AMPLEFORTH
ABBEY

Praying the Liturgy

Supplementary talk for the Paschal Triduum 2023

I would like to begin this morning's talk with a quotation from the Instruction on the Roman Missal:

In the Sacred Triduum, the Church solemnly celebrates the greatest mysteries of our redemption, keeping by means of special celebrations the memorial of her Lord, crucified, buried and risen... Pastors should, therefore, not fail to explain to the Christian faithful, as best they can, the meaning and order of the celebrations and to prepare them for active and fruitful participation... (Sunday Missal, p.341)

That, therefore, is our task this morning – to give some hints and perspectives which help all of us participate as fully as we may, to "pray the Liturgy". As I said in the little "blurb" in the Triduum programme: *"it can be very easy to get so enthralled by the "liturgical drama" that the texts flash past us, and we do not reflect on their meaning for us as disciples"*. And, of course, it's not just the liturgical texts that can flash past. Our Triduum retreat is a very busy time – a time of friendship and fellowship as well as of prayer – and that is important. Equally, each of us comes to this year's Triduum with our own experiences, our own concerns, perhaps in different stages of our journey in faith. There is much richness here in all we do, much that we can profit from – and I just hope that, in some small way, this little talk – aiming to encourage prayerful participation, may bring each of us into closer communion with God and with each other, and so empower us – like Mary of Magdala and the disciples on the road to Emmaus – to go forth in mission on Easter Sunday.

Before we proceed, I would just like to offer a few caveats and an apology. In the first place, this talk is not intended to *tell you how to pray* – I think that would be a disaster, if not an impossibility. Rather, I hope to offer some reflections, some thoughts, some history which you can either use as food for thought, or forget immediately, depending on what touches you. There is no "right way" to pray the Triduum! Secondly, since we only have some 40-45 minutes to play with, I cannot offer you a full "liturgical commentary" on every text and ritual detail. What I hope to offer is a few "selected highlights" as it were – and I think that is important. It is in the Triduum liturgy itself that we encounter God – not this little talk; all I can offer is a few "amuse bouches" before the main banquet of our celebrations. Lastly, the apology: I hope that nothing I say will "get in the way" of your prayer. It is always a risk for 'spiritual commentators' that their insights become somehow "fixed" in their hearers' minds as the only lens by which to view their subject – and that is very much the opposite of what I hope to do. I can remember one of Roman professors saying to us as we learned the basics of preaching: *Always remember. Get out of the way*

of the Word! It is good advice. So let us pray that the Holy Spirit will throw wide the doors of all our hearts, to make us attentive and responsive disciples.

The Triduum Liturgies: *What are we doing?*

By way of a general introduction, I would turn back again to two words from my blurb: *liturgical drama*. In a powerful sense, that is what our Triduum liturgies are. These liturgies – as well as those of Palm Sunday – have a very long history; many of them, indeed, go back to ceremonies first celebrated in 4th century Jerusalem, others to the Roman liturgy of the 5-6th centuries AD. Jerusalem was a very special place for the early Church – it was the city on whose streets Christ himself had walked, the site of many of his teachings and miracles, and the city in which he had been condemned, tortured, crucified, buried and risen. The very geography of the city, combined with the gospel narratives, proved a very rich source of precisely such "liturgical drama". 4th century pilgrims could, literally, follow in the footsteps of Jesus as they processed through the city – much as modern pilgrims make the *Via Crucis*, and for the same reason. Taking the very path that Jesus trod in a sense "brings the gospel to life", it emphasises the historical reality of the events which we celebrate, it gives us a sense that we are "very close to Jesus".

