



The Way of Holy Week

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The liturgies of Holy Week invite us to engage with the words, actions and experiences that constituted Jesus's way to the Father. Fr Tony Nye describes how, over the coming days, we will contemplate Jesus's journey through silence, symbols and scripture.

Lord Jesus, you have shown us the way to the Father.

What follows is an overview of the Holy Week liturgy through the lens of those words that we use in the Penitential Rite at Mass.

We are people of the Way, an ancient term for the first Christians which is found in the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus showed us that way throughout his whole life on earth, but this way becomes particularly clear and calls to us most profoundly in the events of Holy Week, not only by Jesus's words, however striking they are, but by his actions and what he suffered, beyond words. Those events invite us to enter upon this way interiorly, through the words, actions and silences of the liturgy. Through that liturgy we make a commitment of faith to know Jesus more clearly, as individuals, but also as pilgrims together. We are drawn into ancient traditions of contemplating these events.

It is a way of humility in obedience and commitment to the Father

We begin with the Palm Sunday procession, to re-enact the journey of Jesus with his disciples and those who followed him from Bethany to Jerusalem (Mt 21:1-11). We follow him as our king, but one riding on a donkey in humility and in obedience to the Father's word through the prophet Zechariah (Zec 9:9). As we proceed into the Mass the readings



prepare us to focus on this obedience. From the Third Servant Song of Second Isaiah (Is 50:4-7), we hear that the Servant has been given, 'a disciple's tongue ... Each morning [the Lord] wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple.' The second reading, from the kenosis hymn used by St. Paul in his [Letter to the Philippians](#) (Phil 2:6-11), tells us that Jesus,

emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

This leads us into the dramatic account of the Passion. This year it is according to [Matthew](#), which, as in the infancy narrative and other places in the gospel, focuses on fulfilment and obedience to God's plan as the evangelist conceives it.

It is the way of the Servant

Just as in the Mass of Palm Sunday, so in the following days of Holy Week we prepare to hear about the events leading to the Passion by listening to the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah (42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 – the latter repeating the Palm Sunday reading). On Good Friday we hear the Suffering Servant Song (Is 52:13-53:12) after the prostration of the celebrants in silence and the opening prayer. It serves as a meditation on the Passion according to John.

It is a way of self-giving and sharing

The self-giving of Jesus and the sharing in our humanity, and we with him, is very dramatically yet simply portrayed by the Washing of the Feet on Maundy Thursday. This follows John's account (Jn 13:1-15), which is a sort of prologue to the Passion. It can be viewed as an insight into the self-emptying of the cross and the giving of the Eucharist. Bare feet make us aware of human vulnerability. Stooping to wash and dry them carefully is a sign of delicate respect for our neighbour, especially in that neighbour's weakness and poverty. 'If I, then, the Lord and master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet.' In its place in the Mass of the Lord's Supper, this surely points to the self-giving and sharing of Jesus in the Eucharist.

It is a way of deep silence

The liturgy of Good Friday is embraced by deep silence, at the beginning and at the end. The cross is beyond words. We begin with the silence of the congregation; on Good Friday, the congregation is usually large, so the silence is particularly moving. The opening silence in which the celebrants prostrate is underlined by the bareness of the altar and the open, empty tabernacle. After the readings and the enacting of the Passion according to John, in which we all take our parts, the best response is silence, perhaps preceded by just a few brief words to present one aspect of the story we have just heard for some minutes of quiet reflection, to let it sink in. After the ancient prayers, which encompass the needs of the Church and the world, there is adoration of a large

cross, gradually unveiled. Our response is to file up and show our commitment to the Saviour with a wordless kiss, a very personal act which speaks for itself. The service is completed with a very simple reception of Holy Communion without a Mass, like the way we receive when we are sick or bedridden or approaching death. In all this, silence is our most fitting response to a death by crucifixion. The nature of that intense pain and increasing difficulty of breathing allowed very few words to be uttered.

It is a way of renewed promise of the Covenant

The long and complex liturgy of Holy Saturday begins with a very basic symbol of promised light, the Paschal Candle, lit from a blessed fire and illuminating the darkness of the church. Our own individual candles are lit from the great candle and light is passed from person to person, a simple action of solidarity. The promise of new life in Christ is rooted in the Covenant, and the readings, responses and prayers are staging posts on the journey of God's relations with his people. The promise is realised in Baptism and the renewal of our baptismal promises, through which we are engaged in the risen life of the One whose journey we have been following throughout this solemn week. We receive the Easter sacrament with alleluias.

We have been shown the way to the Father. We are invited to continue to walk in that way.

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