St John's Newport and St Stephen's Providence

LENT LECTURES 2019

4. The Good Friday Liturgy

Those of you who have become fans of Egeria over the last few weeks will be pleased that today's lecture must begin with her account of the Good Friday service. This took place in the great complex of buildings and courtyards erected by Constantine in Jerusalem to embrace both the hill of Golgotha and the tomb of Christ. Egeria, you will remember, is the fourth-century Spanish nun whose pilgrimage diary affords us such a vivid glimpse of the Jerusalem liturgy at the time of St Cyril. On Good Friday she tells us that the faithful were summoned to be present at Golgotha at 8.00 in the morning where they found the bishop's chair in place in front of the great cross. She writes:

> *"A table is placed before him with a cloth on it, the deacons stand around, and there is brought to him a gold and silver box containing the holy Wood of the Cross. It is opened and the Wood of the Cross and the Title (that is the multi-lingual notice Pilate caused to be fixed to the cross) are taken out and placed on the table. As long as the holy Wood is on the table, the bishop sits with his hands resting on either end of it and holds it down, and the deacons round him keep watch over it. They guard it like this because what happens now is that all the people, catechumens as well as faithful, come up one by one to the table. They stoop down over it, kiss the Wood and move*

on. But on one occasion (I don't know when) one of them bit off a piece of the holy Wood and stole it away, and for this reason the deacons stand around and keep watch in case anyone dares to do the same again. Thus all the people go past one by one. They stoop down, touch the holy Wood first with their forehead and then with their eyes, and then kiss it, but no one puts out his hand to touch it."

This obviously takes a long time, from 8 o'clock until midday but the worship continues. At noon a Three Hours *synaxis* or Liturgy of the Word is held in the open courtyard between Golgotha and the Anastasis rotunda. Egeria tells us that it concludes at 3 o'clock with *"the reading from St John's Gospel about Jesus giving up the ghost."* There is then a further service in the Great Church or Martyrium, consisting mainly of intercessions and readings, at the end of which they all return to the Anastasis:

"where, once inside, they read the Gospel passage about Joseph asking Pilate for the Lord's body and placing it in a new tomb. After the reading there is a prayer, the blessing of the catechumens and the faithful and the dismissal."

This is a long service by anyone's standards and it is interesting to note *en passant* that our Anglo-Saxon forbears called this day *"Lange Frigedæg"* or Long Friday and the Danes still do the same. The authority from whom I gleaned this piece of information notes with some asperity, *"the spirit which finds the most distinctive feature of the day in the length of its services is hardly the spirit of devotion. Hence the modern title*

"Good Friday", derived from the benefits we have received through Christ's Passion, is a great improvement on the old Anglo-Saxon one."

In Egeria's testimony we recognise in embryo, perhaps, many of the features of the Good Friday liturgy we celebrate in our own time: the ministry of the Word, including the reading of St John's Passion narrative, the Solemn Prayers and the Veneration of the Cross. Liturgists in our day, especially those of the Roman Church who were charged with the renewal of worship after the Second Vatican Council, might be said to have "*Back to the Future*" as their motto. Egeria's writings and St Cyril's own teaching notes, along with other early accounts, lectionaries, and collections of prayer texts, have been hugely influential in the process of reinvigorating the liturgical worship of Holy Week today through the recovery of ancient simplicity, directness and lack of medieval and later accretions. The liturgical tree needs radical pruning every now and again, even back to the stock, if it is to bear fruit in abundance. Strangely enough, the Good Friday liturgy needed less pruning than many other rites, keeping its basic shape and content intact throughout the centuries albeit with some strange obfuscations. The German liturgist, Anton Baumstark, if I may be permitted a quick parenthesis, is celebrated for his attempt to impose some method on the study of liturgy in his influential work, *Comparative Liturgy,* which first appeared in 1934. One of the "liturgical laws" he promulgated was that liturgy is more resistant to change on special occasions. Good Friday is

perhaps the best example of this phenomenon and a time-traveller from 1,500 years ago would not feel a total stranger to what we do today.

