

INTRODUCTION TO THE LITURGIES OF HOLY WEEK

The Rev. Allan B. Warren III
Rector, The Church of the Advent, Boston

I hope that these comments will be helpful. It might be a good idea to read through the description of each service before you come to Church. You will then be familiar with what is going to happen and better able to give yourself to the action and drama of the liturgy.

Palm Sunday

It is the entrance of our Lord into Jerusalem which is commemorated on this day, so it should not be surprising that the Entrance Rite of the Mass is altered and elaborated to re-enact this event and to mark our own entrance into the sacred time of Holy Week. Acolytes and clergy enter and stop at the bottom of the Choir. A collect is sung to mark the beginning of Holy Week. The story of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem is intoned, and the palms which we have been given are blessed. We then process out of the Mount Vernon Street doors and around to the front doors on Brimmer Street, singing *All Glory, Laud, and Honor* which recalls Christ's triumphant reception into the city. The liturgical color for this first part of the Palm Sunday liturgy is bright red, a sign of that triumph.

As we re-enter the church, however, there is an abrupt change in the mood of the service, signaled by a change in color. Red becomes oxblood. The frontal has been changed while we are in procession. The Sacred Ministers of the Mass change their vestments immediately after we enter. Our Lord was acclaimed as he arrived in Jerusalem, but quickly the powers that be conspired to do away with him. Triumph became betrayal and death. And so it is the story of the Passion which is the Gospel for this Mass. It is sung in parts to make us aware of the great drama that is beginning to unfold. During the last hymn the organ is turned off verse by verse until we are singing *a capella*. It will not sound again until the First Mass of Easter. The congregation leaves in silence.

Maundy Thursday

The liturgy on this day differs from an ordinary Sunday in two respects. The Gospel appointed is St John's account of the last supper of Jesus and his disciples. In this account Jesus gives his followers a new commandment – "Love one another" – and to show what this means He humbles Himself and washes their feet. This Gospel is proclaimed, a sermon is preached, and Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet is re-enacted. Twelve persons representing the twelve Apostles come forward, and the clergy wash their feet as the choir sings the words of Jesus' commandment of love and servanthood. Each is given a coin as a symbolic reversal of the betrayal which is to come. The service then proceeds as usual until after the Communion. It has been the custom of the Church for many centuries not to celebrate the Eucharist on Good Friday, but to receive from the Sacrament reserved from the previous evening. And so the liturgy ends with a procession to the Altar of Repose in the Lady Chapel where the Sacrament is reserved until Good Friday. There a watch of prayer is kept until midnight, commemorating our Lord's time in the Garden of Gethsemane. After the procession of the Sacrament the clergy, acolytes, and choir return to the sanctuary to prepare it for the next day. The lamps are extinguished and the sanctuary is stripped of all ornamentation. The bare Altar is washed with water and vinegar. The tabernacle is left open and empty. The choir intones Psalm 22 – "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me" – to remind us of the desolation of Gethsemane and the Cross.

Good Friday

We have commemorated our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem and His institution of the Eucharist. On Good Friday the liturgy focuses our attention upon His death. Appropriately, the ceremonial is stark, direct, and powerful. Its meaning is unmistakable.

The Sacred Ministers enter the Church in silence. At the foot of the altar they prostrate themselves. Upon rising, the Celebrant sings in monotone the Collect for the day. After this brief entrance the Liturgy of the Word begins. Today it is different from any other celebration chiefly in its simplicity. The Old Testament Lesson and the Epistle are read without the usual ceremonial. St. John's account of the Passion and Crucifixion is sung by members of the Choir.

After the sermon the Sacred Ministers gather at the foot of the altar for the Solemn Collects of Good Friday, the intercession for this day's rite. These are a series of very ancient prayers for the whole world, "all sorts and conditions of men," which are traditionally associated with the day on which Christ suffered for all humanity. The Deacon bids us pray silently for various aspects of the life of the world, and the Celebrant sums up or "collects" our prayers with the appropriate Collect.

At this point the usual structure of the liturgy is interrupted by an ancient ceremony peculiar to Good Friday. The Sacred Ministers go to the rear of the Church, and there take up a large veiled crucifix. They then process down the aisle by stages solemnly unveiling and displaying the cross to the congregation. "Behold the wood of the Cross whereon was hung the world's salvation! O come, let us worship!" When they have reached the foot of the altar, the cross is set up to be venerated by those who wish to do so. This very emotional ceremony began in the fourth century Church in Jerusalem when what was believed to be a relic of the true Cross was displayed on Good Friday.

