

An Introduction to Holy Week

Some of the information below comes from the Anglican **Book of Alternative Services**, some from **Evangelical Lutheran Worship** (Leader's Edition) and some from my own experience and understanding learned and practiced over almost 50 years of pastoral ministry with and among different gatherings of believers who make up part of the "Household of Faith".

The glory of Easter is the heart of the Christian gospel. It is the centre of the Church's faith and worship. In the earliest days of the Church, it was the only Christian festival: an annual celebration, in one act, of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and his sending of the Holy Spirit. The celebration lasted fifty days in one continual festival of adoration, joy, and thanksgiving, ending on the Feast of Pentecost.

By the fourth century, the Church was adding to its celebration of Easter a week-long commemoration of the events which preceded our Lord's resurrection, beginning on Sunday with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (which we know as Palm Sunday).

On Thursday evening, Christians would recall the final meal Jesus had with his disciples and his institution of the sacrament of the eucharist and his example of humility shown by washing of the disciples' feet. (This day has come to be known as "Maundy Thursday"—from the Latin "mandatum" which means "command/ment" and refers to the "love commandment" which Jesus gave to his disciples "to love one another as I have loved you".

On the Friday (later known as "God's Friday or Good Friday") they would commemorate Christ's agony and death on the cross by a service of adoration and veneration of the cross (which, in many places, was marked by the "Stations of the Cross"—the 12 places. . . or pauses . . . along the road to Calvary at which significant and/or memorable events took place).

Then on Saturday night they would gather for a midnight "vigil" which included the reading of the scriptures, prayers, the baptisms of their new converts and then, as the day of resurrection dawned, for the joyful celebration of Easter shown by the "lighting of the Easter fire" (torches and candles symbolizing the "return of the Light of the World" and the Eucharistic meal (to which the new converts were, for the first time, welcomed, invited and fed with the holy and life-giving presence of the risen and living Christ). This week before Easter became known as Holy Week.

Although Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the "Great Week" are not remembered in the same way as the "Triduum" (which means 'Three Days'—that is, the last three days from Thursday evening to Saturday evening—nevertheless, these "ordinary" days are still significant because of the events which took place on them (like the cleansing of the temple; Jesus' teaching in public as shown by his parable of the vineyard owner whose son is killed by the tenants of the vineyard as well as numerous other "judgement parables"; Jesus' conflict with and fierce denunciation of the Pharisees and their obsession with the "word" of the law rather than the "spirit" of the law; his foretelling of the destruction of the temple, and his prophecy regarding "the temple being rebuilt in three days" which refers to his death and resurrection).

So, again, while three first three (ordinary) days of Holy Week play a lesser role in the major commemorations and celebrations of the “Three Days”, they ought not be overlooked or underestimated. Instead, they can help us prepare our hearts, minds and spirits for what is coming and for what will happen.

With that in mind, I intend to provide three brief daily services of scripture reading(s), hymns (some unfamiliar but powerful and moving), prayers, and brief reflections (some of which may be “unconventional” meant to provoke thinking in new ways or as a result of different insights).

I would ask that, if possible, this devotion, and the two others which will follow on Tuesday and Wednesday, be read either aloud with another person or silently by and to oneself. . .and that this time of meditation take place “in the darkness” where God is found and where God is waiting to meet, comfort, heal and assure us of God’s protection from any and all threats and dangers which surround us and God’s presence in all that gives and proclaims life and grace.

Holy Monday Meditation

The key verse: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16

Confession and Forgiveness

Holy and gracious God, I confess that I have sinned against you this day. Some of my sin I know—the thoughts and deeds of which I am ashamed—but some is known only to you. In the name of Jesus Christ, I ask forgiveness. Deliver and restore me, so that I may rest in peace.

By the mercy and grace of God, we are united with Jesus Christ, in whom we are forgiven. We rest now in the peace of Christ and rise in the morning to serve.

A Lenten Song “As the Sun with Longer Journey” (From *With One Voice*)

1. As the sun with longer journey melts the winter’s snow and ice,
with its slowly growing radiance warms the seed beneath the earth,
may the sun of Christ’s uprising gently bring our hearts to life.
2. Through the days of waiting, watching, in the desert of our sin,
searching on the far horizon for a sign of cloud or wind,
we await the healing waters of our Saviour’s victory.
3. Praise be given to the maker of the season’s yearly round,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Source, Sustainer, Lord of Life,
as the ever-turning ages roll to their eternal rest.

