

Palm Sunday

With the reading today of the Passion, our thoughts can't help but turn to the whole of Holy Week and especially to the three solemn celebrations that will bring it and the liturgical year to a climax – Holy Thursday with its commemoration of the last Supper and the gift of the Eucharist, Good Friday with its focus on the suffering and death of Jesus, and the Easter vigil and Easter and their proclamation that Jesus who died has been raised by the Father to the fullness of life

Although these three liturgies celebrate different moments in the story of salvation, they are all part of a single saving mystery, the paschal mystery, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. That same mystery is central to the hymn in today's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Because Jesus emptied himself and accepted death, even death on a cross, God has exalted him, raised him up, and given him a share in the divine name itself.

Some years ago when I was giving a tour of the art collection at St Michael's College, a woman commented: "You refer a lot to death and then life," she said. "I am more used to hearing speak of life first and then of death." The liturgy of Holy

Week focuses first on the death of Jesus and all that it means for him and for us before proclaiming his resurrection.

It is not by chance that the Jewish people are celebrating Passover this week. For them it evokes the liberation of their forebears from slavery and oppression in Egypt and the beginning of a journey which would bring them to Mt Sinai and the sealing of a covenant with God in which he committed himself to be their God and invited them to be his people.

Because the death and resurrection of Jesus took place within the context of Passover, the first Christians saw in the events it celebrated a way of understanding what took place in the life of Jesus as a new Passover, a Passover in which God was again active in human history liberating people this time from sin, guilt and fear, and offering them the possibility of a new and renewed life.

At the Last Supper, Jesus identified the cup of wine which he shared with his apostles as “my blood of the covenant,” or, as Luke and Paul put it, as “the new covenant in my blood.” In this saying, Jesus affirms that his death and resurrection will bring about a new covenant, will establish a new relationship between God and the whole of humanity. He commits himself to us and invites us to commit ourselves to him.

Although we are all going to die, the Easter message proclaims that the last word about Jesus and about us is not death but life. In the life and destiny of Jesus God is revealed as a God of life, the ultimate source of all life.

If this pattern of death and life primarily marks the end of life, it is also present throughout the course of our lives. All real moral and spiritual growth involves a dying to self and selfishness, to arrogance and greed, to violence and abuse. To die to such things opens us to a new life, a life in Christ, a life of love and kindness, goodness and generosity.

This year we have all been living through a dramatic example of such a pattern in our struggle with the COVID 19 pandemic. Many have shown extraordinary courage and dedication in caring for the sick and in protecting the population at large.

May our celebration of Holy Week and especially of Easter this year deepen our faith in the ultimate triumph in our lives of life over death. May it strengthen our hope of overcoming the challenges we and the whole world currently face.