

March 28, 2010

On Ash Wednesday, we began our Lenten pilgrimage with prayer, penance, and works of charity. Our pilgrimage has led us to the most sacred week of the entire year. It begins Sunday with the celebration of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

It was for the solemn, sacred, and life-giving actions of this week that the Son of God became man. It was for this week that Jesus lived His hidden life and prepared Himself and His disciples through three years of proclaiming the kingdom of God, forgiving sins, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

Jesus spoke of the significance of the events of Holy Week in this way: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I solemnly assure you, unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12:23-24).

Jesus continued: "My soul is troubled now, yet what should I say – Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (Jn 12:27-28).

Jesus has come to Jerusalem knowing full well that the elders and leaders of the people were looking for an opportunity to arrest Him, have Him condemned and suffer the ignominious and cruel death on the cross. Jesus handed Himself over freely for us and for our salvation.

Before going to the Garden of Gethsemane where He would be arrested, Jesus celebrated the Jewish Passover with His apostles. During that Last Supper, He instituted the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist that we might "Do this in remembrance of me."

The Passover commemorated God's liberation of the chosen people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus is our Passover. Through His passage through the darkness and powerlessness of suffering and death to His glorious resurrection, He gained victory over sin and death for us and for our salvation.

In early February, I had the wonderful privilege of serving as spiritual director of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We were all deeply moved as we prayed at the Upper Room where Jesus celebrated the Last Supper, in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus suffered His agony and was arrested, the Way of the Cross, and in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre wherein we visited Golgotha and the Tomb where Jesus was buried and from which He rose.

However, during Holy Week we do not merely remember what happened to Jesus in that first Holy Week. We do not simply re-trace or re-live the last hours of Jesus' life and death. Rather, we enter into and celebrate mystery.

At each Mass after the institution narrative during which Jesus becomes truly present in the Eucharistic species, the priest says: "Let us proclaim the mystery of faith." The community responds with any of four responses. Each response proclaims the significance of the Paschal mystery. For instance: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Another response: "Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord, Jesus, come in glory."

When we celebrate the liturgies of the Paschal Triduum, we celebrate what Jesus is now doing for us and to us as His disciples whom He calls to conversion, gathers in faith, and empowers with His Holy Spirit. We celebrate the Father renewing us through and with Jesus' salvific love and strengthening us with the power of His Holy Spirit to bring, through our own self-giving, His forgiveness, justice, peace, and love into our families and into our world.

During our celebration and remembrance of the saving events of Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection, and bestowal of His Holy Spirit, the living Jesus is present to us and empowers us with His Body and Blood for our daily struggles to live in His light rather than in darkness, to practice virtue rather than sin, to move from apathy and indifference to commitment and service.

As Jesus freely surrendered Himself to His Father's will, so in our celebration of the Paschal Triduum and, indeed, every Mass, Jesus strengthens us to let go of our hurts, pains, disappointments, fears, and self-seeking in order to reach out in compassionate love and service to others.

In our celebration, we offer ourselves and our personal struggles along with the sufferings within our community to the Father through Jesus. We bring in spirit with ourselves those who suffer from violence, addiction, loneliness, sickness, racism, war, or terrorism. By our entering into Jesus' Paschal mystery, we come to know in a deeper way the depths of Jesus' love for us. His love empowers us to be our best selves, to overcome sin, fear, and anxiety. Our entering into the mystery of Jesus' resurrection grounds our hope with the assurance of everlasting life.

In the words of Sister Thea Bowman, offered from her death bed: "Let us resolve to make this week holy by claiming Christ's redemptive grace and by living holy lives."