We should note that Egeria makes no mention of the celebration of the Eucharist on this day. The unbroken tradition of both East and West has never admitted a eucharistic celebration on Good Friday or on Holy Saturday until after the Vigil. An even earlier tradition extended this prohibition to the reception of Holy Communion as is made clear in a letter from Pope Innocent I to a certain Decentius which dates from the first decade of the 5th century:

> *"It is quite clear that the Apostles during these two days were in mourning and also hid themselves from the Jews. And further there is no doubt they fasted on the aforesaid two days to such a degree that the tradition of the Church requires entire abstinence from the celebration of the Sacraments on those two days."*

This primitive rule is still observed today in the Ambrosian Rite, the liturgy of the Church of Milan, which provides only for a Liturgy of the Word and the veneration of the Cross on Good Friday. Up until the early 1950s, the Roman tradition was for the priest alone to receive Holy Communion during this liturgy, even after the panoply of the procession back from the place of Repose where the Blessed Sacrament had been reserved since the preceding night. The custom of general communion on Good Friday from the consecrated elements reserved from the Maundy

Thursday Mass dates only from the Roman reforms of 1955, adopted in the Church of England by "advanced" Anglo-Catholics and now commended as good practice in the *Common Worship* provision. Both the *Common Worship* and your Episcopal 1979 *Prayer Book* authorise the option of ending the liturgy after the Veneration of the Cross and omitting Holy Communion – and there is something to be said for the idea that, the Triduum liturgies constituting a unity and Holy Communion having been administered on Maundy Thursday evening, that single reception is enough. However, it seems to me that what is more generally done has an even better rationale.

There are profound theological reasons for not celebrating the Eucharist on Good Friday. These can be appreciated more clearly when we set the day in the closest possible association with Maundy Thursday, the day before, and the Easter Vigil on the day ahead. It is no mere historical accident that Holy Communion is given on Good Friday from the elements consecrated on the previous evening. As I stressed last week, Egeria witnesses to the fact that in fourth-century Jerusalem, Thursday and Friday constituted a singe celebration of unbroken unity. The Jerusalem Church thought it theologically appropriate to celebrate the Supper of the Lord on Thursday at Calvary in order to demonstrate the unity of the eucharistic sacrifice and that of the Cross. The Supper and the Cross are so closely linked that they form a single act of sacrifice and cannot be understood without reference to each other. The Cross gives meaning to the Supper, but the Supper also gives meaning to

the Cross. There is a supreme truth to which all this points: the Cross of Christ is not defeat but victory, because that which give it its true meaning is not the execution on Friday but the offering Jesus made of himself at the Last Supper on Thursday evening. Our paschal celebration within the *Triduum* is, and should be seen to be, essentially indivisible. If we do not celebrate the Eucharist on Good Friday it is in part because we are waiting to give thanks for the Cross until we can give thanks for it together with the Resurrection in the one, great, unitive eucharistic celebration of the Easter Vigil. We Anglicans, brought up on the cross-centred theology of Cranmer's Prayer of Consecration in the Book of Common Prayer, need reminding from time to time that every Eucharist is as much a proclamation of the resurrection as a memorial of the Cross.

Let us turn now to examine in turn the three main sections of the Good Friday liturgy. The first part, the *synaxis* or Liturgy of the Word, is characterised by extreme simplicity and austerity. The President and Deacons, vested in Passion Red, enter in silence and fall prostrate before the stripped and bare altar, lying face down for what seems an eternity. The impact is dramatic but the emotion is restrained and the emphasis is soon discovered to be upon a meditative dialogue with God's word. Rising, the President prays the Collect and we sit to listen to the appointed readings. The first is from Isaiah 52 and 53 and presents a view of Yahweh's suffering servant with which Jesus clearly identified himself; this is followed by verses from Psalm 22, which since the very earliest times has been associated in