That is the origin of many of our Triduum rituals – the Palm Sunday procession, the *Mandatum* on Maundy Thursday, the Veneration of the Cross, the lighting of the Easter Fire and the Paschal Candle. But what is important here is that these are *not* 'historical re-enactments' – we are not 'The Sealed Knot', or any of those other re-enactment societies, good fun and educational though such activities can be. We do not dress up in costumes and seek to re-create historical scenarios. Rather our liturgies are something very different. They are 'liturgical re-presentations' of the saving acts of God – a new 'making present' of God's saving power so that all generations might participate in that saving act. Think back to yesterday's first reading at Mass – the description in Exodus of the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, and the saving value of its blood on the doorposts which turns aside the Angel of Death. Remember the last two lines:

This day is to be a day of remembrance for you, and you must celebrate it as a feast in the Lord's honour. For all generations you are to declare it a day of festival, for ever... (Ex.12:13-14)

That passage continues:

And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt when he slew the Egyptians but spared our houses.' And the people bowed their heads and worshipped. (Ex.12:26-27)

The ritual is thus *anamnetic* – it creates a memorial, a shared memory of the event – but that memorial is not just at the intellectual level but in terms of shared *experience.* The Passover is celebrated year after year - each subsequent generation celebrating the ritual comes to share in the physical *experience* of that first Passover, and through that sharing, to share also in the promise of God's transformative power for salvation. And the same is true for our liturgies. The Abbot was not "pretending to be Jesus" during the Washing of the Feet. Rather, he was obeying the Lord's command *in our day: 'if I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, so you must wash*

one another's feet' (Jn.13:14). He did so as a sign to each of us that this is *our* road of discipleship. Many of you here, young and old, will be carers – whether for children, or spouses, or parents. That '*Mandatum'* is a reminder that – whatever care you give, even if it isn't washing feet – Christ is truly present with you in those actions, and it is Christ's love which strengthens your human love and service. That is what our Liturgy is about – encountering Christ.

Maundy Thursday

I would just like to say a few words about Maundy Thursday, and the celebration of the Mass of the Lord's Supper. In a sense, yesterday's celebration "sets the tone" for the remainder of the Triduum. And I think it does this in at least two important ways.

The first, and perhaps more obvious of the two, is that great chant with which the Triduum begins, echoing Paul's letter to the Galatians:

We should glory in the Cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ; for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; in him, we are saved and made free.

It is a stirring text and a stirring chant, a fitting entrance into the mysteries we celebrate. We should *glory* in the Cross, not be ashamed of it. We should glory in all it stands for – that, through Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, the debt of our sins has been repaid, and that we, like the enslaved People of Israel, are now liberated, made free, bought and paid for, redeemed. For Christ is our Life with a capital 'L' – Christ is *all* our life, hidden with him in God. It is a strange paradox: that the most infamous of ancient tortures – crucifixion – should be the turning-point of human history, yet that is what we proclaim with both pride and joy.

But there is another way in which Maundy Thursday 'sets the tone'. The Missal speaks of *"Christ's two-fold giving of himself: he gives himself over to his enemies, to die for the life of the world; he gives himself over to his friends – to us – in the gift of his Body and Blood"* (cf. Sunday Missal, p.342). This "giving of himself", this "handing over" reflects a single concept: *traditio* in Latin – παραδωσις in Greek. The Missal is right to mention those two great "summary" gifts – but this concept of παραδωσις runs right through the Triduum at many levels. The saving act of the Passover, part of the original forming of Israel as God's people, is "handed on" year by year by the Jewish people – but also for us, the New Israel, it becomes the template, as it were, for our salvation too, which is why we will hear the Exodus narrative of the Crossing of the Red Sea in the Easter Vigil. The Eucharist, Christ's greatest gift to the Church, is likewise "handed on" day by day and year by year to the faithful; to borrow those great words of Aquinas: *se dat suis manibus* – Christ gives himself with his own hands to those who are his own. In the Solemn Liturgy of Good Friday, we hear of more παραδωσες. In Paul's hymn to the Philippians, we hear Christ "handing over" his birthright, his glory, into the Father's hands as – in his supreme act of κενωσις, "self-emptying" – he takes on human nature and the Cross. And in the last great moment of the Passion, he hands over (παρεδοκεν) his Spirit to the Father.

