

## Scriptural and Life Reflections in ‘*The Great and Holiest of Weeks*’ during the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Fr Graeme Malone SSS - Roman Catholic Chaplain, Concord Hospital

Friends, after several weeks of turmoil in our lives and also in the pastoral life of Our Church, - with Masses ceasing and Churches being locked, - we find ourselves in the threshold of **Holy Week**.

Speaking personally, the inability to celebrate The Eucharist and other Sacraments in the usual way has been very difficult for me and for the People of God to whom I minister here at Concord Hospital and beyond. People still fall ill, some chronic, others terminal, while others mysteriously recover their health and regain *a new lease on life* itself and so, are able to eventually and thankfully, return home. There are many stresses in our Local and World-wide Communities at this time. We think of the Medical, Nursing, Emergency, and Hospital Personnel in particular, along with Local, State, National and World Leaders each striving to respond adequately to the present-day **COVID-19 Pandemic**.

I'm reminded of the sentiments of *Nobel Peace Laureate Ellen Johnson Sirleaf* (President of Liberia from 2006 to 2018, including during the Ebola crisis) who wrote:

*“Dear Fellow Citizens of The World,...It does not mean that we are on our own, every country for themselves. On the contrary, it is the sign of a communal response, that border closures make a difference.” Her letter concludes: “I have full faith in the relentless spirit of the individual, a conviction that leaders emerge in times of crisis at every level of society, and that our religious and communal differences pale in comparison to our collective belief in the power of prayer, and our respective faith in God. As we all hunker down in the next few weeks, I pray for the health and well-being of our global citizens, and I ask that everyone remember that our humanity now relies on the essential truth that a life well-lived is a life in the service to others.”*

I am sure that we have all felt the sadness and grief of the new restrictions placed upon us at this time, and understanding the reasons for the current rules does not ameliorate the sadness we are all feeling.

These changed conditions in which we find ourselves, has produced some great innovation, as Faith Communities, Parishes and Priests and Pastoral Leaders bring spiritual resources to their people.

Wherever you are and whatever your situation, I hope you feel supported and are able to access the resources you require. Don't be afraid to ask one of your family, friends or neighbours for support. Let us continue to pray for one another.

While *'social distancing'* has become the norm during these days as we each strive to do our best to protect ourselves and our neighbours from **COVID-19**, there are times when it is more difficult than others to stay positive and adhere to the restrictions and rules. For many it will be during the upcoming **Easter Week**.

The *Rituals of Holy Week - Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday* and the **Easter Vigil /or Easter Sunday Service** has always been a chance for parish, school or family, and Concord Hospital chapel and many other Christian communities to come together in sadness and in joy. However, it seems that only in recognising the loss of a broader sense of Community, This Year that, we appreciate how much our faith communities, parishes, and our families have meant to us.

My own hope as Roman Catholic Chaplain to the hospital is that in my sharing of these *Holy Week Reflections* with you, they might - *buoy up* our flagging hearts and minds - as together, we try to assimilate the scale of the COVID-19 Pandemic, but also entrust those who have died or are dying at this time, to God's ever-faithful love - with a renewed faith ourselves - in God's care and goodness for us all. We are invited anew in this *'Holy'* week to join in continued prayer for those who are afflicted and isolated at this time, and in support of the many generous healthcare personnel - each adding their individual skills - *to the ultimate care of us all*.



On **Palm Sunday** we began the prayer of Holy Week as Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, accompanied by crowds shouting joyfully *'Hosanna!'* and waving their palm branches. Very soon, the mood of the people changes and they cry *'Crucify him!'* (Gospel). We accompany Jesus as he goes to his death. Fortunately however, that is not the end of the story, or that of our own...

