



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title:
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading	Genesis 23: 1-13
Second Reading	Isaiah 52: 13-53: 12
Third Reading	Hebrews 10: 1-25

Gospel	John 18: 1-19: 37
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Sermon One.

We have gotten used to shorter services over the years. This wasn't always the case, and the services for Good Friday are an example of where the tradition lives on. There are many churches even today that will celebrate a three-hour service of some sort: the Seven Last Words, *Siyete Palabras*, or some other devotion may take up the entire time period recorded by the evangelists that our Lord was on the Cross. We here at Holy Trinity offer something much more modest, but it nevertheless is longer than a typical service. The rite today is traditionally divided into three sections: the Liturgy of the Word, the Veneration of the Cross and the Holy Communion from the Reserved Sacrament. I would like to say something about each of these parts in the three homilies today.

It is the singing or reading of the Passion narrative that takes up much of the Liturgy of the Word today. On this most solemn and holy of days, we allow ourselves the time to hear once more the entire narrative of our Lord's suffering and death. Many

centuries ago, it became the custom to have this lengthy passage solemnly chanted, and to bring variety to this, it was sung by a single cantor in three ranges: each representing different characters. By the middle ages, the poor multi-ranged cantor was relieved by two more singers added to perform the parts, with the resulting often dramatic experience we will have today.

Hearing the Gospel in this way today is not meant to be a bible study, nor certainly an oratorio. It shouldn't show off the singers voices, but rather the words of the narrative themselves as we think about what today's events mean.

Perhaps we shouldn't do it this way. Perhaps singing the Gospel story for Good Friday is making it too artistic and palatable. The emotions of that day were, after all, raw and agonizing- not the carefully crafted operatic performances that church music most often tends to be.

But the Gospels were never written as history or narrative alone, but as proclamation. They were originally designed to be read in public, as part of worship as we do today. Private study, and thus personal reflection on the text, came only later. And if we are to proclaim this Gospel- to tell the world about what Jesus did for us- then it should be in a fashion that makes it clear that something momentous, dramatic and earth-shaking has happened. The proclamation- the announcement, and indeed the "performance" of this Good News is what the public services of the Church are all about- just as our response to the Gospel story, and to God's goodness, is not only a personal experience, but a shared, communal one. We pray together, we sing together, and we form community in response to the death we commemorate today and the Resurrection we will proclaim on Sunday.

And if this takes a bit more time than usual, so be it. Jesus is worth it.

Sermon Two.

The Second feature of the Good Friday liturgy is focused on the Cross. The central part of this is a symbolic cross brought forward to be the focus of devotion while ancient Christian hymns and canticles are read or sung. This so-called "Veneration of the Cross" goes back to at least the 4th century in Jerusalem where, it was believed, a piece of the actual Cross of Jesus was kept as a church treasure and brought out on special occasions for the people to see and honor. Descriptions of this suggest that the entire Christian population of the city took part in this, waiting in line for hours for their chance. While there are places, like the parish in Tarlac that is in the news, where relics of the True Cross purport to be shown to the congregation, others who perform this rite must be content with a cross or crucifix.

Actually coming forward to touch or kiss the cross is uncomfortable for some. It breaks into a passive meditation on our Lord's death and encourages us to act. We move, we walk, we bow, and we kiss- things that symbolize our response to this sign of our religion and of its Lord.

The act of coming forward to venerate the Cross might be uncomfortable enough for some, but there is something even more controversial that is part of this rite. When the rites of Holy Week were officially restored to the American Prayer Book, the draft edition included the verses called the Reproaches as part of the Good Friday rite. These are passages that list the examples of ingratitude on the part the people in response to God's love and compassion to them. The recurring refrain is poignant: *"My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!"* And the verses continue:

I led you out of Egypt, from slavery to freedom, but you led your Savior to the cross.

For forty years I led you safely through the desert. I fed you with manna from heaven, and brought you to a land of plenty.

I planted you as my fairest vine, but you yielded only bitterness...and you pieced your Savior with a lance.

And so it goes- image after image of the original Passover and the escape of Israel from Egypt juxtaposed with the way Christ was treated on this day- as if He were with us and speaking to us from the cross asking us why we have done this.

Some liturgists complained about the inclusion of the Reproaches. The imagery of the holiest memory of the Jewish religion shown up this way against our Lord's death seemed too anti-Semitic: as if it were the Jews alone who were responsible. But for those of us who choose to include some of the Reproaches, as will be done today, the point is not blaming the Jews, but identifying with them in their humanity and the fact that the rejection of God's plan for Salvation is not a racial issue, but a human one. For each of the aspects of God's work in the history of the Jews, each one of us has a story to tell of freedom, of release, of being led to a Promised Land of renewal and forgiveness. And each of us has a story of betrayal of that ideal, and of terrible ingratitude towards the God who has done so much for us.

The Reproaches are not meant for the Jews alone, however they have been interpreted in the past- but they are the expression of Jesus' terrible disappointment in the humanity He had come to show a new way of living, but who could only get the message through this terrible way of dying.

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you; because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.

Sermon Three.

It is one of the strange facts of the church year that on the very day when we commemorate Christ's death, the primary sacrament in which we make that Sacrifice

present for us is not generally celebrated. With some exceptions in our Anglican history, this has been the case since the earliest days of the Christian Church. Holy Communion is offered from the consecrated Bread left over from Thursday night's celebration, but the entire service is not repeated. Why?

Most probably because the Eucharist is a celebration. Even when the occasion is penitential or mournful, there is an aspect of joy and praise that permeates the mass. From Thursday night until Saturday night, however, the Church is in deepest mourning. The altars are stripped, the organ is silent, and the People of God are utterly bereft of its Lord. It is not a time for celebration- that must wait until the Resurrection on the Third Day.

Of course, there is something theatrical to this. Jesus is no longer dead on the Cross. We have the luxury of being able to see His Sacrifice for us from a wider perspective. We know that there is a happy ending to this tragic story. Indeed, as I've mentioned to you before, the Eastern Christian tradition uses the joyful word "alleluia" more times on Good Friday than just about any other time- in contrast to our careful, almost compulsive avoidance of it.

But liturgical theater has its place. Today, we are not just ourselves: we assume the roles of those who are experiencing the Crucifixion for the first time- those who stand at a distance and watch as the Lamb is slain for the sins of the world. We are, in essence, "pretending" to mourn, reliving the emotions, vicariously making the tragedy personal for us today.

But God does not abandon us today- he doesn't leave us without the assurance that something good will come out of all this suffering and all this death. The small token- this *pasalubong*- that he gives is the sharing in Holy Communion today- the piece of bread reminding us of what St Paul told us- that by sharing in this holy food, we show the Lord's death until he comes in glory.

And with that act, the three parts of the Good Friday liturgy come to a close and we leave, silently, introspectively to start to shift our gears and prepare for a new emotion, a new theme: the joy of Resurrection.

There are other ways of observing this day, beloved by many other Christian traditions throughout the world. This is our ancient way of doing it. It is not perfect, but it can be powerful. It proclaims the Gospel of Christ's death, it exalts the holy Cross upon which he died, and it offers us the consolation of the Body of Christ to give us the hope of joy tomorrow. Thanks be to God.