

LENT COURSE 2022

Session 4 The liturgies of Holy Week

29 March 2022

Introduction

In discussions after the second and third talks in our programme people have referred to the Second Vatican Council, which did so much to renew the life of the Catholic Church, meeting from 1962 until 1965. The first teaching document which the council produced was on liturgy, known by its Latin title *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: the bishops at the council were clear that before you renew and reform anything else in the Church, you have to make a start with worship. Worship defines the disciples of Jesus Christ; moreover as Catholics believe that we truly become the Church when we come together to celebrate the Eucharist, the Mass. As it happens for most Catholics in the world the most obvious change which resulted from Vatican II has been the changes in the Mass - Mass celebrated in the local language rather than Latin, Mass celebrated by the priest facing the people rather than with his back to them, and Mass celebrated with more and longer readings from the Bible - which are what they would associate with Vatican II, even though it did so much more. The Vatican II document didn't change the Church's liturgy itself - this was done by the pope and a commission set up by him in the years to 1970 - but it set out the basic principles: and one of them was that the liturgy needed to be reformed and renewed. Another was that everyone present at Mass should *actively participate* in the Mass; they should not be passive spectators. It is just over two years since the first lockdown in this country. For much of this time, especially in the early months, that whole notion of active participation was seriously impaired, for good health and safety reasons, and at times almost completely disappeared. Even now a great deal is not back to normal, for good reasons: we don't have many altar servers, we don't physically exchange the sign of peace, the Holy water stoups are empty and people do not receive Holy Communion from the chalice.

It follows that any renewal process like the synodal pathway, which we have looked at, should also involve reflection about how we worship in the Catholic Church. The most important worship in the life of the Church is what we will be doing in a fortnight's time: Holy Week and Easter. This period is marked by special acts of worship, some unlike what we do the rest of the year; while some of us have been attending these for many years and know them well, others are less familiar and many may not know the meaning and history of some of what we do. Moreover we need a 'refresher': two years ago Fr Steve and Fr Simplicio, with our seminarian Joseph hiding out of sight, enacted shortened forms of the rites in a locked church, livestreamed as all churches were closed in this country; last year we were allowed to celebrate in public, but with restrictions on numbers and time; many normal parts of the rites didn't happen. Even this year things will not be back to normal. One thing which is always important in a parish is the need for formation and education and this is very true of liturgy: it is never true of the Church, as was notoriously said by government minister Michael Gove in 2016, that 'we have no need of experts'. While I am not that much of an expert in liturgy I do teach it to diaconate students and seminarians.

In St Edmund's liturgical worship has always been done well and taken seriously; some of this may be because some years ago Monsignor Peter Strand was a specialist in liturgy. Holy Week is also important because the changes in liturgy brought in by Vatican II didn't happen as bolt out of the blue, but began some years earlier in 1950 under Pope Pius XII. This was when the ceremonies of

the Easter Vigil were reformed, followed in 1955 by the rites for the rest of Holy Week. All this happened after the celebration of Mass in the evening was permitted during and after the Second World War, for the first time for centuries. These reforms were extensive and really began the whole process of changes in the liturgy.

In the Holy Week rites we celebrate the events of our redemption brought about by the death and resurrection of Our Lord; moreover we *enter into and participate* in that narrative: we take part in what we commemorate; that's why these things are so important. Before I go through the various days - and we will look at the Easter Vigil next week - I will lay out some basic principles.

Basic principles

The first thing to point out is that the special ceremonies of Holy Week are very old, and can be traced back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. In the last two hundred years or advances in scholarship have greatly expanded our knowledge of what happened in the worship of the early Church. For example we have one extraordinary document called the *Travels of Egeria*, an account by a woman from what is now Spain in the 4th century. Egeria describes her travels to the Holy Land, spending a lot of time telling us about how Christians in Jerusalem celebrated Holy Week and Easter. The way we celebrate Holy Week was more or less fixed by the 10th century.

The second principle we need to remember is that because these ceremonies are so old and so special, we need to have a particular frame of mind when we join in them. We prioritise the time we give to them; we realise that for the most part they will take time; we don't expect them to be short! This was, and to some extent still is, challenged by the circumstances of the pandemic; but what we consider tonight and next Tuesday is *the ideal*, to which hopefully we will be able to return next year. We are asked to be *generous* in terms of the time we give to God in worship in Holy Week because of the events we are marking, the death and resurrection of the Lord. None of these things make sense if we keep looking at our watches.

Thirdly, we are not only joining in worship with Christians over the centuries who have done these things in Holy Week, we are at this time of the year joining in a special way with our fellow Christians all over the world. While there are differences in certain places, by and large Catholics worship in the same way in Holy Week all over the world: and one of the ways in which we have changed in the last two years is that we can watch acts of worship from all over the world: in particular, led by Pope Francis in Rome. We feel a particular closeness to others at this time of the year. That's particularly important for Catholics for a significant historical reason: at the Reformation in this country more or less all the special rites and ceremonies of Holy Week were abolished. Things our forbears had done to mark the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus for centuries were made illegal, and did not properly reappear until the 19th century.

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

For Christians Sunday is the first day of the week, so the Sunday of Holy Week is the beginning of it. In this parish we begin to build up a week before that, when we veil and statues and crosses in the Church - and we will do this on Saturday. It is optional now, but it's a visually powerful reminder that we're in a special time: everything in the physical space of the church becomes hauntingly austere. Since crosses are veiled as well as statues the experience is rather paradoxical; we don't have the usual visual aids, we have to make more effort with our imagination, with listening to the Scriptures.