## HOLY THURSDAY YEAR A: THE MASS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER 2020

'Remembering' what Jesus did and said the night before his death, one expects Saint John and his Gospel account, to describe the narrative of *The Last Supper*: - of Jesus' prayer offered in 'thanksgiving' to the Father; of his actions of taking *the Passover bread*, of offering *the Blessing over a cup of wine*; and central to all this - is recalling the command: "**To Do This In Memory of Me.**"

Instead, we read the account of *The Washing Of The Feet*, - a *Solemn Ritual* performed by Jesus: He "**arose from Supper and discarding His outer garments, with towel in hand He poured water into a basin and began to wash His Disciple's feet and to dry them with the towel about His waist.**"

One could be forgiven if, perhaps you considered a water basin, a pitcher of water and towel, as somewhat strange, erratic, and unusual '*tools*' for any labourer. How could one not be astonished and intrigued by this action and: What could it mean...?

The mandate, *the command* of Jesus to "**Do this in Memory of Me**" lies at the *very heart* of the Holy Thursday Liturgy, and indeed, at every celebration of the Eucharist. In some way, Christ's *mandate* is given greater clarity, and an urgency this night through the '*Washing of Feet*'. At the very time when we are given bread and wine as spiritual food and drink to "*Do this in Memory*" of Jesus, we are also charged to wash each other's feet. Christ's mandate is heightened even more so presently, as the world awaits the outcomes associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic. I'm not so keen - at most times friends - to embrace Christ's challenge. However, St John makes it clear - that it is in this '*sign*' of the 'washing of one another's feet' — *of service to our sister, our brother in Christ*; - that we '*en-flesh*' the demands of The Eucharist. For to sup or eat from *The Table of Eucharist* is indeed - *a very dangerous thing to do!*

Whenever we gather at the Lord's Table, it is simply not enough to eat a little bread and maybe, take a sip of wine. If that is all we do then, well, we have certainly missed the point, - we have become much-like St Peter himself, - who found it difficult to understand that the *action* of the 'foot washing' has *a hidden meaning*.



Within the celebration of *The Last Supper* is an invitation: *an invitation* to deepen our awareness of what the Eucharist is, and of what it demands from each one of us. Our 'foot washing' or *service to Christ* in those whose lives are broken and fragile, happens everywhere - at a neighbour's kitchen table; over a conversation and a concern shared; at an AIDS Clinic, or a hospital bed. It might happen in the classroom, or within a busy city-office block, or even - in our own backyards. No matter where it happens or how it looks or how often it is done, or even whether you think about it or not; - it is intimately connected with The Eucharist!

On this Holy Thursday, we are reminded that to accept *the invitation* to dine at the Lord's Table is also *to wash the feet of one another in need*: - to wash *the places of human living* that thirst for new life; to proclaim in deed and in word, in what we say and in what we do - the coming reign of *God's Love*, of God's *justice* and *infinite peace!*

Holy Thursday is not meant to be a celebration focused narrowly upon the beginning of the Institutional Priesthood. To do this, is to miss the larger and far more essential character of tonight's Eucharist. Dear friends: We are a People, a World - who *dare to proclaim the love of God* as '*a passion*' — as love, unto death!

It is that Love with which we have been marked with the Sign of The Cross. It is the same love which impels us, which drives us, from complacency *into our fragile World*, water basins, pitchers and towels in hand - to comfort the weary and hardened feet of all whose *pilgrimage through life* is often rough and pitted. For so many at this time — life is shaped by illness, uncertainly, grief and death itself. *The Washing of Feet* is echoed presently, in particular, in the daily care of health care providers, of researchers seeking a vaccine, of emergency workers coming to the aid of those less fortunate than perhaps, ourselves. They are the ones being *Christ-Like* in their service of others, they are the ones putting daily their lives at risk - who possess *the courage* to be humble, *to be servant* of our sisters and brothers; and like the numerous firefighters of recent months, are each, examples in which we need to contemplate Life's many challenges and blessings.