And all of that perhaps leads us to a first focus for our prayer and reflection this year. Perhaps there is something in our own lives that the Lord is asking us to "hand

over" this Easter. It might be some aspect of life, or even some person, we need to "hand over" to him for healing. It might be some new challenge that lies before us, a new threshold which we are nervous or fearful of crossing. It might even be something precious to us which we are scared to let go of, even though we may be aware that unless we do, we cannot make progress, cannot grow. The Lord Jesus handed over everything for us – what is he asking us to hand over that we may truly be his disciples?

Good Friday

Turning now to the liturgies of Good Friday, the so-called "Solemn Liturgy" has three main parts – the Liturgy of the Word, the Veneration of the Cross and Communion. Before looking at some of these elements, though, I would like to offer a few introductory comments.

You will all be aware that, after the solemnity of Maundy Thursday, the church itself is transformed – everything is stripped away, altarcloths, candles, other moveable furnishings. All is left stark and bare, naked architecture. I always find that rather moving, especially in our Abbey church. And like the church, so too the Office is stripped down; all the poetic elements are stripped away – hymns, versicles and so on – leaving only the stark reality of the psalms and gospel. Both of these elements – what we might call the physical and the spiritual "environments" – can also shape our prayer as well as our emotions. As we recall Jesus himself being stripped of everything that gave him human dignity, we too join him in that naked starkness. I must admit that – each year – as the candles are gradually extinguished after each psalm of the morning Offices, I cannot help but be moved as the darkness of evil seems to be taking the upper hand.

And the Solemn Liturgy shares in that starkness. The entrance procession occurs in silence, and – on reaching the sanctuary – the Abbot and ministers prostrate before the altar for some time in prayer, before the Opening Prayer is offered as the first words to break the silence at the hour of Jesus' death. It is a very powerful moment. In fact, the earliest descriptions we have of the Roman Liturgy (from the early 8th century) suggest that this was how every Mass started – although on other days there would be a sung Introit accompanying the procession. The prostration of the Celebrant was both an opportunity for him to pray fervently before beginning the Liturgy, and a sign to all present of the power and majesty of God. The fact that Good Friday is now the only day when this solemn prostration occurs highlights the great Mystery which we celebrate.

In many ways, the Liturgy of the Word speaks for itself – the last of the 'Suffering Servant Songs' from Isaiah a moving prophecy of Christ's own sufferings, the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews explaining the significance of Christ's death as our *"supreme high priest... who learnt to obey through suffering"*. Then follows the Passion according to John. The fact that it is sung makes us listen differently than if it were merely proclaimed – it takes us as a community into a "different world", as it were, heightening the drama of the narrative, and drawing out a deeper emotional response. And it is this response, also in song, which we traditionally "summarise" in the two hymns which form "responsories" within the Passion. We are not just

passive bystanders – we stand with Mary and John at the foot of the Cross, and we offer our response with theirs.

After the Homily, there follow the Solemn Intercessions. These ancient prayers for the Church and the World are drawn from the 7th century, although slightly modified at the Council. Jesus' death, and the piercing of his side by the lance, are the moment when God's mercy is poured out most abundantly in our world, and so we plead for all in need in this sacred moment.

The Veneration of the Cross and Communion then follow. These two rites, celebrated here at the Abbey in one ceremony, actually have two separate origins in the Roman Liturgy. The Veneration was a "papal ceremony", held at the basilica of Santa Croce, just down the road from St John Lateran, where relics of the True Cross are enshrined. The Pope would lead that liturgy, which would end with the faithful who were present coming in procession and venerating the relics. At other churches around Rome, which did not have such relics, such veneration would not originally have occurred, and the liturgy would have concluded by those who wished to receiving Communion from the reserved Sacrament consecrated at the previous evening's Mass. Gradually, the two elements were combined, as in our modern liturgy. We venerate Christ's Cross, that paradoxical "tree of death, which now becomes the tree of life for us", and we receive the broken Body of the one who died for us – a pledge that, if we can have some share in the sufferings of Christ, we will also merit a share in his Resurrection.