Christian usage with Christ's suffering, then we hear a passage from Hebrews 10 with its reflection on Christ's self-offering. The climax, in all its majesty and glory, is the Passion according to St John, dramatically sung, sometimes the millennium-old chant alternating with the timeless polyphony of Victoria, at others a more modern setting, or even a dramatized reading. While on Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion we hear each year a different Synoptic Passion, on Good Friday it is always that of St John. Not by accident but by design - it is the Johannine account of the Passion that stresses the victory of the Cross and paints for us the picture of *Christus regnans in cruce* – Christ reigning from the Cross. To my mind there is no need for a sermon for the magnificent truth is, as it were, placarded before our minds and imaginations. As Michael Ramsey wrote:

> *"In the Passion story of St John the glory dominates . . . Dying as the king, Jesus is no less the Passover lamb. Pilate delivers him to die at the moment when the lambs are being prepared for sacrifice. The king and the sacrificial victim are one Christ. Thus the Johannine story of the Passion both reflects and creates the imagery in the Church of One who is both lamb and king, victim and conqueror.* Vexilla regis prodeunt – *The royal banners forward go."*

This is the vision to be seen in the type of crucifix known as the *Christus Rex*, the victorious Jesus standing in royal and priestly garb, hands outstretched in the act of blessing and embracing the world. This is the Christ who, in the words of one of the earliest western Eucharistic Prayers, "opened wide his arms for

us on the Cross." There is no real need for a sermon at this liturgy. I speaks powerfully for itself, but if sermon there must be, the preacher should heed the words of the distinguished twentieth-century Swedish Lutheran theologian and bishop, Gustaf Aulen:

> *"Good Friday appears in its right perspective only when it is seen in the light of Easter. If the note of triumph is not present in preaching on the passion, this preaching has lost its Christian character."*

With St John's understanding of Christ's High-Priestly role now before the eyes of our mind, we seek to unite our wills with his by joining in intercession for the needs of the Church and the World. In the *Common Worship* liturgy, the Celebrant puts it in this way in the introduction to the Prayers that follow:

> *"God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Therefore we pray to our heavenly Father for people everywhere according to their needs."*

These prayers, called The Solemn Prayers, whose origins are of great antiquity are an impressive exercise in corporate intercession and probably reflect the way this type of prayer was offered daily in public worship in the Early Church: first a bidding by the Deacon, then the assembly's silent prayer, then a collect recited by the Celebrant, whose outstretched arms may serve to remind us of the arms of Christ stretched out upon the Cross in order to draw all humanity to himself.

We move now to the second and most dramatic section of the liturgy, the Veneration of the Cross. There is a marked change of style from the restrained austerity of the *Synaxis* with its Roman gravitas, to a mood of more vivid, eloquent emotion, derived from the rites witnessed by Egeria in Jerusalem and reworked into its present form in France and Germany in the late ninth century. A crucifix is solemnly brought through the church, escorted by lighted candles and held up three times before the people, inviting their response of worship. In many places, this triumphant procession is accompanied by the great *Pange Lingua* hymn of Venantius Fortunatus, a sixth-century liturgical genius who wrote an office, including this hymn, for the reception of a relic of the True Cross in St Radegonde's nunnery in Poitiers. The hymn salutes the Cross as "the victor's trophy" and is utterly appropriate to the occasion. When the Cross has arrived in the sanctuary, all come - clergy, servers, congregation - to kneel before the it and, perhaps, kiss it as Egeria and her contemporaries venerated the relic of the True Cross held by their bishop in Jerusalem. To embrace the Cross in this way is to make an act of faith in Christ and his saving work. It is also an act of gratitude, penitence and of love. In the Veneration we pay our homage not to a corpse but to a reigning sovereign. The whole ceremony is performed in the light of St John's presentation of the Gospel: the Cross is held erect and candles burn on either side. The Cross is a throne as well as an altar and we are taking part in the Homage at a Coronation. In Westminster Abbey, those who do homage go up to the throne,

kneel and swear allegiance and then kiss the sovereign's cheek or hand. There is a clear analogy here with what we are doing in this liturgy. Our kiss must be that of a faithful subject, not that of the traitor, Judas. Here is no idolatry either – the honour paid to an image passes to its prototype – but Cranmer and his cronies hated this "creeping to the cross" and abolished it along with many other vivid rites at the Reformation. What is natural and instinctive and traditional will ultimately and inexorably return to the way of worship of God's people and the *Common Worship* provision formally restores this powerful act of devotion to the Good Friday liturgy.

