



Preaching the Paschal Mystery in Holy Week

Diocese of Huron, Mar 22, 2025

Goal of this workshop

- The goal of this workshop is to help people to **think liturgically about preaching** in Holy Week, that is:
- To preach in a way that helps people **access the meaning** of the liturgies of Holy Week.
- If people know the meaning of what they are doing in these unique services, they will be able **to respond more fully** to what is being celebrated in them: the Paschal Mystery of Christ.
- Being able to receive and respond to what God is doing in Christ helps us to **become who God is calling us to be.**

Tasks for this workshop

- ◆ To that end, this morning we will discuss the content of the main liturgies of Holy Week — the ancient readings, prayers, and rituals that are found in our *Book of Alternative Services* — and what they seek to convey.
- ◆ In the afternoon, we will discuss in smaller groups the particular concerns of different pastoral contexts for preaching in Holy Week.
- ◆ We are a diverse church! Each congregation worships with different resources, different traditions, and under different circumstances.

A diverse church

- ◆ Many congregations worship without the presence of clergy, or without musicians, or without a preacher, or in multi-use spaces rather than in church buildings. None of these circumstances would prevent a congregation from observing Holy Week, using the resources available to them.
- ◆ This presentation will engage the Holy Week liturgies as they are set out in the BAS, not so as to be proscriptive, but as a way to reflect on the content of these services so as to assist both preachers and congregations to find deeper meaning in them, whatever our circumstances and whatever our traditions may be.

What is the Paschal Mystery?

- ◆ *Pascha* is the Greek word for “Passover”
- ◆ *Pascha* is the word used by most of the world’s Christians to refer to what we call “Easter”.
- ◆ The term “Paschal Mystery” refers to the **passion, death, resurrection, and ascension** of Christ.
- ◆ The Paschal Mystery is what we celebrate in Holy Week, on every Sunday (even if there is no Eucharist), and at every Eucharist (even if it’s not Sunday).

Therefore, understand, beloved,
How it is both new and old,
Eternal and temporal,
Perishable and imperishable,
Mortal and immortal,
This mystery of the Pascha.

– Melito of Sardis, On Pascha (2nd cent.)

Why is it a “mystery”?

- ◆ The Paschal Mystery isn't a mystery because we don't know who done it! It's a mystery because we can never exhaust the meaning of it.
- ◆ That's because the acts of Jesus in time are also the acts of God in eternity.
- ◆ They are real events in history, but they resonate in every time and place, because God is beyond time and space.
- ◆ What God has done in Christ calls for our response, here and now and always.

Preaching the Paschal Mystery

- ◆ The Paschal Mystery is what Holy Week is all about.
- ◆ Each liturgy in Holy Week **invites us to contemplate**, day by day, some aspect of this Mystery, using Scripture, prayers, music, and ritual passed down to us through the centuries.
- ◆ Each liturgy also **invites us to respond** to what God has done in Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.
- ◆ Preaching in Holy Week helps to enter into this contemplation and to make our response to the Paschal Mystery, so that we can embrace what God is doing in Christ *now*.

Palm Sunday

*Hosanna to the Son of David:
Blessed is He that cometh in the
name of the Lord;
Hosanna in the highest!
(Matthew 21:9)*



- ◆ The principal liturgy of Palm Sunday (BAS pp 297-300) could be said to have two “movements”.
- ◆ First, the “Liturgy of the Palms”: prayers are said and the gospel proclaimed to recall the triumphant entry of Christ into Jerusalem. A procession follows.
- ◆ Then, the service continues with the readings of the day, including the Passion gospel (BAS pp 299-300). The celebration of the Eucharist follows.
- ◆ Through these two movements, the liturgy of Palm Sunday invites us to see the events of the triumphant entry *in the light of* the Passion to come.

- ◆ In this way, the readings and prayers on Palm Sunday invite us to contemplate the *intentionality* with which Jesus began this week: what He was doing, why He was doing it, and for whom.
- ◆ The liturgy also invites our response to this.
- ◆ It invites us to **respond to Christ's intentionality with our own.**
- ◆ It does this in two ways: the procession, and the Eucharist.