Three chants are traditionally sung during the Veneration. All are very ancient. The *'Crux fidelis'* was written by Venantius Fortunatus, probably about 570 AD, to accompany the arrival of relics of the True Cross in Gaul. The second *'Crucem tuam adoramus'* (in our translation: *We worship you, O Lord, we venerate your Cross, we praise your resurrection: through the Cross you brought joy to the world*) reminds us that it is only because of the Resurrection that we can understand the mystery of the Cross. Perhaps the most extraordinary, though, is the last of the three, the "Impropreria" or "Reproaches". Again, this is a very ancient text – some scholars placing it in the 7th century because of the presence of the "Trisagion" – the Greek text: *'Holy is God, Holy and Strong, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us'*. This may have reached Rome directly from Byzantium (there was a large Greek population in the city in the 7th century) or through the liturgies of Gaul. It is a poetic development of Micah 6:3-4 – *"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 bondage"*. From this basic starting-point, the chant sets out a series of contrasts between God's care and saving power for his people, and the way they have treated him. It is a text well worth reflecting on, especially as – most unusually – our response is the voice of Christ, the voice of the Father: *"My people, what have I done to you?"* It is our sins that break the heart of God, our sins that Christ bore on the tree of the Cross.

After all this emotion, the procession again leaves in silence. From this point onwards, until the Easter Vigil, the Cross takes centre-stage on the sanctuary – it is the focus of our on-going veneration and, whenever we pass it, we genuflect as a

sign of reverence. It really is worth spending some time before the Cross, either today or on Holy Saturday, especially when the church is quiet and empty.

Holy Saturday

Holy Saturday is always a 'strange' day. As the Second Reading at Matins reminds us year by year, there is always that question: *"What is happening? Today, there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence and stillness, because the King sleeps..."* Holy Saturday, like Good Friday, is often described as 'aliturgical' – meaning that there is no celebration of the Eucharist. But 'aliturgical' does not mean literally *without liturgy* – since there is the Liturgy of the Hours throughout the day, a chance for each of us to pray and reflect together as a community as we await the celebration of the Resurrection. As I mentioned concerning Good Friday, the Office is very bare, stripped back to its core, and especially to the psalms – its nearest equivalent being the "Office of the Dead". And perhaps it is worth noting that the psalms used on both Good Friday and Holy Saturday are not from the usual "cursus" – rather they are specially chosen to highlight *both* the aspect of lamentation at the Saviour's suffering and death and also our continued trust in God, that trust in God we learn from Christ himself. As the second reading from Hebrews we hear on Good Friday states: *During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard* (Heb.5:7-9). In a sense, our participation in the Liturgy of the Hours throughout the day means that – like the women in the gospel, to whom we refer in the Benedictus and Magnificat Antiphons – we sit by the tomb of Christ, not only in sorrow, but in hope, awaiting *"the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ"* (Tit.2:13). To share our prayer in the Office makes the whole of Holy Saturday an "Easter Vigil".

Which brings us to the high-point of our Triduum celebrations, the Easter Vigil itself. This Vigil, which the Missal describes as the *"greatest and most noble of all solemnities"* is, by ancient tradition *"a night for keeping vigil for the Lord"* (Ex.12:42) just as was that first night of Passover in Egypt. As Israel waited to see the salvation of God and their liberation from slavery, so now the Church awaits the return of the Lord Jesus, watching for him with lighted lamps, so that – as he returns from the dead – he will find us awake, *'watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise'* (Preface II of Advent).

The original context of the Easter Vigil, at least in the Latin West from the 4th century onwards, was as the culmination of the preparation of Catechumens, who were baptised, confirmed and received their first Communion during this holy night. Just as Christ rose from the tomb during the stillness of this night, crushing the power of sin and death, so now the newly-baptised, rising from the 'tomb of the font' take their full share in the new and risen life of Christ, as Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans, read as the Epistle at the Vigil. And perhaps that is something all of us can reflect on – even if it is many years since our own Baptism. Each year, at this same Vigil, the Christian people throughout the world renew their own baptismal promises. That renewal does not change our *status* – we are already baptised, we are already the Children of God – but it should, at least in some way, change *us*. The whole of our Triduum liturgy should be focused towards making that renewal of our

baptism a *living reality* in our lives, something active and not passive. It should be a genuine *renewal*, an active embracing of our faith and – empowered by the Spirit in joy – it should drive us out in mission.