There are many in Our World - Our Nation, Our cities this very night friends, who wear the torn and tattered shreds of human forgetfulness, or of illness, of loss and of uncertainty and of fear. In our *common memory* we are called this Holy Thursday, and indeed at every Eucharist, '*not to forget*' them. We are called to '*remember*' - that in the midst of all those who suffer tonight, can be found The One who asked us to "**Do this, In Memory Of Me**", The One whose voice echoes in our hearts still: "**Love one another, as I, have loved you.**"

## GOOD FRIDAY YEAR A: THE PASSION OF THE LORD 2020

Dear Friends, in St John's proclamation of *The Passion of Jesus*, it is Jesus himself who enters into *the heart of human suffering*. All that the worldly powers can offer, whether it is Caiaphas - the High Priest, his guards, or Pilate and his cohorts; are *imprisonment, torture and death*. Even St Peter fails to evade the pattern, drawing his sword to cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant. Jesus however, brings *another vision* and unfolds it in the center of this picture of conflict and despair. Isaiah notes: "**He does not crush the bruised reed, he does not protest, but rather, allows himself to be handed over.**"

Jesus offers himself so that this *New Vision* may indeed be '*accomplished*'. As a '*living sign*' of this new vision, this *new order*, Jesus — from the Cross - gives his mother Mary; and the Disciple - the one Jesus called *The 'Beloved'*; - to one another. In their *new life shared*, they offer each other *a new love, a new spirit*, for which Jesus so thirsts.



At the Wedding Feast at Cana, Mary asked Jesus for wine, and he replied: that '**His hour had not yet come**'. Now, mingled with water, in this — '*His Hour*', Jesus pours out the wine of His life's blood as soldiers pierce his side - so that all who come to believe in him, may in turn, *be nourished by His love* and bear *its 'fruit'* - in the love we show to one another as Jesus' disciples today.

In John's Gospel, Jesus has no need of help: there is no *Simon of Cyrene* to assist him with The Carrying of The Cross. He takes up *His Own Cross* and trudges onward to Calvary, which is *the scene* of His fulfilling *his mission* and of his revealing God - to the World. His last words are not a cry of reproach, accusing God of abandoning him, but rather - a shout of triumph; "**It is accomplished.**" Earlier he had explained to His Disciples that The Good Shepherd is the one who lays down His Life for His sheep: he acted this out when he washed the feet of the Disciples, including Judas. John tells us that Jesus did this out of love: "**now he showed how perfect his love was**". We can understand this whenever we contemplate and reflect upon Jesus *on The Cross*.

As we gather, on this '*Good*' Friday, there are no more words from The Cross. The miracle worker from Galilee is silenced; his parables are heard no more. The Table is *empty*, the bread *consumed*, the wine *drained*. With Mary his mother, and with *the beloved disciple*, we too, '*remember*' His Cross, and 'await the Resurrected Spirit' of Jesus *to touch our lives afresh*. Like Mary, and John - *The Beloved*, we too, dare *to follow him* along *The Way*, where we are invited to walk amidst our own '*Way of the Cross*'; and yet, - understandably for us and for our present—day World - none of us particularly, want to freely do so!

Friends, in these days of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the *Passion of Christ* touches and changes us! Often, many among us are weighed down with the challenges and worries in life. So many at this time internationally are experiencing daily - great stress caused by illness or the death of a loved one; or perhaps some other anxiety or personal hardship. We are anxious and gravely concerned for our children or parents, for the International Economy, for our families, friends and work colleagues — in short - we may be fearful about the sufferings of those we love so deeply. In reality, dear friends, few of us don't have some burden or other, so the idea of walking in step with Christ and of following in his footsteps may not seem particularly appealing to anyone of us just now, - because we all carry *our own crosses* through life.

Jesus' mission was to reveal God's love for humanity and he invites us into *a relationship with God* which is perhaps best described as *a friendship*. Throughout John's version of the Gospel story we are given examples of people coming to believe in Jesus, growing in their appreciation of who he is, and what he means to them. Today, we are invited to consider how *The Cross* is more about *love* than it is about *justice*. No one can love more than *to lay down their life for their friend*.

As His Disciple, we each are called today to become *Christ—bearers* in the midst of our fragile and broken world, entrusted with Christ's *new vision* which frees our heart *to love!* For it was not Christ's suffering that saved our world, but rather, *Christ's love* - a love with which he bore and offered *his sufferings* to God For Us!