Let us go forth in peace

- ◆ Whether festive or penitent, the ancient ritual of procession is **an expression of our desire for God.**
- ◆ The movement of our bodies and the hymns we sing give voice to this desire.



- ◆ The liturgy of Palm Sunday invites us to contemplate Christ's entry into Jerusalem in view of his passion. Then it invites our response.
- ◆ It says, "Look, this is what Jesus did on this day, this week. What are *we* going to do today, this week? What is our answer to all this?"
- ◆ Our answer is: "Let us go forth in peace. / In the name of Christ. Amen."
- ◆ We enter into procession to **express our desire for God and our willingness to follow Jesus.**

I will go unto the altar of God

- ◆ In the Eucharist too, we make our response to the Paschal Mystery.
- ◆ In Holy Communion, we again express our desire for God, and our willingness to follow Jesus.
- ◆ “Taste and see that the Lord is good”
- ◆ “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves”



Preaching Palm Sunday

- ◆ A Palm Sunday sermon can:
- ◆ remind us how the liturgy invites us to contemplate the events of Christ's triumphant entry in the light of his passion.
- ◆ help us to embrace the procession and the Eucharist as ways in which we express our response to these events and what God is doing in them.
- ◆ encourage us to respond to Christ's intentionality with our own: **to begin Holy Week with the desire to follow Jesus alive in our hearts.**

Maundy Thursday

*A new commandment I give unto
you,*

*That ye love one another as I
have loved you.*

(John 13:34)



The Paschal Triduum

- ◆ Maundy Thursday begins the Paschal Triduum, or “three days” of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday in Holy Week.
- ◆ The principal Maundy Thursday service (BAS pp 304-307), celebrated in the evening, covers a lot of ground, because so much happened on that night.
- ◆ Jesus was busy that day, so we are too!
- ◆ Here is an outline of what occurs at this service:

Maundy Thursday

- Readings and sermon
- Washing of feet (*aka* the “Maundy” = “commandment”)
- Celebration of the Eucharist
- Transfer of the Blessed Sacrament
- Stripping of the altars
- Gethsemane watch (traditional, but not in the BAS)

A closer look

- ◆ Let's take a closer look at what each of these parts of the service are doing: what they invite us to contemplate, and how they invite us to respond.
- ◆ The readings recall the events of this night:
 - ◆ the Last Supper,
 - ◆ the institution of the Eucharist,
 - ◆ and the "new commandment" as Jesus washes his disciples' feet.

An ancient gesture

- ◆ Just as the readings invite us to contemplation, the ritual of foot washing invites our response to what we have heard.
- ◆ This ancient gesture becomes a way in which we can express to God our willingness to follow Christ, and our openness to him.



A new commandment

- The foot washing ritual highlights Christ's example of servanthood. Jesus said: "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (Jn 13:15)
- The prayers in the liturgy and the traditional hymns and antiphons (such as *Ubi caritas*) affirm this meaning. (BAS pp 304-307)
- Thus, the foot washing is our response to the "new commandment" of Jesus: "love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:35)
- It expresses our willingness to love as Jesus did, **to serve others as Jesus did.**

Unless I wash you

- The foot washing also highlights how difficult but how crucial it is to be open to grace. Jesus said to Peter: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” (John 13:8)
- Recent research has posited a connection between John’s gospel, the foot washing ritual, and baptism. (See Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation*, pp 19-23.)
- Thus, the foot washing is our response to the Paschal Mystery: we express in this gesture **our willingness to let Christ save us**, our willingness to receive God’s love for us.

On this very night

- The celebration of the Eucharist that follows invites us to recall the night of the Last Supper, when Jesus gave us the gift of this Sacrament.
- In fact, we can look at Holy Week through the lens of the Eucharist. What happened this week — the Paschal Mystery of life, death, and resurrection — is always present to us in the Eucharist. We do this for ever more until the new creation.
- The liturgy of Maundy Thursday invites us to an awareness of this gift not only in the celebration of the Eucharist itself, but in the rituals that follow on this night.

