to follow his example. All the baptised, all disciples of Jesus, are mandated to act as Jesus did. To act justly, to seek the good of others, to get down on our knees and serve those who are the most vulnerable and most in need. Tonight teaches us this way of life for the Christian is not an optional extra - it is mandated!

And we find the strength to take that journey and live that life in journeying together. Not alone but as part of a community of faith united around the Christ who invites us to share his journey.

We have been gifted with each other, breaking bread and sharing life; and we are called by the Word of the Lord: to act with justice, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with our God, to walk humbly with our God.

Let us see the journey through – to the Cross – and to Resurrection!

Good Friday

This year, we celebrate Holy Week and Easter in a context of large-scale wars and conflicts the likes of which the world has not seen for some time. There is a sense of helplessness as we watch the war in Ukraine entering the third straight year and the Israel-Palestine conflict unfolding with deadly consequences for both kidnapped Israelis and innocent Palestinians who have suffered occupation, dispossession, and a brutal form of apartheid in their own land while most have turned a blind eye at best or at worst are implicated in the dispossession of a people for purely ideological reasons. Most of us are horrified and unsure of how to respond. The shock and scope of these events are overwhelming and beyond comprehension.

Holy Week and Good Friday provides us with a true antidote to the reciprocal violence. We began Holy Week on Palm Sunday with the celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. It is a symbolic gesture that subverts power and domination. In Christ, we are called to witness to a different way of being in the world, a different way of being in community with one another, and a different way of being sisters and brothers to one another.

These great days of Holy Week stir us to transformative action, for it gives us a glimpse of the victory of love over hatred and life over death. It was not evil that had the upper hand. It was not injustice, violence and death that had the last word. It was God's unflinching fidelity, his unconditional love in Jesus that brought about the victory of peace.

Good Friday calls us to renew our commitment to follow the humble suffering of the trustful and fearless Messiah. God is involved with the pain and suffering of our world. God is involved in our quest for justice, peace, the flourishing of all peoples, and the fruitful wholeness of creation itself. The victory of peace and wholeness is won by the awesome power of compassionate love, in and through solidarity with those who suffer.

The work of the Cross of Christ is the work of a transcendent God, breaking into a cycle we cannot change alone. To believe in the crucified one is to want no other victims. To depend on the blood of Jesus is to refuse to depend on the sacrificial blood

of anyone else. It is to refuse to play the mob that makes a scapegoat out of the victim who may be the weak, the marginalized and the minority among us.

The Church, the people of God, as a new community formed through identification with the crucified one, must be dedicated both to the innocent victim whom God has vindicated by resurrection and to a new life in Christ that overcomes conflict and destruction in all its forms and guises.

May we follow the example of Jesus the Suffering Servant who shows us the way of disarming hatred with love, evil with goodness, violence with peace, injustice with justice, oppression with freedom, indifference with compassion, closed minds and intransigent ideologies with a willingness to simply listen to the stories of others.

May our commitment to heal and transform our wounded humanity, and our broken earth, be brought to fruition in accordance with God's plan in Christ.

May we travel together from the hill of Calvary and crucifixion to the new life promised in the dawn of Easter and the new life that we are called to live – hand in hand with our sisters and brothers – both neighbours and strangers together - travelling as one humanity into that future moment when the whole of creation reaches that omega point of consummation in the Cosmic Christ and the fulfilment of perfect unity and harmony.

Easter Vigil

Once again, we are entering the most sacred, grace-filled and transformative time in the Church's liturgy. The long and often sombre Holy Week ceremonies that culminates in the celebration of Easter is a powerful journey of the re-enactment of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Everything we believe and hold dear is grounded in this paschal mystery.

Easter gives us the meaning, strength, and power to transform the world in which we live. Easter provides us with the horizons of hope within which we strive for the full realisation of the reign of God.

At the heart of the Easter message is the summons to a new future against the background of entrenched hopelessness. As with Mary and the disciples, who were emboldened to move from the shadows of crucifixion into the light of the resurrection, the Church today must be a pioneer leading humanity to a new dawn of greater justice, equality and fraternity.

As Church, as the people of God, we cannot be an inward-looking institution but an outgoing and prophetic community of disciples. The God who raised Jesus from the dead leads us beyond our limited horizons to a new future of life to the full. This life to the full is not static or a closed system but ever expanding and evolving.

In fact, the essence of Christian hope is contained in the abundant life that Jesus brought about through His death and resurrection. The whole point of the Risen Christ is our human capacity to become a new type of person who can do new things for a new heaven and a new earth.

