

Good Friday

7th April 2023

'Triduum II, Silence & Communion'

Is 52–53: *He was pierced through for our faults*

Ps 30: *My life is in Your hands, deliver me from the hands of those who hate me.*

Heb 4; 5: *During His life on earth He offered up prayer and entreaty ...*

Jn 18–19: the Passion according to John.

The Good-Friday service is a unique one in the Catholic calendar. No other day's liturgy in the whole year is like this one, and for good reason, since it is the sacred day of Our Lord's Crucifixion. It's not Mass! It is a stark liturgy, almost 'bare.' We enter in silence, we disperse in silence, and fittingly so, for the death of the Lord on the Cross. Our Service begins with the Word — the great readings including the St John's powerful Passion account, and then the universal prayers for the Church and the world, for believers and non-believers alike. And then our solemn service continues with the Cross: the veneration of the wood on which our Saviour hung for those hours of agony at the culmination of His earthly life. The Cross is lifted up for us to gaze on with humble thanksgiving, and then we 'creep to the Cross' ... we come forward to kiss lovingly that rough instrument on which He died, on which He saved us. I wish to focus firstly, today, on the *silence*.

I. SILENCE.

There was an elderly abbot that I knew, in a monastery where I like to go on retreat, and he wasn't a great fan of the homily. Of course, he knew it had its place; but he also used to say that sometimes there's no real need for a homily ... The Scripture speaks for itself, and sometimes the homily can detract from Scripture's own powerful message. I certainly feel a bit like that on Good Friday when we have proclaimed together the Passion according to St John. What can one say after that? What *is* there to say? How can my words add to the sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God? He has died for love of me; He has died to take my sins away. Part of me just wants to fall into a silent reverie as I contemplate that Jesus would actually do this for me, for us, for humanity.

It is right that *silence*, therefore, does form a part of our stark Good Friday liturgy: the solemn silent entrance; the silent kneeling in prayer at the start; the falling to our knees in silence at the death of Jesus in the Passion reading; the kneeling for silent prayer in the General

Intercessions in a few minutes' time; the brief silences in between the hymns as we creep to the Cross to venerate it; the silent exit today, as we leave, in contemplation of what we have witnessed to this Good Friday. And silence is good; silence is good for us, especially when there's nothing more that needs saying, or would add nothing. Silence doesn't necessarily indicate disconnection ("giving someone the silent treatment.") Silence can also indicate the sort of deep love that doesn't require voiced words. Think of the silence of a loving, long-married couple: they don't always need to talk, they can be comfortable in each other's presence without words. Our silence in the face of the Cross is a bit the same: we gaze reverently on this One, Jesus, who loves us so deeply. His often-silent actions, e.g. His refusal to answer many accusers' taunts, are not a sign of disconnection from humanity, but indeed a sign of His quiet commitment to His loving, suffering, mission.

There's a line that ends a reading that families often choose for funerals (it's in the Book of Lamentations) and which I always find very powerful: "*It is good to wait in*

silence for the Lord to save." God is not a loud God, a 'shouty' bullying God; He is the God of gentleness and sometimes of silence. He is powerful in His silence; just as Jesus the Son was powerful in His silent acceptance of the Cross, His agonizing walk to Calvary, His painful Crucifixion and hours of hanging there till death. Isaiah prophesied so many centuries before: "*Harshly dealt with, He bore it humbly, He never opened His mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers, never opening its mouth.*" Our Lord's silence is not weakness, but the strength of God Himself who knows that no physical torment, no violent hatred, can crush the love He has, even for sinful mankind. He does not have to prove Himself; He just 'is.' He just *is* the remedy for this world's ills, and only those who contemplate this truth deeply and quietly in their hearts will come to understand this, and follow Him.

Our moving, simple, and powerful ceremony today for Good Friday should prompt us to silence, to a loving reflection: do I take the time for silence, for prayer, for

loving communion with God? How desperately we need silence in our lives, when everywhere there is the noise and bustle of everyday life denying us silence (like piped music in shops, in restaurants, even in toilets!). We need to avoid the distractions of constant noise, and make sure that our life has its times of truly quiet prayer. We dearly need the silence of prayer with the God who loves us, simply allowing Him in quiet to reach out to our hearts, comfort and console them, speak to our souls and give us that guidance to live as He would truly want. It is so good for us to be here, sometimes in silence, knowing that the Lord came as He had promised, that He suffered silently when we rejected Him, but that even so He offered humanity the only salvation it can ever know. *“It is good to wait in silence for the Lord to save.”*

II. HOLY COMMUNION

Now, a second feature of this unique Good Friday service — perhaps a most surprising part — is the last part: the Holy Communion; the fact that, even after commemorating the death of Christ we still partake of the

sacred body of the Lord in Communion. Now, not all Catholic rites around the world include Holy Communion at the Good Friday service, but we Latin-rite Catholics do, and have done for centuries. Why is that? Why do we not fast from Holy Communion on this solemn day of Jesus’s death? Well, it was put so well and so clearly to me, once, when I had a Jesuit priest lead my parish in a Lent mini-retreat. He said it so many times, so we could not miss it. “God is not dead,” he said, ... “God is not dead.” Even when we have cruelly and sinfully crucified Our Blessed Lord Jesus, *God is not dead*. Our receiving Holy Communion is a clear statement of that. Although humanity has shamefully mistreated the Son of God, and exposed Him to the most barbaric death conceivable, yet God is not dead ... He has gone, in the fullness of His divine immortal life, to the *realms* of the dead, so as to restore life. It is as if the devil thought that by enticing man to put the Lord to death, we would somehow gain mastery over the world. Instead, Jesus submits Himself to mortal death so that He might go as far from God the

Father of life as it is possible to go: right into the jaws of death. But the Lord is not destroyed in death: He brings His life to the dead, He lies in the grave but is not finished. He is still at work, silently and powerfully, His divine soul bringing light to all those righteous human beings who lay in death. This is what we mean when we profess in the Apostles' Creed: "He descended into Hell." God is not dead — even in human death He is powerfully alive, and bringing the hope of new life to the dead.

And so today when we conclude our service with Holy Communion consecrated yesterday evening at the Holy Thursday Mass, let us reflect on that fact that God's life, His immortal, almighty being-alive, is more powerful than anything else. In Holy Communion we receive the living God, the risen Jesus, who cannot be contained by death, even though we subjected Him to the worst death imaginable! This, please God, also allows us to cope with the bereavements that we suffer. Often the death of a loved one (a grandparent, a parent, a child) is one of the hardest moments in life. For some it leads to a wavering in

faith. But today, Good Friday, should help us to have the medicine to heal that doubt, and to be renewed in hope. God is not dead! On the Cross, Jesus has embraced human death, embraced it in a loving gesture, and restored the dead to God in Himself. So, the worst that we can experience, even the loss of a loved one, can be placed alongside this worst experience of Jesus's life, His Passion — and there we see that Jesus willingly accepted it, and reversed its effects. He took the sting out of death, He drew the poison out of the wound of sin. And He can do the same for our doubts, our fears, our sadnesses. His life is unconquerable, even on Good Friday. As we receive the holy life of God in Jesus at this Holy Communion today, let's bring especially our deceased loved ones to Him — carrying them in our hearts as we come up to receive — that the living Jesus may give them life through our supplications and prayers, even as He feeds our own souls with life. *God is not dead!* He is alive; He is the conqueror; and He truly offers us the rich rewards of His victory on Calvary. "*It is accomplished!*"