The Prayer of the Day

Almighty and merciful God, whose Son was crucified yet entered into glory, may we, walking in the way of the cross, find that it is for us the way of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

A Reading Psalm 36:5-11 (from "The Message" – The Psalms – by Eugene Peterson)

God's love is meteoric, God's loyalty astronomic;
God's purpose titanic, God's verdicts oceanic.
Yet in God's largeness nothing gets lost;
Not a person, not a mouse, slips through the cracks.

How exquisite your love, O God!
How eager we are to run under your wings,
To eat our fill at the banquet you spread
as you fill our water bottles with Eden spring water.
You're a fountain of cascading light,
and you open our eyes to light.

Keep on loving your friends;
do your work in welcoming hearts.
Don't let the bullies kick me around,
the moral midgets slap me down.
Send the upstarts sprawling
flat on their faces in the mud.

A Reading John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But Jesus Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii * and the money given to the poor? (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it). Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

**300 denarii would be nearly a year's wages for a labourer*

A Reflection on “Grace” from Frederick Buechner’s book
Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC

“After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody’s much interested any more. Not so with *grace*, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like *gracious* and *graceful* still have some of the bloom left.

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream, or earn good looks, or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?

A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There’s nothing *you* have to do. There’s nothing you *have* to do. There’s nothing you have to *do*.

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It’s for you I created the universe. I love you.

There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it. [Come to think of it]. . .maybe being able to reach out and take grace is a gift, too.”

You are invited to spend some time in quiet thought about grace—about grace shown to you, not only by God but by others, and the grace you have shown. . .or wanted to show. . .to others. Give thanks for grace wherever it appears, in whatever form it takes, and in whatever way it has changed you for the better. If others are present, brief conversations, observations and/or reflections may be shared and appreciated as the gifts they are.

A Song “Bless Now, O God, the Journey”

1. Bless now, O God, the journey that all your people make,
that path through noise and silence, the way of give and take.
The trail is found in desert and winds the mountain round,
then leads beside still waters, the road where faith is found.

2. Bless sojourners and pilgrims who share this winding way;
your hope burns through the terrors, you love sustains the day.
We yearn for holy freedom while often we are bound;
together we are seeking the road where faith is found.

3. Divine eternal lover, you meet us on the road.
We wait for lands of promise where milk and honey flow,
but waiting not for places, you meet us all around.
Our covenant is written on roads, as faith is found.

Martin Luther’s Prayer at the Close of Day

We give thanks to you, heavenly Father through Jesus Christ your dear Son,
that you have so graciously protected us today. We ask you to give all our sins,
where we have done wrong, and graciously to protect us tonight.
Into your hands we commend ourselves: our bodies, our souls, and all that is ours.
Let your holy angels be with us, so that the wicked foe may have no power over us. Amen.

A Prayer of Commendation

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.
You have redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping;
that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace.

Hear my prayer, O Lord; listen to my cry.
Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.
In righteousness I shall see you; when I awake, your presence will give me joy.

A Song “God, Who Made the Earth and Heaven”

1. God, who made the earth and heaven, darkness and light;
you the day for work have given, for rest the night.
May your angel guards defend us, slumber sweet your mercy send us,
holy dreams and hopes attend us all through the night.

2. And when morn again shall call us to run life's way,
may we still, whate'er befall us, you will obey.
From the pow'r of evil hide us, in the narrow pathway guide us,
never be your smile denied us all through the day.

3. Guard us waking, guard us sleeping, and, when we die,
may we in your mighty keeping all peaceful lie.
When the last dread call shall wake us, then, O Lord, do not forsake us,
but to reign in glory take us with you on high.

4. Holy Father, throned in heaven, all holy Son,
Holy Spirit, freely given, blest Three in One:
grant us grace, we now implore you, till we lay our crowns before you
and in worthier strains adore you while ages run.

A Night Blessing

Almighty and merciful God, Father, + Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless, preserve, and keep us, this night and forevermore. Amen.

Dismissal

Now in peace I will lie down and sleep; you alone, O God, make me secure.