

Holy Week: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told

Sometimes I'm asked when it was I decided to become a priest.

Truth be told, it was a gradual process. Little by little as I finished up at the U of M, I was beginning to think about the possibility of priesthood. But along the way, there were moments where the decision began to become more clear.

One of those moments was on Good Friday. I went to the evening liturgy, and was moved by the quietness and low lighting in the sanctuary as the crucifix was covered in black. The deacon led the service that evening, and referred to it simply as the greatest love story ever told in his remarks. I took that to heart as I listened to the Passion, and then venerated the cross. I look back at that moment and remember being moved, and thinking how much God cared about me, and then what I needed to do to respond to that love.

I'm not one with one of those "completely lost my way and found God" stories, but in my early 20s at the time, I certainly was trying to find some direction in life as I sorted out where I felt I was being called to do. I'd always gone to Mass, but I remember that liturgy helped me to focus more on trying to center my life even more on God, but also reminded me once again of how much God truly cared.

These days we have a little more time to think with our lives upended by the Corona virus. And sometimes I know I can think about the fear of not knowing when it will end, or what will happen next. But then I have to remind myself how much God truly cares. This week hits that point home more than ever.

Holy Week invites us to think more deeply about God's love, with each liturgy having it's unique components.

We start at Palm Sunday, and read the Gospel describing Jesus entering into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowds welcome Him with palm branches, much like they would a great prophet or leader, perhaps thinking He will be the one to end Roman rule. Yet within a few days, He is forgotten, seemingly just another failure, the crowds who welcomed Him nowhere to be found when He is condemned. Perhaps we can think about how we follow Jesus. Do we trust in Him when the bad times come too? Do we get sidetracked from following Him as other things get in the way in our lives? Do we deny Him when our faith is challenged?

Holy Thursday we celebrate the institution of the Eucharist. This year's Holy Thursday liturgy will be different in that we will not have the washing of the feet due to the absence of a congregation, but what strikes me with this liturgy is God's gift of being ever-present with us. God gives us the Eucharist as food for the journey, but then tells the apostles as well to live this out, as He washed their feet, including those of his betrayer Judas. This Mass reminds us of God being always with us, but also invites us to think about how do we wash one another's feet through actions of love and mercy.

We see that all around us these days as people help one another out through this trying time, but hopefully we also make it a way of life.

Good Friday we reflect on the Lord's Passion again, and the sanctuary is typically dim, the altar linens removed, the tabernacle empty. It hits home how far God goes for us; I think of the mental anguish of not knowing what would happen and seeing His closest friends leave Him too. At my first parish, the youth director once said to the youth group during a reflection that even if you were the only person in the world, Jesus still would have come and given His life for you. How true that is, and sometimes we forget just how much God is in love with us, loving us to the end.

Holy Saturday we celebrate the resurrection, and we begin at the fire with the Easter candle illuminating the darkness, celebrating Christ's passover from death to life. It reminds us of how life and resurrection have the last word. The worst possible thing happened; Jesus died, and all seemed lost. But all things are possible with God, and it leads to Jesus liberating us too from death forever.

Admittedly, this years liturgies will be difficult. Many of us won't be able to be in attendance at them. But my hope is as you enter into this week, even if you can't be in attendance at these liturgies, pause to think who God is to you. Pope Francis said it best, we need God as the ancient sailors needed the stars to navigate the skies. On Good Friday 20 years ago, I began to see what God wanted me to do, but also began to think more deeply about how much God cared for me. This God we worship knows our fears, our struggles, our sadness, and enters into all of these things with us. So let Him into your heart, and let Him chart the path for you to the heavenly kingdom.

God bless,

Fr. Paul