The procession of the Sacrament

- ◆ After Holy Communion is concluded, the reserved Sacrament is carried in procession with great solemnity to another site, called the altar of repose.
- ◆ This ritual action recalls the betrayal and arrest of Jesus as he is taken away from the disciples.
- ◆ After a brief act of adoration, the procession returns to the chancel.

The stripping of the altars

- ◆ At this point the altar cloths and ornaments are removed from the chancel and the lights in the church building are gradually extinguished.
- ◆ This ritual is traditionally accompanied by the singing of Psalm 22 (see BAS p 307), as the chancel party departs one by one in disarray, recalling the flight of the disciples: “smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered” (Matthew 26:31).
- ◆ The service concludes in darkness and total silence.

Gethsemane watch

- After the service, it is traditional to spend time in silent adoration before the Blessed Sacrament at the altar of repose.
- This is sometimes called the “Gethsemane watch”. It’s an opportunity for us to answer the question Jesus asked: “Could you not watch with me one hour?” (Matthew 26:40)
- For some, this is a time simply to be with Jesus, in the memory of his passion. For others, it’s a time, in the silence of his presence, to reflect on the events of a busy night! What is our response to all that Jesus has done?

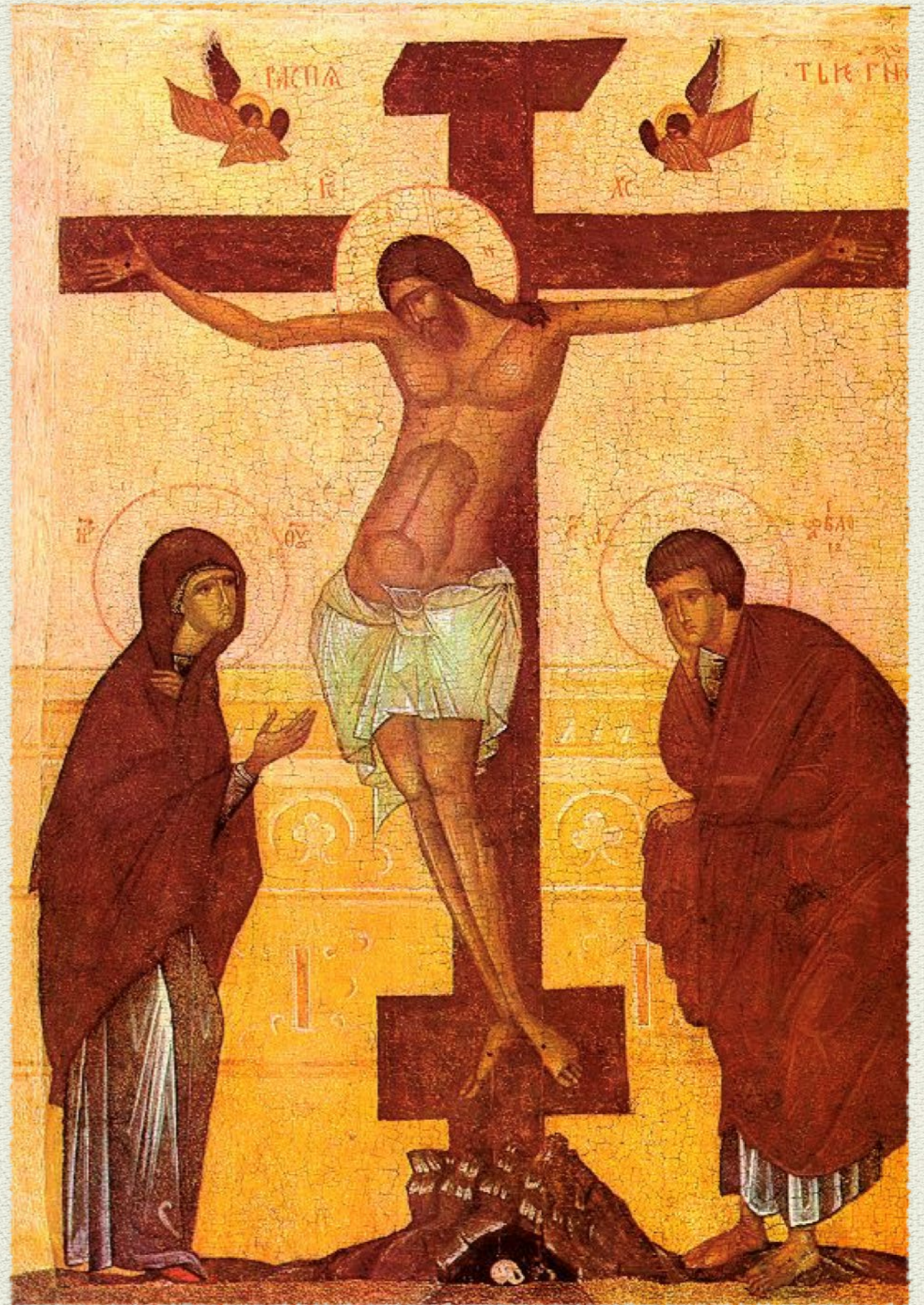
Preaching Maundy Thursday

- ◆ By reminding us:
- ◆ how the liturgy invites us to contemplate the events of the Last Supper, the “new commandment”, and the gift of the Holy Eucharist,
- ◆ how the foot washing and the Gethsemane watch are ways in which we express our response to what God is doing in Christ,
- ◆ a Maundy Thursday sermon can help us to respond to Christ’s self-offering with openness, thanksgiving, and a renewed commitment to his commandment of love.

Good Friday

Christ became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

(Philippians 2:8)



- ◆ The second day in the Paschal Triduum is Good Friday (BAS pp 308-320). The service begins and ends in silence, in a church devoid of lights and ornament.
- ◆ Elements of this service are of great antiquity. There are four main parts:
 - ◆ The readings, including the St John Passion
 - ◆ The Solemn Intercession
 - ◆ The Meditation on the Cross
 - ◆ Holy Communion

The St John Passion

- ◆ The Good Friday readings, especially the solemn proclamation of the St John Passion, invite us to recall all the events of the day Jesus died.
- ◆ This part of the service is above all an act of contemplation.
- ◆ After the sermon, the liturgy offers us three ways in which we can respond to what we have heard in the story of the Passion.

