

The Meaning of Holy Week

Love would never leave us alone.

Everything in Holy Week speaks of love.

The liturgies, which run from Palm Sunday on April 9 through Easter Sunday on April 16, are often long, for example, because love endures; the liturgies are sensual, because love depends on bodily intimacies (touch, smell, sight, sound); the liturgies are sorrowful, because every day love is violated; the services are mysteriously joyful, because no violation of love exhausts love's mercy. Indeed, the Holy Week journey that recounts day by day the story of Christ's death and so seems nothing if not tragic is, properly understood, from beginning to end the story of a wedding—everything speaks of love.

This, at least, is the conviction of one old tradition that places the image of Christ the Bridegroom at the very beginning of the most sacred week of the Christian year. Of the many titles given to God in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Saviour, Lord, Father), Bridegroom is arguably the most common and significant. Holy Week is a journey into the mystery of a divine desire to be 'wed' to our humanity not simply in its beauty and goodness, but in its deepest and most profound darkness and forsakenness. In all of the liturgies and sermons, in the music and the silence, one truth will be proclaimed over and over again: that, though the world may betray love, 'Love,' as Bob Marley sings, 'would never leave us alone.'

The daily liturgies of Holy Week are animated by lengthy readings from the four Gospels (the 'biographies' of Jesus at the beginning of the Christian New Testament). The reading of the story of Christ's suffering begins on **Palm Sunday** with a procession through the University grounds that includes a live donkey, palm branches, and choir, in commemoration of the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem the week before his death and resurrection. The procession insists that we are not simply witnesses of the events of Holy Week, but participants. Historically, Jesus came to Jerusalem and was received as the Messianic King. The crowds that rejoiced to see him arrive quickly abandoned him and called for his death once they realized that he preached not a political or social revolution, but a revolution of the heart. Palm Sunday suggests that there is a tension, even a deep contradiction, in our relationship to love.

Mysteriously, the Gospel narratives that begin on Palm Sunday and are the most distinctive feature of the liturgies through Wednesday, offer us a unique way to cultivate our capacity to pay attention. By paying attention to the life of Jesus of Nazareth we discover the capacity to pay deeper attention to others as well as to ourselves. Indeed, as we listen attentively we begin to hear echoes of our contemporary reality in the narratives. For example, we may begin to see that the coercive use of power by the Roman authorities is not so different from the coercion that is practiced by most bureaucracies; we begin to see how tempting it is to sacrifice real people to abstract ideals of peace or justice. More urgently, we may begin to see ourselves or others in the story: some of us may be busy betraying the love we know, like Peter; some of us may have fallen asleep to love like the disciples on Maundy Thursday; others of us, like the Mary who anoints Jesus for burial early in the week, may be wide awake to love, even though this may require profound heartache.

The most unique services of the week begin on Wednesday evening with the candle-lit service of **Tenebrae**. This sung liturgy consists of chanted Psalms, lessons, and passages from the Lamentations of Jeremiah. As each psalm is sung, a candle is extinguished and the Cathedral Church darkens until only one candle remains. This service makes no demands on those in attendance other than attentiveness. It beautifully anticipates the “action” of the coming three days:

On **Maundy Thursday**, Tenebrae’s darkness gathers round Jesus who, after washing the feet of his disciples and calling them to love one another, is betrayed by Judas and abandoned by his dearest friends. We are invited to pray in the Chapel throughout the night. These late-night hours are a precious opportunity to sit in silence for an hour or more in the Chapel and simply bear witness to the world’s suffering. In the betrayal of Jesus we may find every betrayal of love in the history of the world — the daily domestic betrayals of family life, the betrayals of friends, the Church’s betrayals of its Master, the daily betrayals of the poor and oppressed in Halifax and beyond. If you do nothing else this Holy Week, come this night and bear witness.

On **Good Friday**, the darkness of Tenebrae is made complete when Jesus is crucified. As the Gospels suggest, this death has cosmic significance: the sun is darkened, the earth shakes. All of nature is confused by the death of the one John’s Gospel says is the “one by whom all things are made.” Jesus rests in the tomb for the remainder of Friday and Saturday — the Jewish Sabbath — and we are invited to rest as well. In some mysterious way these hours of quiet allow the week’s revelations to germinate in the soil of our hearts until, at the **Easter Vigil** on Saturday night, a large fire is kindled and the most important liturgy of the year begins with the Deacon announcing: The Light of Christ! The darkness of death is

overcome by the Resurrection and the entire cosmos is given a share in Christ's victory over death. **Easter Sunday** morning continues our celebration of the Resurrection.

So then, what do we discover in Holy Week? Many things. The week is an antidote to the culture of distraction that numbs us to both our own and others' loveliness and fragility; it is an alternative to the culture of consumption that reduces us to our most superficial appetites; it is the opportunity to discover that we are all complicit in the world's pain — and others are complicit in ours — and yet to do so from the perspective of forgiveness; it reminds us that the human use of power almost always coerces from above, but the divine use of love serves from below.

But more than all of this, Holy Week is about the discovery, in the words of Bob Marley, that "Love would never leave us alone." Though the world may turn its back on Love, Love himself is always turning towards us. In Holy Week, we dare to believe that there is a Bridegroom for each and everyone of us — one who wishes to take upon himself all that is ours, including the betrayals and sadnesses of our lives, in order to give us all that is his, including his life and love.

The Rev'd Canon Dr Gary Thorne