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Homilies for the Triduum

(Fr Gordon Spencer)

FR GORDON'S HOMILIES

Father Gordon was already booked to be our preacher over the Triduum (Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday) and instead of preaching them, he has written them in a way for you to read at home.

Maundy Thursday

"I will lift up the cup of salvation."

Although I start this homily with those words from the psalm for the Maundy Thursday Evening Mass, it is not only the beginning of this homily it is also the end towards which we will be progressing on Easter Day. We will make this progress alongside some of the disciples and followers of Jesus for that is what we are, separated in time from the original ones but united in spirit in the here and now.

We begin this journey with Jesus and the disciples on the way to Jerusalem. Both Mark and Matthew record that Jesus said to his 12 disciples on the way, *"that the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes and they will condemn him to death, then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified and on the third day he will be raised."* (Matthew 20:18 & 19.)

Matthew does not record how the disciples reacted to these alarming words. But he does record that the mother of the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, asked Jesus if, when he comes into glory, they could sit one at his right hand and one at his left. Jesus seeks to test them with his reply. *"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink."* That is the question that Jesus asks each of us as we follow this journey. Can you drink the cup? The cup that is the fullness of life for us as followers of Christ. Can we drink the cup down to the last drop? Can we live life to the full whatever it may bring to us?

In the gospel reading for today (John 13:1-15) we read how shortly before the festival of the Passover Jesus meets with his disciples for a meal. Suddenly he stands up and begins to wash his disciples' feet. But Simon Peter, always quick to respond, questions Jesus. *"Are you going to wash my feet?"* But more than that he insists Jesus will never wash his feet. He changes his mind when told *"unless I wash you, you have no share with me."* He responds with passion: *"Lord not my feet only but also my hands and head."* Are we willing to let our Lord and Master take the role of a servant and wash our feet?

Picture that scene of Jesus moving along from one disciple to the next washing their feet and then think of him washing your feet. What are your feelings? What would your response be?

Now we move on in our mind's eye to the Passover meal, the last supper that Jesus had with his disciples. St Matthew records what happened in Chapter 26: 26-29 and St Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Let's read from that account which has a

particularly poignant meaning for us in these days when no public celebration of the Eucharist is possible. You might like to hold your hands as though you were receiving the Body of Christ and sipping from the chalice to receive the Blood of Christ as you read these words from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

“This is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you, that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and thanked God for it and broke it, and he said, “This is my body, which is for you, do this as a memorial of me.” In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.” Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death.”

We move on now with the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus moves further away from the main group of disciples with Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John. He asks them to wait and remain awake while he moves further away and prays. *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”*

He was effectively asking himself the same question he had asked James and John before. *“Are you able to drink the cup?”* Those words keep echoing in my mind in these difficult days that we are currently enduring. We are being reminded each day that we are fighting a war against an invisible enemy. For many people this will be a difficult almost unbearable time and for some it will lead to death. But the cup that Jesus had to drink would, as he well knew, inevitably lead to his own death.

In the garden, three times Jesus went back to Peter, James and John and found them sleeping. *“Could you not stay awake with me one hour?”* In these days of isolation and distancing it should not be difficult for us to find on Maundy Thursday one brief hour of prayer and contemplation.

I will close this homily with some words from Henri Nouen’s book *“Can you drink the cup?”* It is the book that gave me the inspiration for this homily. The book was published in 1996 but these words speak to us today with an apt and challenging meaning.

The cup that Jesus speaks about is neither a symbol of victory nor a symbol of death. It is a symbol of life, filled with sorrows and joys that we can hold, lift, and drink as a blessing and a way to salvation. “Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?” Jesus asks us. It is the question that will have a different meaning every day of our lives. Can we embrace fully the sorrows and joys that come to us day after day? At one moment it might seem easy to drink the cup, and we give a quick yes to Jesus’ question. Shortly afterwards everything might look and feel quite different, and our whole being might cry out, “No, never!” We have to let the yes and the no both speak in us so that we can come to know ever more deeply the enormous challenge of Jesus’ question.”

Good Friday

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

In my homily for Maundy Thursday I encouraged you to join with the disciples in following our Lord and Saviour throughout that day we now call Maundy Thursday. I invite you now to follow the disciples and particularly Peter, James and John on this day we call Good Friday. But ask yourself first, where were they all? And then let the words of that familiar spiritual song echo in your heart. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” When we reach the end of this homily I will discuss who is asking you and me that question.

In the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus was speaking with his disciples, Judas arrived with a large crowd armed with swords and clubs to arrest Jesus. Matthew tells us that all the disciples deserted Jesus and fled. But St John records that immediately after Judas had betrayed Jesus with a kiss, “Simon Peter who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword back in its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” Peter who, just a short while before then, had assured his Lord, “I will never desert you” followed Jesus and another disciple, probably John, to the courtyard of the high priest. When Jesus had prophesied that “this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times,” Peter was sure that he would never deny Jesus. But when Peter was spotted by a servant-girl, and accused of being a follower of Jesus, he denied any knowledge. Three times he denied it, and then the cock crowed.

Perhaps Peter followed the crowd as Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate. Perhaps he was in the crowd when Pilate asked which of two prisoners he should release, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called the Messiah. If he was there he would have heard the crowd call for Barabbas to be released and then clamour for the fate of Jesus the Messiah. “Crucify him.” *Were you there?*

Matthew records that the soldiers took Jesus to the governor’s headquarters, stripped him and put a robe on him, twisted some thorns into a crown which they forced it down on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and mocked him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” There is no mention of Peter or any disciple or any onlookers, but how else would the gospel writers know what had happened if there were no witnesses? *Were you there?* Were Peter, James and John beginning by now to understand what Jesus had meant when he had said, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.

