

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” HOLY WEEK AND THE TRIDUUM

Dear Preachers:

As I reflect upon the readings for these days, I have some general thoughts from my own preaching notes that might be useful for any of the preachings we do from Thursday to Easter Sunday.

I was advised once not to think of these days as separate events but to keep their unity in mind. You cannot think of one of these days out of the context of the other two. So, Good Friday needs also to be seen in the light of Easter; Easter has to be faced in light of Good Friday. You hold the pain and death while mindful of the new life of Easter; you celebrate the new life of Easter mindful of what it came out of--the death of Good Friday.

I also enter these days reminded that I am not pretending to be “there when they crucified my Lord.” These events we celebrate are present tense, not some ancient happening. God is either healing our wounds, giving us bread for our journey and overcoming death or God is doing nothing at all for us. We are looking not for a return from the dead-on Jesus’ part, but we are looking for someone to roll away the stone and open a whole new way of life for us. We don’t need a past hero, but someone to open up the present and future for us; show us possibilities now and into our future. On our own, facing our deaths and struggles, we see no path, no sense to what we experience. But if the stone were rolled back we might see new life and transformation possible for us.

Holy Thursday....the links to the Passover are obvious. Note the Gospel starts with that link, "Before the Passover." The Triduum is seen as a Passover for the whole church. Just as the Jewish people saw the Passover as a present reality ("Why is this night different from every other night?") so Jesus' death and resurrection are seen as a present reality for us. The symbols and words associated with the cross have changed and have become more focused on anguish, blood and the wounds. For a people suffering this makes a lot of sense. But the earliest tradition was marked by a sense of triumph, the more ancient the crucifixes, the more likely they were to show Christ as victor. Christ is shown as conqueror of the powers of oppression and evil. Ancient hymns, referring to the wounds, stress the theme that the Church, as a source of life and healing, is born from the wounds of Christ.

Thus, the present tense aspect of this Passover of ours; the death of Jesus is a source of life for us now.

Some thoughts on the Passover that might also be applied to these days: it is a feast that stands at the heart of the Hebrew scriptures. God brought Israel out of Egypt. The people remember they were set free by blood--it is more a story of divine actions than of human events. For us too, God is the key actor these days. I am struck by the first readings from the Hebrew texts and how often God is the speaker and the doer--note the "I wills" and the "I delivers" and the "I will saves" in the readings. These are like a small local community celebrating "Memorial Day", remembering "who did what for whom." The church is remembering how we passed from death to life, and we had nothing to do with it--- the initiative was God's.

Passover also had a "not yet" quality to it, a longing for total and final deliverance. The Eucharist can be seen in these terms as well. It is a meal that states that things are "not yet". The preacher might point to local and worldwide realities that show us that much is incomplete. We still have much to face and in our lifetimes will continue to see things uncompleted. As we realize that, even with all our efforts, there will be much left undone and even misdirected, what will keep us from throwing up our hands in frustration and despair?

The Eucharist is the meal that, like the Passover, sustains us "IN THE MEANTIME". It also gives us a vision of some future day when it will be all done and God will finally free us to share the Paschal feast in full communion with God and one another. With that vision renewed at our Eucharist, we can once again enter the struggle to bring about the community of love and justice Jesus envisioned for us.

The preacher, in the light of the foot-washing, might want to recognize the volunteers of the parish at the Holy Thursday celebration.

Good Friday forces us to stare death in the face and keeps us from jumping too quickly ahead to a giddy celebration of Easter. We are not involved in some biological or natural process here. It is not like the way we wait through a hard winter with crust frozen soil, knowing, as day follows night, that there will be Spring. We are sure flowers will bloom soon; indeed they have already begun to do

that. But their flowering, and the new shoots breaking through the earth, are not “proofs” of a resurrection awaiting us all. Nature might make a good example when we want to make the Resurrection “reasonable”, “expected”, almost “logical”. But note that in the Southern Hemisphere, Easter comes in Fall, the dying season. Maybe Good Friday and Autumn make better partners.

What’s clear in the narratives is that a human died. That’s supposed to be the last word; he is dead. He is the son of Mary, and like so many other mothers, she has seen her son die. This day links us with so many parents who have lost their children to violence. And as we suggested on Palm Sunday, it also is a day to think about preaching against the death penalty. Mary is not expecting him to return in the Springtime with the flowers. Good Friday says, “that’s that”.

Easter is more than flowers catching us by surprise. This may seem like a good metaphor, but we expect them, whereas, we don’t have a basis to expect the Resurrection. Metaphors pale in the light of what God did; God did something much more. We take death seriously so that we can be completely surprised by Easter. Sunday will require that we see everything completely differently. Now Resurrection is the lens through which we see everything. Nothing quite matches what Resurrection really is, and we take its surprise to our daily lives as we face death in all its forms. When we are confronted by the dyings, we should not gloss over them as if they were easily overcome. Good Friday requires us to take these deaths seriously, they are beyond our power to triumph and when new life comes and a way through opens, we know they have their origins in a more powerful source than ourselves.

We sit at the Vigil Service having suffered the violence of Jesus’ death and all the other deaths and endings we have endured. We vigil, realizing how weakened we are by death and all the other corrupting forces in our lives. As we vigil we wait to hear the Easter announcement of Luke’s Gospel.

The women’s account is taken as “nonsense” by the disciples. The Greek word used for “nonsense” or “idle talk” (NRSV) describes the talk or babbling of a person in delirium. But we who listen to the account are in on “the secret” and we know the disciples are really speaking nonsense and idle talk. Later in the Emmaus story, the risen Lord will call the disciples “foolish” and “slow to believe”. In Luke’s telling of the story, not even the women seem to believe; they

are relating what happened to them and what they heard. It will take the appearances of the Risen Lord and his own teaching of the disciples to finally open their eyes.