We re-enact the Lord's entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and people getting him the waving of palms, olives and other branches. This is a very ancient ceremony, which sometimes began from another church. It's an important act of witness, which we begin here before the 930 Mass from the recreation ground. After two years ago almost hiding away, I would encourage as many of you as possible to join in the outdoor procession. At other Masses we make a ceremony of coming from the back into the church.

Another tradition on Palm Sunday is that we mark the seriousness of what we're doing by listening to one of the long narratives of the Passion of Christ - now a different one each year (before the reforms it was always the Passion of Matthew on Palm Sunday). This is semi-dramatised by being read by three readers (in theory three deacons), but it's not a straightforward dramatisation. Sometimes it is sung (to a very distinctive chant) and there are musical settings of the part of the crowd, by composers such as Palestrina

Maundy Thursday

The next three days of the week don't have unusual ceremonies, but the gospel readings gradually prepare us for the last three days of the week. We don't mark any saints' days in Holy Week or Easter week: anything really big is simply transferred to when it's all over (such as St George's day). In this diocese on the Wednesday (*Spy Wednesday* because the gospel reading is about Judas) we have in the cathedral the annual Mass of the Chrism when the archbishop blesses all the holy oils we use for the next year (in theory it's meant to be on the Thursday morning but you can have it earlier.

Until the 1950s all the special ceremonies of what we call the *Triduum Sacrum* ('the sacred three days') were celebrated in the early morning, even when they had originally been celebrated in the evening; also, as far as I am aware, they weren't always as well attended as they are now. This was all changed from 1950.

On the Thursday of Holy Week we mark the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper by Jesus: therefore we're not allowed to have any Mass other than the one in the evening. A word about names: in much of the world this day is called *Holy Thursday*, but the old English name is *Maundy Thursday*. This is because the gospel reading recounts Jesus saying 'a new commandment I give you, love one another' - the Latin word for commandment is *mandatum*, and 'maundy' is old English form of that word. This all relates to one of the specific ceremonies in the Mass when the priest re-enacts the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus at the Last Supper described in John's gospel. Before the reforms after Vatican II this only happened in big churches, monasteries and cathedrals, and it happened earlier in the day. It was done in England by the monarch too, but the Hanoverians replaced the foot washing with giving people money in the 18th century. Before the election of Pope Francis the priest washed the feet of twelve Catholic men, but a few weeks after his election in 2013 he extended this to women and non-Christians, a very significant reform (and again he performs the ceremony away from church earlier in the day). This will be the first celebration of this ceremony this year since 2019.

There's one thing you can't understand about the Maundy Thursday ceremonies without understanding Good Friday. Because the Mass is a *celebration*, in some Christian liturgies the Mass isn't celebrated on penitential days (so in some rites on Fridays in Lent). On such occasions people

receive Holy Communion from hosts consecrated the previous day. In the Roman rite Good Friday is the only such day, so on the Thursday we consecrate enough hosts for the Good Friday liturgy. At the end of the Mass these consecrated hosts are taken to a place traditionally known as the *Altar of Repose*, to remain until the Friday. This is usually decorated with candles and flowers in order to recreate the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus and his disciples went in Jerusalem after the Last Supper. Here we have for the last twenty years (apart from the last two years) had the Altar of Repose in the hall, which is a good way of marking how special the place is and stressing that the hall is part of our church premises. We keep a watch in silent prayer until midnight, mindful that at some point in the evening the Lord was arrested and his disciples ran away. In case you're anxious we do transfer the Blessed Sacrament at midnight to the safe in the sacristy as there's no one living above the hall these days.

Good Friday

I am only going to talk this evening about the afternoon liturgy of Good Friday (incidentally that name for today is only found in English); for Covid reasons we have now children's service or walk of witness this year (though there is a service on St George's Green)

It's now at 3pm, as the gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified at this hour; in some countries it's in the evening, if the day is not a public holiday. Remember it's *not a Mass*, and much of what happens is different, marking how special the day is. It's almost as if we feel a bit lost in the face of the Saviour's death. This is certainly so at the beginnings when we gather in silent, and while everyone else is kneeling, the clergy mark our sense of desolation by lying prostrate on the floor (which only happens normally at ordinations). The service begins very simply with a prayer and readings (this is the ancient way in which liturgies began in the early Church). We always hear on Good Friday the gospel of John.

Many aspects of the Good Friday liturgy are very ancient, and after the homily we have the *Solemn Prayers*, much more elaborate than our usual bidding prayers, marked by us all genuflecting before each prayer topic; these includes specific groups - such as the Jewish people, other non-Christians and so on. In the old liturgy the prayer for the Jews was marked by negative language which would not be considered acceptable today: sadly at some points in history Good Friday was a day when Jews were subjected to violent attacks by Christians.

An ancient ceremony originating in France is the veneration of the Cross. The deacon brings the crucifix in as we kneel down three times. It is meant to be dramatic. Here the ceremony of us all kissing the feet of the crucifix, which in medieval England was known as 'creeping to the cross' is one ceremony we're not carrying out this year for Covid reasons (it is actually optional) and we'll be asked to venerate the Lord in silence from our places. Hopefully we will be able to kiss the cross again next year. Traditionally clergy go up to kiss the cross taking off their shoes first and some of their vestments.

Then the Blessed Sacrament is brought to the altar and we all receive Holy Communion. The liturgy ends in a low key way without a blessing, and it's one day when we ask you to leave the church quietly. In the evening of Good Friday we may have Stations and devotions to mark the beginning of the *Divine Mercy* novena.

Next week we look at Holy Saturday and the Easter Vigil.