Today, on this so termed — ‘Good’ Friday, we enter into *the darkness* which surrounds us with *a message of Light, and of Hope*. Every pain that Jesus endured was endured For Us! Everything he suffered during His Passion was a fulfilment of Isaiah’s words: **“He borne our infirmities and carries our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.”** (Isaiah 53:4)

Friends, as we follow Jesus along *the ‘way of the Cross’* today, we ought to remember that He is following us, along ours! Whenever we are in the midst of hardship, we can call upon *the power of the cross*. In the life and person of *Saint Mary of The Cross MacKillop* for example, we possess a mentor and guide. Mary’s Sainthood, - *her holiness of life*, exists not in some supernatural power but, in Mary’s fidelity to Christ’s Call to stand beneath *the shadow of His Cross*, and to embrace it in *our daily living!* If then, we can, *especially in these most challenging and difficult days* - hold secure in our belief that *a new vision, a new life*, can be seen beyond The Cross - to *The Resurrection* - then; - Jesus’ Cross can bring us *Joy*, bring us *Peace*, and even bring us *Healing*, as we entrust our lives, our problems, into His care.

The Crucified Christ opened His arms on Calvary, and still calls to us: **“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest”**. Words that find *an echo* in the stark realizations of the vast number of COVID-19 related deaths associated with the destruction caused by the virus. There is nothing we can face in Life’s Pilgrimage that Jesus hasn’t faced already, for he accompanies us not only in our mountaintop experiences but in *the valleys* as well. He makes us stronger than we presently are, if we but come before him in our human weakness and reach for Christ’s eternal love and mercy.

The challenge of this Good Friday is clear! *Life* can follow *death*; *Joy* can follow on *failure!* That which was *broken* can be *Restored!* To believe this however, we, like Mary MacKillop and all The Saints - must have Faith in *The Cross of Christ*. Today, in a unique way we see The Cross as it stands in the midst of the World — and its shadow falls across the International Family of Humanity. As its shadow presently touches so many of us, we are still called to embrace it in ‘*An Act of Veneration*’. Might we then, be able to see *The Cross* with *fresh-eyes*, for even though it is a hard olive wood, it is also, *a fertile tree* - that brings New Life! Furthermore, and most of all, it is *The Revelation* of an extraordinary divine love. As we *revere* The Cross this day, - we give thanks that Jesus is present to us again - as The One who indeed *redeems the World*; and this day, before all other days - we make our own the *Faith Proclamation* which we declare so frequently: ***Lord, by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the World!***

— Fr Graeme Malone SSS — Roman Catholic Chaplain CRGH



## HOLY SATURDAY YEAR A: THE EASTER VIGIL OF WORD and OF LIGHT 2020

Friends, there is no doubt that for many, if not all of us, *The Easter Triduum*— these Sacred Three Days — are like no other!

Who could have foretold of our Churches and Places of Worship being '*closed down*' throughout the World. Of Christian Lenten and Easter Liturgies being televised and '*celebrated*' in our own lounge rooms, or of the ancient and great Cathedrals of Major Cities — inaccessible to but a few as solemn rituals within, are celebrated by a mere handful of *The Faithful*.



Cities like Valladolid in Spain are renowned for their Holy Week Processions. During Lent, men and women who belong to organised religious groups, like brotherhoods, or guilds, pious societies and the like, prepare to carry religious statues through the streets to commemorate The Passion of Christ. The statues are both life-like and life-sized and many date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Graphically, they show the wounds and suffering of Christ and of His mother, Mary, and others still, the people who were involved in The Passion. The Processions of Good Friday and Easter Sunday are completely different in mood, but together present the drama of God's Plan of Salvation. Whilst on Good Friday the mood is funereal and sombre, on Easter Sunday it is full of joy and gladness! The *black penitential hoods* worn by the men on Good Friday are removed, as are the black *mantilla* head coverings worn by the women. Their bright and joyful faces can be seen again as the women wear *white mantillas* as well as bright colours.

In Valladolid, - *as in the cities and villages of The Philippines*- a Procession carrying a statue of The Risen Christ weaves its way around the streets to meet another *Procession carrying Our Lady* into the Plaza Major. Jesus, *risen from the dead*, greets His mother in *the square* or *the barrio*, and their statues bow reverentially to one another. Her sorrow is turned into Joy and the Hope of the Resurrection leads to great applause by all present. Families then, usually gather either at home or in local restaurants or cafes to celebrate The Easter Feast with fine wines, and rich food. . . . But not so, This Year!!!