The Solemn Intercession

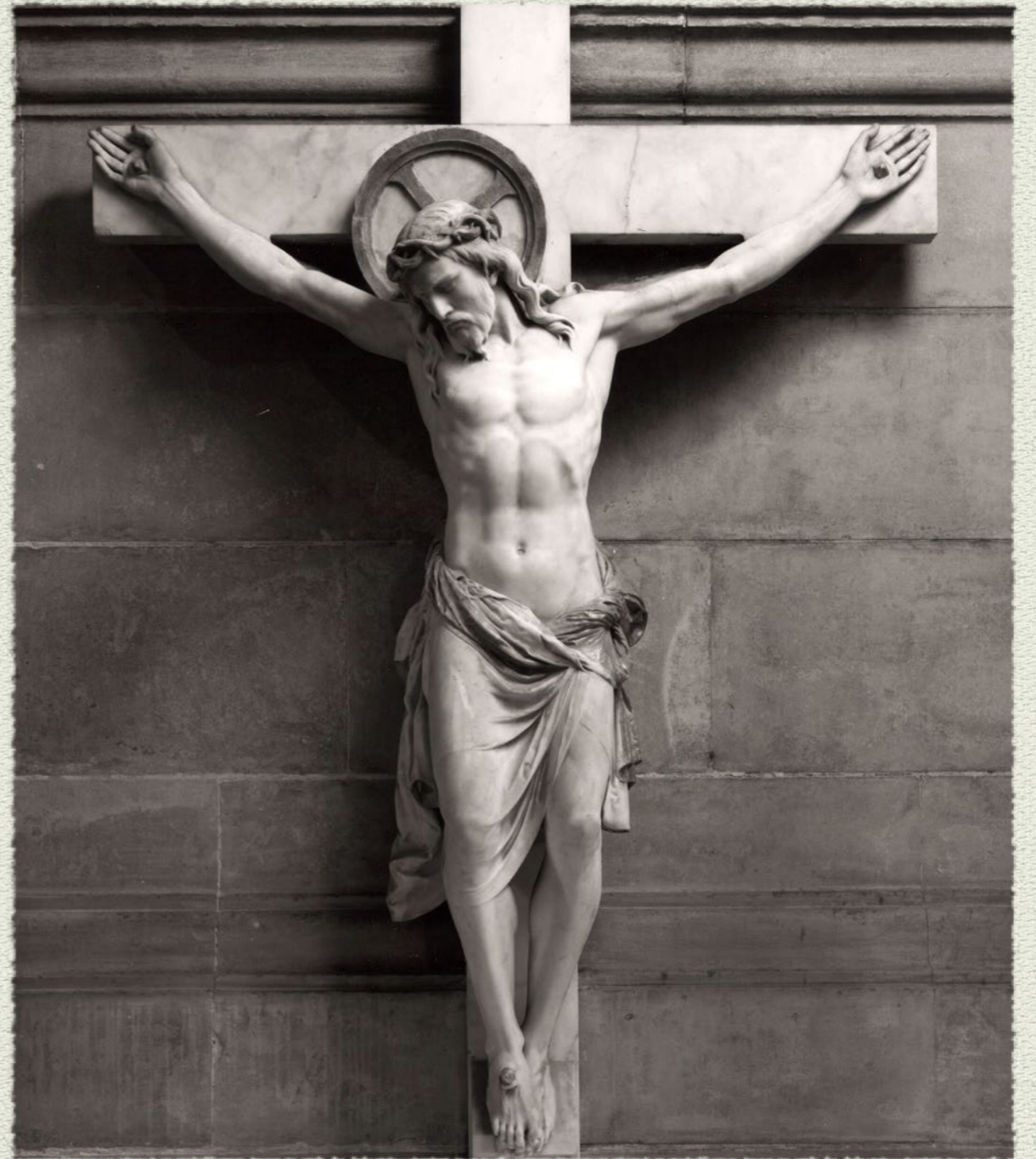
- The first is the “Solemn Intercession” (BAS pp 309-313), through which we see the death of Jesus as a *priestly* act: an act of self-offering.
- Our response to the self-offering of Christ is to *join with him* in his priestly offering. That is:
- In the Solemn Intercession, the Church, the Body of Christ, takes up her royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) and offers, together with her Head, prayers to God on behalf of those for whom He died.

Meditation on the Cross of Christ

- ◆ The second way in which the Good Friday liturgy invites us to respond to the death of Jesus is the Meditation on the Cross. (BAS pp 313-317)
- ◆ Traditionally, this meditation was accompanied by an act of *veneration*: a gesture through which people have the opportunity to express their devotion to Christ.
- ◆ This can be done in many ways. Traditionally, a crucifix is processed, unveiled, and presented for people to approach and make a gesture of reverence.

Veneration of the Cross

- We are embodied creatures, and we express ourselves to God not only through our thoughts and words but through our physical actions.
- Procession, foot washing, and veneration of the cross are all ways of doing this.
- Through Jesus we draw near to God with great intimacy. It is an encounter that changes us.



Holy Communion

- ◆ The third and final way in which the Good Friday liturgy invites us to respond to the death of Christ is in Holy Communion.
- ◆ We receive the One who offered himself on the cross.
- ◆ This is traditionally done using the Sacrament which was consecrated on the night of Maundy Thursday.
- ◆ The service ends, as it began, in silence.

Preaching Good Friday

- ◆ By reminding us:
- ◆ how the Passion invites us to contemplation,
- ◆ how the Solemn Intercession, the Veneration of the Cross, and Holy Communion are different ways in which we express our response to the death of Christ,
- ◆ a Good Friday sermon can help us to:
- ◆ embrace the priestly self-offering of Christ as the mission of the Church in the power of the Spirit, and
- ◆ draw near to God in Christ with great intimacy, to receive a love that changes us.