I have mentioned the element of penitence that must also inform our act of veneration. Traditionally, during this solemn section of the liturgy, the choir sing the *Reproaches* – in Latin, the *Improperia* – which build on a passage from the book of the prophet Micah:

> *"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."*

The text is ancient, the Micah verses were probably sung *inter alia* at Jerusalem in Egeria's day, and what we have now appeared first in a ninth-century antiphonal from Senlis in France. Scholars think the composition originated in the worship of the early Spanish Church with verses added later in France as the appropriateness of the exercise caught on. Christ himself is

in dialogue with his faithless people and with a painful cry of reproach challenges us to make a response of penitence and faith. *"O my people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!"* Our response, in Greek and Latin and in our native tongue, is just that, an act of faith and a call for mercy. *"Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy upon us."* There is something dynamically Christian about this chant, another act of liturgical genius.

The text of the *Reproaches* has been criticised as anti-Semitic – Hugh Montefiore, when Bishop of Birmingham, introduced the idea into a debate in the General Synod of the Church of England way back in 1985 when the early drafts of the Holy Week liturgy we now use were first discussed. Properly understood there is nothing anti-Semitic about the Reproaches. The dialogue is not with the Jews but with *us*. It challenges us, those present at the liturgy, to faith, love and repentance and reproaching us with examples of infidelity taken from the past history of the people of God. In the words of Pope Pius XI, "we are all spiritually Semites" – we are one with our "fathers" in an inheritance both of shame and of glory and we cannot claim one without the other.

We move from the Veneration to the final section of the rite, the distribution of Holy Communion. The consecrated elements are brought from the place of reservation quietly and with dignity and placed on the altar. We all join together in saying the Lord's Prayer and receive Communion. The whole

service then concludes with a collect and the ministers leave as they arrived in silence. There is no dismissal because the liturgy of the Triduum is one and concludes not now but after the Eucharist of Easter Day. As we leave in silence, Christ still hanging on the cross, we reflect that our closest union with Christ is a sacramental union. In Holy Communion he takes the initiative, entering into our lives and bringing with him his life-giving Cross and all the graces of his Passion. The last word on this profoundly moving liturgy should be with Venantius Fortunatus:

"He endured the nails, the spitting,
Vinegar and spear and reed;
From that holy Body piercèd
Blood and water forth proceed:
Earth and stars and sky and ocean
By that flood from stain are freed."

Perhaps a word should be said about a Good Friday devotion which, while not strictly part of the liturgy of the day, has gained an enormous currency in parts of the Church. This is the Three Hours' Devotion, generally scheduled to coincide with the period of time in which our Lord hung upon the cross. It is somewhat ironic that a devotion, instituted in Peru by Jesuit missionaries at the end of the seventeenth century, should have become so popular in middle-of the-road Anglicanism but the austere diet of Matins, Litany and Ante-Communion provided in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer for Good Friday proved

insufficiently nourishing for late nineteenth-century members of the Church of England. They turned instead to Three Hours Devotion which is a preaching service where, classically, the preacher meditates on the Seven Last Words of Jesus from the Cross. There is opportunity for hymns and music – indeed Haydn wrote seven very moving string quartet movements to accompany the preaching – and people can, if they wish, come and go. Some churches in England adopted what became known as a liturgical Three Hours which consists of Stations of the Cross, Preaching of the Passion and finally the Liturgy of the day.