### **CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!**

Is our great Proclamation!

Friends, may our hearts be *on fire* with this knowledge, and *our lives* reflect His Resurrection by our commitment to Him! In the Evening of Holy Thursday we recalled and washed one another's feet *in memory* of the one who called us to imitate His *self-giving love*. On Friday we were invited to Commemorate the Death of Jesus, and His being buried in a Tomb. Soldiers were made to guard his *Prison of Death*. . . It seemed like the *defeat* of Life, *the loss* of Freedom, and *the end* of Hope. Darkness had covered the Scene of Calvary and defeated The Light! The Solemn Easter Vigil begins, - you will recall - in this same Darkness, but soon celebrates *The Triumph of The Light*, - the very *light* God fashioned on *The First Day of Creation*; and which now shines forth anew through The Risen Christ! In His Light, we usually read from *The Book of Exodus*, - of God's leading Israel out of their *prison of slavery*; and we read from the Prophet Isaiah - of *God's everlasting love* calling God's Chosen People out of the *prison of their Exile*! Then, with the dawning of *The First Day of the Week*, Mary of Magdala - and the other Mary, return to the Tomb.

Now, the *Creator God*, performs a New Creation as there is a violent earthquake, and the stone that seals the Tomb is rolled away. *Death* is defeated as the *Tomb opens*, and the soldiers become like the corpse they were supposed to guard. All the attempts of the authorities to keep Jesus, *the Lord of Life* in the grave - have failed, and *The Crucified One* shakes off the chains of death, as an angel proclaims: **"He is not here, for He Has Risen!"**

Friends, each one of us will be affected in a different way by the events of The Resurrection. The characters in the Gospel, too, have different reactions to what they witness. Easter Sunday's Gospel flows on from where tonight's passage ends, and we discover how *Mary of Magdala* was upset, because the body of Jesus was missing; of how Peter and the other Disciple — *the one Jesus loved*, set out for the place of burial, as if to join in the search. There is an eagerness about the *Beloved Disciple*, as he runs on ahead, but then, doesn't quite have the courage to go *all of the way* into the Tomb; and so Peter, - almost calmly - walks into the Tomb - he finds nothing — but discovers everything!!! The Easter implication is simply expressed: **"He saw and he believed"**.

Dear friends, there is a wonderful wall painting in a small Church in Istanbul, in Turkey. It shows the Risen Christ standing over the broken gates of The Under-World and he is *full of life, agility and enthusiasm!* His strong hands are pulling Adam and Eve out of *the prison of the grave* — from *the clutches of death itself*, and there is a sense of power and light as The Risen One dispels darkness and death itself! On his feet however, are still the marks of the nails, because the *Resurrection does not forget The Cross* — but allows us 'to remember it' and to recognise the power of that extraordinary divine love, which enters into *The Pain and Suffering of Humanity*; and into death itself for the sake of ALL of God's Creation: redeemed now, through Christ's Cross and Resurrection!

On Easter Night, dear friends, despite the challenges COVID-19 has brought into our lives and our homes, into our *isolated worlds* - we are exultant and filled with the same joy as The Women at the Tomb — the two Mary's, - who forever shall be - *the first disciples of Faith!* With them, we also Rejoice in *the Victory of Christ* over death and in His Invitation - to come out of *the prisons of our fears, of our selfishness and our sin*, in order to share in Christ's Risen Life and - the gifts of *A New Creation!*

The Easter Vigil initiates us into a *Renewed Faith*. We can go forth - through the darkness which forever remains symbolic of the *many present-day Crosses* which shape the journeys and lives of All - as Christ's disciple!

So, let us rejoice in 'Christ Risen' and 'Give Thanks' on this 'Great Day of Resurrection!'

May our hearts be *on-fire with this knowledge*, and may our Lives reflect His Resurrection by our commitment to Christ 'Risen' and His indwelling presence among us! **Amen!**



May the Blessings of New Life be Yours this Easter Season  
- For You and Your Loved Ones, and For Our Fragile World! -

## **A Happy Easter!**

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