Hence, we must release ourselves from both religious individualism and personal social and political ideology and confront the general or acceptable religious, social and political experience, which is cosmic and evolutionary, and involve ourselves in the divine mandate of the flourishing of the whole of life, the flourishing of the whole of creation.

Without bringing these understandings into a new religious story that animates our lives and focuses our energies in a new direction, we will have diminished our mission, failed in our mandate, failed to live Easter and the risen life to which we are called.

Easter is not merely about our own salvation and the afterlife of heavenly bliss. Easter is God conquering the forces of evil and darkness here and now. Easter is God reconciling the estranged creation.

We are called to partner with God in bringing the victory of the cosmic Christ to fulfilment. Easter, therefore, obliges us to work for both personal and cosmic transformation.

“Cosmic transformation” means working for the community of life of which we are a part. It means working for the whole of creation that God created, sustains and destines for flourishing.

It means that we become a place where the poor and the forgotten can be brought into a new unity; a Church that advocates life at all costs and promotes peace in a war-torn and violent world; a Church that models justice in an age of greed, consumerism, oppression, and power; a Church centred on the risen Christ, empowering a consciousness of the whole.

In the words of Pope Francis, let’s pray in Easter 2024 that the risen Jesus of Nazareth: “May open us to the newness that transforms, to the beautiful surprises of God. May he help us to feel his presence as the one who is alive and at work in our midst. And may he teach us each day, dear brothers and sisters, not to look among the dead for the Living One.”

Christ is risen. Alleluia.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Easter Sunday

Sadly for many Easter has become a mediocre feast - a feast of moderation.

In its beginnings Easter was a time of extremes. Life and hope flared out from where death and darkness had reigned. Easter represented the victory of life over death, of victory over a crushing defeat, connection over isolation, freedom over captivity, hope over despair.

It is an exuberant feast in which the overflow of joy is measured by the depths of grief that have preceded it. In the Christian churches Easter Sunday follows Good Friday which focuses on Christ's torture and brutal execution. It represents the hope that speaks to the experience of the loss of everything at the personal, national, and universal level.

If we smooth over the extremes of Easter, ignore or avoid the evil brutality of Good Friday, underplay the depth of darkness with which the light of Easter contrasts, we finish with a beige mediocre feast that means sweet beggar all. Small pain, small gain.

That is true also of the story of Easter. Seen from God's perspective the story of Easter represents God's salvation of humanity as seen in Jesus' rejection, humiliation, tortured execution intended to wipe out all claim on humanity, leading to his rising to life. The Scriptures variously describe this as being taken out of death into life, from slavery into freedom, from sin to forgiveness, and from despair into joy.

In each of these images early Christians measured the astounding and exuberant joy of Jesus' rising by the horrific story of his death. The extent of our salvation is matched to the equally dramatic extent of our need. If we pass lightly over the reality of human sinfulness and the extent of our need, we also minimise the extraordinary gift of salvation and domesticate the scope of God's promises. A small need and a sanitised crucifixion lead to a restrained and mediocre happiness at the minor victory that was won at Easter.

The reality is the extremes of Easter speak to our own times. If we only open our eyes we can see the depth of our need as members of the human race. Our inadequate attempts to deal with climate change revealed in flood and bushfire, our vulnerability to disease revealed in the coronavirus, our incapacity to manage the risks of scientific and technological discovery revealed in the threat of nuclear war and artificial intelligence, our inability to recognise and deal honestly with the injustices that breed terrorism, war, violence, poverty and inequality, whether it be in Gaza, Ukraine, or our own backyard, all speak to the need for a salvation greater than technology, politics and business as usual can meet. They demand a united human response where individuals, communities and nations come together to act, caring for the people most in need – caring for the creation and environment God has gifted to us.

To make this response we need hope. Easter Sunday invites us to recognise the depth of our need and the greatness of our hope. We believe that we live in the presence of

the risen Christ who has experienced the depths of our betrayals and misery and has risen to offer us a vision of a world beyond human possibility and our imagining.

That is what Easter offers us. That is what the Risen Christ offers us. We can embrace hope because Easter has defeated the events of Good Friday. Risen life has defeated brutality and death – but only if we have the courage to recognise our own need for salvation and the humility to cry out ‘Lord I believe - help my unbelief’. Then we can begin a new day, the old day is done and dusted – and if we live in the Easter Christ all can be made new.

Christ is risen. Alleluia.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.