

Holy Week

When we zoomed into each other at our previous conference call, I jumped in with prayer and reflection. We prayed the Second Preface of the Passion followed by the response “Holy, holy, holy.” My occupational hazard is that I need to be with people, and speak to them. So, dearest friends and suspects, indulge me, allow me to come to you with a few thoughts. Sifting through these Scriptures our Franciscan vocation transpires.

The Four Songs of the Suffering Servant from the prophet Isaiah are proclaimed Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday of Holy Week. First, Isaiah the person. He makes his appearance in Chapter 6, his “call” story. We are with him in the capitol city of Jerusalem and he is the king’s counselor. For his counsel to be wise, clear and trustworthy, our man is always found in prayer and reflection in the Temple.

Now, the king has died. There is going to be domestic and international policy changes. Flags are flying half-staff; the citizenry is not sure what the future will bring. And we find our man, again, in the Temple, sitting in the back, head in his hands, and this time something happens. He looks up into the sanctuary. He sees the Lord seated on a throne, and seraphim angels with six wings: two covering their bodies, two to cover their faces, and two to hover about. And he hears them saying one to the other, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory.” There you have it. But wait. Here St John the Evangelist has something to say about “glory.” The first part of his Gospel is called the Book of Signs (miracles: “signs and wonders” Jesus performs); the second part is its fulfillment, the Book of Glory. First, for St John “glory” is the “presence of God” on earth. So when we pray these words after the Preface at the liturgy, we acknowledge that the presence of God fills the space between heaven and earth; that God is with us. Second, the “glory of God” is Christ crucified, shining on the world, His arms out-stretched between heaven and earth in the everlasting sign of the covenant. The time (“the hour”) has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, a reference to the paschal mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Returning to our man, Isaiah in the Temple, he confesses his unworthiness to represent God’s directives to the new king, and is purged of his sinfulness, becomes God’s spokesperson. The Call story of Isaiah 6, 1-9: “here am I, send me.” Ready for mission.

Second, the “servant.” The readings of Holy Week converge around the suffering and death of Christ. The reading from Isaiah is the first of four songs of “the *unidentified* servant of the Lord” (42, 1-7). This servant is introduced as a prophetic figure whose work will effect God’s will, not only in Israel but among the nations as well.

The character of the servant is described: mild mannered and not given to clamor or violence. The damaged stalk of a plant he/she will not break; the smoldering wick he/she will not extinguish. His/her work will be done in a peaceful fashion. From the servant we learn the lesson of determination with a gentle expression. Conviction, not with an aggressive thrust, but with a gentler spirit that can be equally effective.

On Tuesday, in the second song of the servant, the mission is underway (49, 1-6). Called from his mother's womb, the servant is directed to call all to conversion, as well as to be "a light for the nations." The mission does not meet success. His hearers are unresponsive. He feels frustration and a sense of failure. Yet the servant remains confident that the Lord will see him through.

On Wednesday, "Spy Wednesday" because of the biblical account of Judas' betrayal, the third song of the servant is presented (50, 4-9). The mission continues, but the servant meets with greater trials, this time, in terms of physical abuse. While never backing away from his call, the servant recounts the many abuses. In all of this he continues resolutely on his path, always confident of the Lord's continued assistance. His well-trained tongue speaks honestly and with candor. We as Christians are to be just as authentic in our responses to situations in which we find ourselves. The temptations are always there to bend the truth at times in our favor. Sometimes truth is painful. We are asked to bear it with courage.

On Good Friday we directly recall the great cost of our redemption. The readings center on the sufferings of Jesus. The first of these readings is the fourth and last song of the servant (52, 13—53,12). Introduced in the first song, frustrated in the second, reviled in the third, the servant is brought to his death in the fourth. Harshly treated, the servant remains silent before his persecutors. His death takes on a distinctive meaning, bringing us to one of the major insights of the songs. The servant's suffering is vicarious. His ordeal has been endured on behalf of sinful people. Isn't this an insight to the "why" of suffering? Suffering may be endured on behalf of others. Still, the servant remains unnamed; yet the Church has long seen the servant as an image of Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews sees Jesus today: "He learned obedience through what he suffered, and...became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." If Christ has gone this far for us, how can we doubt that we will make the last mile?

Enter into the great silence and stillness of Holy Saturday. The homily on Holy Saturday is a classic found in the Liturgy of the Hours. It speaks of Christ going to awaken our first parents who live in darkness and the shadow of death. He goes to release them from their captivity and share with them the new life of God, the first fruit of redemption.

We await the Easter triumph that is about to break forth. We relive the painful experience of the cross and our present confinement in a spirit of quiet reflection. We need Holy Saturday and should not see it only as a preparation day. Christ today touches those who have gone before us. The bridal chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling place is prepared. Are not are hearts full? with a deep love for Christ Jesus.



A blessed Easter! Peace and All Good! With bonnets on!
Christopher, TOR
Servant-in-Turn