The Great Vigil of Easter

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

(Romans 6:4)



- ◆ The final day of the Paschal Triduum is the Great Vigil of Easter, celebrated on the night of Holy Saturday (BAS pp 321-334).
- ◆ This is another service that is of great antiquity, and has a lot happening in it! The BAS lists four main parts of the service:
 - ◆ The Service of Light
 - ◆ The Liturgy of the Word
 - ◆ Christian Initiation, or the Renewal of Baptismal Vows
 - ◆ Holy Eucharist with Easter Communion

The Service of Light

- Right before the service begins, it is traditional to light the new fire and bless the Paschal Candle using the prayers on BAS p 333.
- The Paschal Candle as a symbol of Christ is carried in procession into the church to the chant *Lumen Christi*, “The light of Christ” (BAS p 322), and the light from the Candle is passed from taper to taper in the congregation.
- This is a symbol of how the baptized are illumined by the light of Christ.

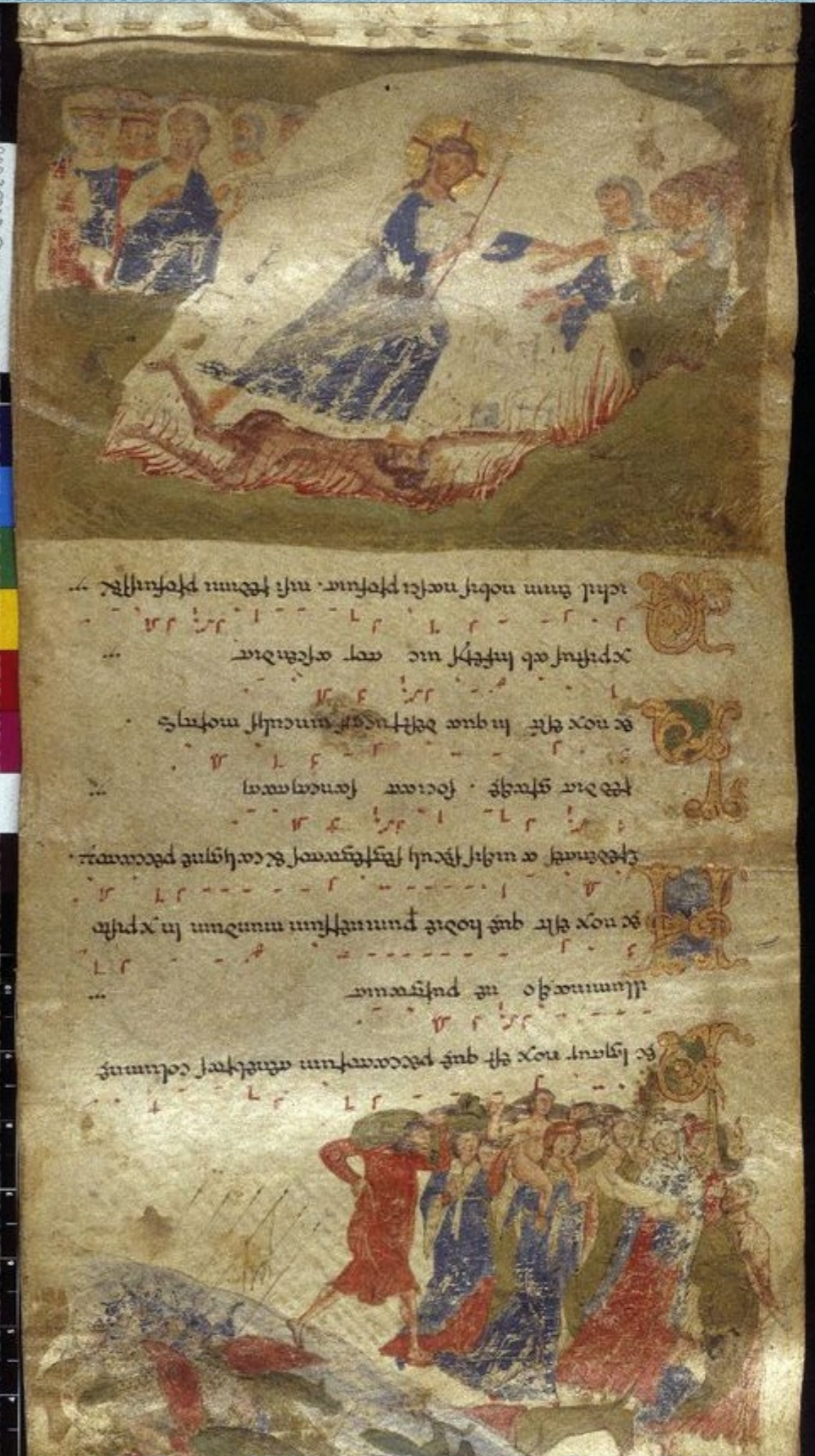
- ◆ Throughout the liturgy, the Exodus story is used to talk about the Paschal Mystery: Jesus leads us through the waters of death into the promised land of new life (another image of baptism).
- ◆ As the procession makes its way to the chancel, the Paschal Candle becomes an image of Christ as the pillar of fire by night (an image taken up by the *Exsultet*).