No disciple was there to help Jesus carry his cross, just a man who happened to be there, Simon of Cyrene, previously little known but now recorded in history for all time. Luke records that by now a great multitude of people, men and women, were following, bewailing and lamenting. More women than men, I suspect, because Jesus addressed them, *“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”*

We follow, blending into the crowd along the rocky path to the place of execution called Golgotha. There the soldiers offered Jesus wine mixed with gall to drink. But Jesus refused. His thoughts were elsewhere. *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”*

And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read. “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

*“Were you there when they nailed him to a tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to a tree?
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to a tree?”*

In our imagination we look around, we see just a small group of followers, his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. There was just one of the disciples.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother. “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Having completed his last will and testament, bequeathing one to the other, Jesus had one last request. *“I thirst.”* The soldiers handed him a sponge full of sour wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. This time he accepted and drank. When he had received the wine, he said, *“It is finished.”* It is accomplished. What he had been born on his earth to do had all been accomplished.

When they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (John 19:14)

*“Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?”*

Two secret disciples of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus, prepared it for burial, anointing it with myrrh and aloes and spices, and laid it in a new tomb.

*“Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”*

I wrote at the beginning of this homily that I would discuss who it was that was asking the question. In fact there are four questions.

*“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed him to a tree?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”*

So who is it who asks these questions, apart from the author of this hymn or spiritual song, who refers to Jesus as my Lord, not your Lord and not our Lord, but my Lord?

As Jesus was dying on the cross, standing close by, were three Marys; Mary the mother of Jesus, her sister Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene. I think it is one of these three. You may come to your own conclusion. Think about this when you read my homily for Easter Sunday.

Easter Sunday

*“Were you there when he rose to glorious life?
Were you there when he rose to glorious life?
O, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when he rose to glorious life?”*

Throughout the previous two homilies for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we have been following a few of the disciples as they themselves were following the Way of the Cross. At the foot of the Cross as Jesus died there was just a small group, Mary his mother, her sister Mary wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and John the disciple Jesus loved.

We read what happened next from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew 28:1-8.

After the Sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulchre. And all at once there was a violent earthquake, for the angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone and sat on it. His face was like lightning, his robe white as snow. The guards were so shaken, so frightened of him, that they were like dead men. But the angel spoke, and he said to the women, “There is no need for you to be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said he would. Come and see the place where he lay, then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has risen from the dead and now he is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him.” Now I have told you.” Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples.

These two Marys became in effect the first Apostles, sent by the angel of the Lord to the eleven disciples. But even before they reached the disciples we are told that, coming to meet them, was Jesus. He then repeated the commission. *“Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there.”*

St John's Gospel in chapter 20 has a somewhat different and longer account of the experience of Mary Magdalene early on the day of Resurrection. *Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”*

It is assumed that the disciple whom Jesus loved is John the writer of this Gospel. John accompanied by Peter ran to the tomb and looked in, seeing just the linen wrappings. Peter, always the impulsive one, went right in followed then by John. We are told that John saw and believed.

Those of us who have followed the Stations of the Cross at the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham will have also been able to enter the tomb. But even those who have not had that privilege can now in imagination enter with Peter and John. We can picture the linen wrappings and the cloth on which laid Jesus' head. We too can see and believe. *Were you there?*

But John has more to report about Mary. She had run back to the tomb with Peter and John. As she wept and looked inside she saw two angels where the body of Jesus had been lying. They asked her why she was weeping. *“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”* But then she turned and was greatly blessed by seeing Jesus who she assumed at first was the gardener. She asked him if he knew where the body of Jesus had been taken. The one word reply **Mary** was sufficient identification. The reply that Jesus made *“Do not hold on to me”* in its Latin form *“Noli me tangere”* has been the inspiration for many well-known paintings. The contact between Mary Magdalene and the Lord was to be no longer of a human physical relationship but now a spiritual and enduring relationship based on faith.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had prayed: *“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”* I turn once more to Henri Nouen's book *“Can you drink the cup?”* for his theological reflection both on this prayer and on the significance of Christ's death and resurrection.

Jesus' unconditional yes to his Father had empowered him to drink his cup, not in passive resignation but with the full knowledge that the hour of his death would also be the hour of his glory. His yes made his surrender a creative act, an act that could bear much fruit. His yes took away the fatality of the interruption of his ministry. Instead of a final irrevocable end, his death became the beginning of a new life. Indeed his yes enabled him to trust fully in the rich harvest the dying grain would yield.

As we follow our own individual journey of faith through life in fellowship with other members of the Christian family, we inevitably find ourselves drinking both the cup of sorrow and the cup of joy. It is only through our endurance of the difficulties that life sometimes throws at us, only through the blessings and joys that life too can bring us that we drink not only of the cup of sorrow and the cup of joy but also drink and understand the cup of salvation. This is the cup that Jesus our Saviour drank and gave to us by dying for us, for the forgiveness of our sins, and for the sins of the world.

In the previous two homilies, these questions were asked.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed him to a tree?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”

And now one more:

“Were you there when he rose to glorious life?”

I have suggested that it was one of the three Marys who stood near the Cross on which Jesus died who is asking the questions. Which one is putting the question to you?

Every question deserves an answer. I hope and pray that as you have followed the path of these three homilies, that as you have read and prayed the questions, your answer was an emphatic **Yes**. Your answer to those five questions will provide you with the faith and hope to get through the global earthquake of the coronavirus that is encircling our world. For some that earthquake may even result in death. But death is the entry into a new life in the kingdom of heaven with our Lord and Saviour.

Jesus lives! To him the throne over all the world is given:

*May we go where he is gone, rest and reign with him in heaven. **Alleluia!***

Fr Gordon Spencer (March 2020)

Bible readings and quotations in these homilies are either from the Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version.