When the veneration has been completed, the Sacred Ministers and Acolytes go to the Altar of Repose to bring forward the Blessed Sacrament which was consecrated the night before. This corresponds to the Offertory Procession in an ordinary celebration, but because the Eucharist is not celebrated on Good Friday, it is the reserved Sacrament which is brought to the altar, thus another name for this liturgy, the "Mass of the Presanctified Gifts." On this day the Liturgy of the Sacrament is made stark and simple. It consists only of the breaking of the bread and the Communion, for there is no consecration. As preparation this is preceded by the Confession and Absolution and the Lord's Prayer. After the Communion and a concluding prayer the liturgy is ended and the Sacred Ministers, Acolytes and Choir leave in silence.

The Paschal Vigil and First Mass of Easter

The service begins with the Church in darkness, expectant, seemingly just as it was when we left on Good Friday. The Resurrection of Christ is the act of God which brings the Church into being, and during this first Mass of the Resurrection the Church will ritually and, indeed, literally come into being again. It will be "re-built" to become what it was before the desolation and death of Good Friday. Light will enter the Church and the lamps will be rekindled. Persons will be baptized into the household of God. The Eucharist will be celebrated once again and the Blessed Sacrament - Christ's risen presence among us - will be returned to the tabernacle. In this Mass the Church becomes alive again and whole through the power of Christ's rising, not broken, desolate and empty as it was the day before.

The Choir, Acolytes, and Sacred Ministers enter the rear of the church in silence and in the dark. A fire is kindled and blessed and the Paschal Candle, a symbol of the Resurrection, is lit. The Deacon of the Mass takes the candle and leads us into the Church by stages. In a reversal of the procession of the veiled cross on Good Friday, he stops three times. This evening, however, he exclaims "The Light of Christ," and at each exclamation the light spreads from the Paschal Candle first to the clergy, then to the choir, and finally to the congregation. Having entered, we all fill the Church with the light of the Resurrection. The Paschal Candle is put in place. Given the size of the candlestick, this is a moment of great excitement and anxiety here at the Advent. The *Exsultet*, an ancient hymn extolling the joy of Easter, is sung by a cantor.

Then follows the Vigil - a period of anticipation which awaits the solemn proclamation of Easter. Originally, the Vigil would continue until the stroke of midnight when the Resurrection would be announced. In our celebration it is much shortened. Five lessons from the Old Testament are read which in the early Church were understood to be prefigurings or "types" of God's action in the Resurrection of Jesus. Silence follows each lesson. A psalm is chanted and the Celebrant prays an appropriate collect.

After the last of these collects, the Vigil itself is ended, and we proceed to the Administration of Baptism, Easter being a traditional and most appropriate time to initiate new members into the Church. The Deacon takes the Paschal Candle from its holder and leads a procession of Clergy and Acolytes to the Font. The candidates for baptism and the congregation join them. The Celebrant questions the baptizands, parents, and godparents and hears their vows. We reaffirm our own vows together with them. He then sings the Blessing of the Baptismal Water during which the Paschal Candle is plunged three times into the font, as if it were inseminating the water with the power of the Resurrection. Baptism is administered, and afterwards we all are sprinkled with water from the font to remind us of our own Baptisms. The procession returns to the Altar as the Litany of the Saints is sung, and we join our prayers to the prayers of those who have gone before us and know the fullness of the power of the Resurrection.

At this point the Celebrant proclaims the news we have all been waiting for, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" and all respond, "He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" The *Gloria in excelsis* is sung for the first time since we began Lent; the Collect for Easter; and the Liturgy of the Word begins. Before the proclamation of the Gospel, the Great Alleluia is sung by a cantor. This wonderful word, itself a joyful exclamation, has been suppressed during Lent. As if delighting in it, the cantor and congregation sing it three times, each time on a higher note.

After the sermon the Liturgy then proceeds as usual. Bread and Wine are brought to the altar and the First Mass of Easter is sung. The tabernacle, previously open and empty, is now replenished with the risen, sacramental presence of Christ. Easter has once again given birth to the Church. The Deacon dismisses us, "Depart in peace," and he adds, "Alleluia, Alleluia!" We all respond, "Thanks be to God. Alleluia, Alleluia!"