The Vigil itself has four parts. The first is the "Lucernarium" – the 'liturgy of Light'. The great Paschal Candle, symbol of the Risen Christ, is solemnly prepared and then lit from the new fire. Like the pillar of fire which led Israel through the desert, it is that great icon of Christ, the Paschal Candle, who himself leads his own disciples into the darkened church. Three times the acclamation "Lumen Christi" is sung, to which all respond "Deo Gratias" – 'Thanks be to God'; we welcome Christ as our Light, the true Light which even the darkness of death could not overpower, and we follow him. As the procession proceeds, gradually each disciple's candle is lit from the Paschal Candle – 'a fire divided but undimmed' – until the whole church is ablaze with the glory of the Risen Christ, his light shared by each one of us.

This first section of the Vigil ends with the *Praeconium Paschale* – the Easter Proclamation or *Exsultet*. This great hymn of praise is again very ancient, probably dating back to 7th or 8th Gaul. It is very long, but a real treasury of imagery for our reflection. Starting again from the Exodus, it sings the praises of Christ, the Candle and the Pillar of Fire, the true Paschal Lamb and the Morning Star, not flinching from the paradoxes of God's work for us: *O charity beyond all telling, to ransom a slave you gave away your Son! O necessary sin of Adam... that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!*

At the end of the *Exsultet*, the Vigil proper begins, the second part of the liturgy. These seven long readings, followed by their psalms and – after some silence for reflection – a proper prayer follow the pattern of the whole of salvation history, from Creation onwards leading up to the Resurrection itself. This reading from the Word of God is a fundamental part of the Easter Vigil. We listen attentively – in a way, it is a form of communal *Lectio Divina* – so that the Spirit may draw our hearts to God in awe and thanksgiving for all his wonderful works. And perhaps our last Psalm response is a fitting summary of all that this part of the Vigil seeks to instil in us: *Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is thirsting for you, my God* (Ps.41:2). In the early Church in Rome, mosaics in the apse would often depict two deer flanking either the Cross in glory or the figure of Christ himself, and drinking from streams in flowery meadows; they were icons of the Christian soul, thirsting for the water of life flowing from the side of the Crucified and Risen Jesus.

The third part of the Vigil is the Baptismal Liturgy which we have already discussed, and the final part is the celebration of the Easter Eucharist. After the prolonged, three-day gap since the Mass of the Lord's Supper, Communion comes to us like manna in the desert, satisfying our spiritual hunger for the Lord. Traditionally, this long "wait" for Communion between Thursday and late Saturday night was accompanied by fasting – especially by those who were to be baptised and the clergy – and for those who have the strength (although only the Friday fast and abstinence is required) perhaps such an extended fast would be another way to deepen our prayer and our experience of the Triduum.

Participation, Communion, Mission – these three great aspects of our Christian discipleship are all brought about through the Liturgy. Like the disciples on the road

to Emmaus, we meet the Risen Lord in all our distractedness, we share with him our thoughts and hopes and fears, while he explains the scriptures to us, showing us who he really is, and so making us who God wills us to be. Sharing in the bread of his Body which he breaks and offers us, we are empowered by His Spirit to run with new strength along the road, and to bring his message of new life to all we meet. That is the purpose of the Triduum. That is the locus of our prayer. That is what we celebrate in faith and proclaim to the whole world.

I would like to finish with the prayer we will use as the Collect on Easter morning:

O God, who through your Only-Begotten Son,
have conquered death
and unlocked for us the path to eternity;
grant, we pray, that we who keep the solemnity of the Lord's Resurrection
may, through the renewal brought by your Spirit,
rise up in the light of life, through Christ our Lord.

6.iv.23