Holy Week and the Depth of God's Love

Every year when we get to Holy Week, it builds my faith as a Christian and as a priest. As the title suggests, it's the holiest time of the year. And I look forward to it so much. The celebration of the three days of the Last Supper, Passion and Resurrection of the Lord reminds me anew of God's love for me, and I'm inspired as I see so many people turn out to have their faith strengthened too and to grow closer to God. I'll confess my favorite part of priesthood is not meetings or administration. It's liturgy, and being with people for the celebration of the Eucharist. This week gives us a sacred time to think about how far our God goes to show us how much He loves us.

My hope is that as we begin this week, you too will find it a way to grow closer to God. Maybe you come every week, or have been away from Mass for a while and are just returning. Maybe you have felt really close to God this Lent, or maybe you are stuck in a rut and go to Mass but are in "auto pilot" mode, with God lumped in with the other things in a busy schedule. Use this week to re-connect with God, and to deepen your relationship with Him.

What I've found is that each of the liturgies can have a different way of helping me to grow in my faith. And I hope you'd think about that as you prepare to celebrate this most solemn week on our calendar.

We begin at Palm Sunday. Bishop Robert Barron, Bishop of the Winona Diocese and founder of Word on Fire, a Catholic apologetics website, has called the Passion the "symphony of sin." You have jealousy from the Sanhedrin and those who see Jesus as a threat to their power. You have the cowardice of Pilate who knows the right thing to do but doesn't do it, even when God is literally staring him in the face. You have Judas pretending to be loyal but betraying his friend with a kiss. And Peter and the others running away showing cowardice too. You have the hate of the mob and the Sanhedrin. This liturgy challenges us in a way to think about how serious we are about the word "love" and living out our faith. Do we really mean that word when we say it, or only when it is convenient? Palm Sunday gives us the opportunity to think about how serious we are about love, being a disciple, and following Jesus. It also invites us to think about how God stands by us always; but what about us? When do we "drop our palms" and walk away from the faith, or deny the faith when we face pressure from others or society, or fall into making poor moral choices?

Holy Thursday gives us a lot to think about too. There is the institution of the Eucharist, God's gift of love to us when we celebrate at every Mass. There is the institution of the priesthood too, and I think about my ordination and how I live out my vocation. But what I've always been struck by is the washing of the feet. We do this as a reminder of what Jesus did, but what I love with this ritual is that it's a visible thing we do at liturgy to basically say "OK people, if you are going to receive Jesus in Holy Communion, and say I am a Christian, here's what it means." Liturgy always has to connect us to the greater community. Remember the words of Pope Francis, that the Church is a field hospital. So as we see the feet being washed, it helps us think about who's feet we need to

wash. Who might be hurting in our lives; who we might be neglecting; or who might be in need. Jesus even washes the feet of Judas. Some people in our lives our easily lovable. Some people are more challenging. We can't just serve or love when it is convenient - what Jesus does is give us a mandate to do for others what He the master has done for the 12. That's something that we need to live out daily. Certainly the poor have physical needs and we need to care for them, but so many out there are "poor in spirit" and hurting from a difficult life, or feeling alone - so what can we do to help them?

Good Friday is a unique liturgy in that it's the only day of the year with no Mass. The altar is bare; the church is dimly lit. Two things really hit me on Good Friday. The first is the ugliness of sin. It's all there in the Passion; cowardice, betrayal, greed, pride, you name it. And as we think of the Passion, all of us can on the inside silently nod and think "yes, I too have done these things" because all of us are culpable. Just as the soldiers who drove the nails into our Lord, our sins do the same. But all of this is overcome by the Passover Lamb, Jesus. What strikes me with Good Friday is yes, you have the sin but that's overcome through the incredible love and mercy of Jesus. Think of all that power He had; the power to bring down fire and brimstone; to get revenge; to show everyone who He was. But He surrenders to the will of the Father; and He reveals for us love on the Tree of Life, the Cross. Even with respect to Judas, Jesus still loved him. Yes, we are sinners and do evil things. We are like those who drop the palms and walk away. But we are *loved* - and this is how far God goes for us out of love. Think about that on Good Friday as you touch the cross and reflect on the Passion again. Turn your sins and struggles over to the one who is love itself and let that liberate you.

Lastly, Holy Saturday. The light dispelling the darkness, the triumph of life over death, of love over sin. If you have never been to the Easter Vigil, do consider going. Yes, it's longer, but parking is a lot easier, and you can sleep in a bit on Easter, go find the Easter basket, and then go off to your ham dinner. What I love with this liturgy is how we hear of salvation history; of God time and time again coming to our rescue. It's so amazing to see the light dispelling the darkness as the Easter fire is lit; the new Easter candle blessed and all the candles being lit from that candle. It's an amazing experience to sit in the presider's chair and see all the candles lit. We are reminded of God having the last word over death and of our redemption. It fills one with hope, and when you hear the Exultet chanted, and the Litany of Saints prayed for the newly baptized and confirmed, you are overwhelmed with this sense of God's love and the power of the love that exists in the body of believers, the Church. The sight of all the candles lit and celebrating baptism and confirmation with the RCIA candidates and catechumens is also so meaningful, because it reminds me of how we are a community and support one another, but also of the fire of faith that burns in the souls of the people of God. The candles are only lit for the first part of the liturgy, but inside us all is the fire of Christ's love, something I see time and time again as a priest in the great people I've come to know.

So much more could be said about Holy Week, but I'll just close with this: consider going to the liturgies each night. They are not obligatory holy days, but as you experience the liturgies this week, my guess is that you truly will grow in your faith and

be touched by the love and grace of God as you hear the greatest love story ever told. And if you can’t make it each day, just remember one thing: God loves you, and even if you were the only person God ever made, He still would have done all of this for you.

Have a blessed Holy Week!

Fr. Paul