

“A Week to Remember”

Passion Week or Holy Week is seven days of drama. It begins jubilantly with the entry into Jerusalem as the crowds cheer on Jesus. But they are also pleading with him when they shout “Hosanna,” which means “save us.” But even as Jesus’ procession moves into Jerusalem, on the other side of town, a show of power enters as the Romans bring more soldiers into the city. The show of force was intended to cow the surplus of worshipers. After all, the Passover is the celebration of the escape of the Jews from the oppression of the Egyptians. The Romans did not want the crowds to get any ideas into their heads about revolting against Rome.

Monday starts out with Jesus cleansing the Temple of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals. It was not so much what they were selling, the many visitors needed to exchange Roman coins with the head of the Emperor on them, for Temple coins, which did not have idolatrous images. People also need animals for their sacrifices to God. Dragging an animal from distant places would make them unfit for sacrifice. What Jesus objected to was the inflated prices and exorbitant exchange rates. The merchants and money changers were needed, but they were abusing the worshipers.

Tuesday and Wednesday are calmer. Jesus teaches in the Temple and curses an unproductive fig tree. He may have rested on Holy Wednesday, as the Gospels do not record any activity specific to that day.

On Holy Thursday, or as our tradition calls it, Maundy Thursday, the action speeds up relentlessly. Two disciples seek out a room for their Passover Seder, where the twelve disciples gather along with other followers. Jesus sets the example for what we call the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion when he blesses bread and wine, calling them this body and blood. He asks us to continue the practice in remembrance of him. A practice that has continued for nearly two thousand years. In the Gospel of John, he also washes the feet of the disciples, setting another example of servant ministry. We are not to lord it over others, but as followers of Christ, even the most exalted are to serve. It is a humbling and necessary lesson.

After supper, Jesus goes off to pray. It is a troubling scene where he begs for the cup of suffering to pass him by. Even as he anguishes in the Garden, his closest disciples sleep. They are heavy with food and wine and cannot keep their eyes open. One disciple can remain awake as he is on an errand of betrayal. He has gone to the religious leaders to tell them that they can arrest Jesus in a dark and secluded garden on the Mount of Olives, across a small valley outside of the city. With only the eleven disciples to defend him, Jesus is easy prey for the Temple police and Roman guards.

They march him off to a secret session of the Sanhedrin the Temple council. The trial is fixed. Even with the prep they must have gone through the witnesses against Jesus cannot agree on what he did wrong. The law required two accusers to tell the same story. Despite that failure, the Temple authorities pushed through the guilty verdict. In the light of day, they take Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, and demand that he be put to death. Pilate, who in other places is described as cruel, in this case tries to save Jesus from crucifixion, but the crowds demand Jesus’ death, and Pilate relents.

Jesus must then carry his cross to the Place of the Skull. He is beset by crowds who are alternately jeering and contemptuous or tearful and moaning. It is a frenzied and disturbing sight. Of course, the crucifixion itself is harrowing. How Jesus and the two criminals can talk during the painful ordeal is stupefying. But they do and that brings us to the Seven Last Words of Christ.

These are the words Jesus says from the cross as recorded in the four gospels. The most heartbreaking are the first words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."¹ Who among us would have our tormentors and executioners in mind as we slowly lose our life?

"Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."² A man who acknowledges that he deserves this fate, unlike Jesus. Yet Jesus guarantees him he can die knowing he is headed to paradise.

"Woman, behold thy son! Behold thy mother!"³ Not only does Jesus take care of the criminal, but he assures his grieving and horrified mother that she will be taken care of by one of the disciples. She is losing her son but also gaining a son and protector.

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁴ As the pain and the inevitability of death take over his mind and body, Jesus also feels abandoned. His sense of aloneness is enhanced because by this time, all his disciples have abandoned him. Only a few women remain, and even they are far off.

"I thirst."⁵ As his body shuts down and his breathing becomes more labored, his mouth becomes dry. He asks for water but is given vinegar to slake the dryness of his parched mouth.

"It is finished."⁶ His earthly ministry is over. His lungs are scorched. His heart is failing. There is little life left in him.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."⁷ Jesus gives up his life and is reunited with his Father in heaven.

His death has been an act of holiness, as he said earlier. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."⁸ And so, it has been and will be forever. Until he comes again to complete God's promise of a new kingdom as it is in heaven.

¹ Luke 23:34

² Luke 23:43

³ John 19:26

⁴ Mark 15:34

⁵ John 19:28

⁶ John 19:30

⁷ Luke 23:46

⁸ John 15:13