Sloyan comments on the details of the story. He says the number of youths or messengers at the empty tomb and the details of what the women say and do are not important. What is important is their concern and fidelity in the light of the fear of the male disciples. For Luke, the central message of the resurrection narratives is the question, “Why do you search for the living One among the dead?” Jesus is not merely a resuscitated corpse, but the living One. Jesus now lives a different life, the life of the new age. This life, as we heard in our Vigil readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, was longed for and anticipated for centuries.

Sloyan concludes:

“The marvel has happened. The gospel has reached us. A question for us is, does it make any difference?

I do not put the question as it touches our individual lives of faith. Undoubtedly it does. We dare to hope that we shall live again. Our faith conviction is that if sin cannot master us, the grave cannot hold us. But that can be a private treasure, a product not for export. I ask another question. What difference does it make to world markets, to oppressed peoples, to the poorest of the poor, that we believe in resurrection from sin and death? Have *they* felt the difference that our faith has made? To whom, if to anyone, have we proclaimed, “He is not here. He is risen,” in a way that made any real difference to them?

This is not an Easter question. It is the Easter question.”

—Gerard S. Sloyan in “Homilies for the Christian People”, (Pueblo Publishing Co. N.Y.),
p.452-3

Additional Suggestions—

1. Be careful these days not to caricature the Jewish faith. The Gospels portray its piety and leaders in a very unsympathetic light. Don't become an unconscious anti-Semite. Such bashing of the Jews can reveal an insecure faith, seeking assurance in caricaturing the faith of others.

Jewish people suffered their worst pogroms during Holy Week at the hands of Christians. So, be careful of subtle forms of anti-Semitism.

2. Be careful to respect the integrity of each Gospel. Don't harmonize or fill in to make a composite picture. Stay within the text and treat it distinctively, learn how each writer saw and witnessed the Christ event.

3. Remember that the principle actor is God. There are some key figures in the stories for meditation (Peter, Pilate, etc.), but in the Gospels this week Jesus absorbs our attention. Put aside all else, even the "moral lessons." We see nothing but Jesus, and him crucified. What is God doing and saying to us this week?

4. The Triduum is a unity: this contradicts the conventual wisdom that sees each day as a separate unit. Note that in each day of the Triduum there is explicit reference to the whole paschal liturgy. Each particular day commemorates the whole of the mystery, while at the same time emphasizing one aspect of the events. So, we preach Good Friday in its defeat and pain in the light of the hope of the resurrection; we preach Easter in its glory, reminded of the seeming hopelessness of Good Friday. The renewed emphasis isn't on "holy week" but on the consciousness of the passion and resurrection as intimately bound to our own lives as church.

5. This is a good time to work with the lectors. The Word this week is powerful in its drama, lively in the hearing. The congregation won't need to follow along with a written text if the lectors and participating preachers are well prepared.

6. I want to be careful how I preach about suffering and death during these days. I wonder how we can think of them as positive? In the Scriptures of the Jewish people, suffering and death are to be avoided and, where possible, alleviated. The hope we have as Christians is that God will do away with both at the end. It seems to be always the poor who suffer the most, who always are the victims. So, during these days the preacher might invite the congregation to become more fully involved with God's plan to alleviate suffering by alleviating the suffering of the poor through deeper involvement in social programs. Good Friday, for example, should not be a day that keeps a silence of inattention to the suffering of others. If we keep a silence this day it may be to ponder the suffering of those around us and to resolve to do something about it.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

“The Three Days: Parish Prayer in the Paschal Triduum” by Gabe Huck.
(Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1981)

This is a gem of a resource for the Triduum. Good for planners of the liturgy with suggestions drawn from parish experience. Gives a wealth of information on the liturgy of these days and an overview of how the days form a unit.

QUOTABLE:

“Holy Week teaches that while nothing is impossible with God, we must wait for the realization of that possibility. This is difficult in an age that so values activity over passivity or contemplation. We moderns are happiest when we have something to do. We plan and plot, scheme and devise, work and produce. Through technological sophistication, we contrive to control the uncontrollable—future and destiny, success and defeat, history and mystery. We have come a long way in the modern effort to master chance. Palm Sunday counters this; it slows us down.

The man who comes seated on the colt is a sign of contradiction. He is a threat to the God whom we have made over in our image, a God of high achievement and performance, majesty and power, triumph and transcendence. God in Jesus of Nazareth unnerves and disturbs us. His crucifixion and death disclose the chosen vulnerability of God, the willingness of God to come among us, to share our ordinary lot, to suffer with us, to suffer for us.

...Holy Week prepares us to live in hope, in active, creative waiting. Holy Week teaches us to hope in future possibility, even in the face of negation. Indeed, when we hope in the absolute future, we grasp what was required of Jesus: that he stake his whole life on its being directed towards God, that he trust his life had a definite meaning in God, that he believe that God would save him and deliver him absolutely. This is hope that binds back to the heart of God all creation which has been scattered by sin. This is hope that heals and restores, that waits and creates.

...This week is holy for what it teaches us: to wait, to value being, presence and silence; to love without reserve; to live in compassionate and practical solidarity with women and men and children who suffer afflictions concretely, unbeautifully, actually; to hope.

Out of this waiting, in the midst of this love, within our solidarity comes

resurrection.

----M. Shawn Copeland in, "The Living Pulpit", January-March, 1998,

"Easter is God's class action suit against sin and death.

-----from a sermon by James A. Forbes

No death has greatness
but that from which new life
can spring.

No life more vital
than that which from the death
of Self takes wing.

-----from "The Book of Angelus Silesius" transl. by Frederick Franck

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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