- ◆ This is the night when first you saved our forebears: you freed the people of Israel from their slavery and led them dry-shod through the sea.
This is the night that with a pillar of fire banished the darkness of sin.

Exsultet

- When the Candle reaches the chancel, the beautiful *Exsultet* (BAS p 323-4) is chanted as our response to the resurrection: a song of joy, wonder, and praise.



The Liturgy of the Word

- ◆ The Liturgy of the Word then begins with readings from the Old Testament, telling the story of salvation from the creation of the world to the promise of redemption in Christ.
- ◆ In this way, we are invited to contemplate how, through all of history, God has prepared the way for the Paschal Mystery.

- ◆ When the Old Testament readings are completed, the *Gloria* is intoned, bells are rung, and lights are rekindled in the church.
- ◆ Sound, song, and light express our joyful response to the Good News of the resurrection.
- ◆ The Epistle and Gospel readings then follow: St Paul's reflection on baptism and the Paschal Mystery, and the gospel account of the empty tomb.

Christian Initiation

- ◆ The celebration of baptism, and/or the renewal of baptismal vows is the next way in which we are invited to respond to the Paschal Mystery.
- ◆ In the waters of baptism, we ourselves enter into this Mystery, following Christ from death into new life, baptismal life.
- ◆ When we renew our Baptismal Covenant on this night, we are saying “yes” to the Paschal Mystery by saying “yes” to a life lived in faithfulness to Christ.

The First Mass of Easter

- ◆ The celebration of the Eucharist completes the rites of Christian Initiation.
- ◆ As the first Mass of Easter, it is also our response to the resurrection: we celebrate the Mystery.
- ◆ Thus, our ultimate response to the Paschal Mystery is to receive it, and to live it.

Preaching the Easter Vigil

- ◆ By reminding us:
- ◆ why we light the Paschal Candle, what we celebrate when we sing the *Exsultet*, how the readings show the unfolding of God's plan of salvation throughout history, what we commit to in our baptismal vows, and what we receive in our Easter Communion,
- ◆ an Easter Vigil sermon can help us to **embrace more fully the baptismal life** which is our ultimate response to the Paschal Mystery.

- ◆ It can also help us understand one very important question: What difference does it make that Jesus rose from the dead?
- ◆ The image at the heart of the Easter Vigil is the descent of Christ to the dead, one of the primary ways in which the ancient Christians imagined the resurrection.
- ◆ We see this image in the traditional Eastern icons of the resurrection.



Anastasis: The Icon of the Resurrection

Parecclesion, Chora Church, Istanbul

- ◆ The ancient Christians understood the death and resurrection of Jesus to be the means by which God *rescues* us and all creation from a condition of death, the effect of the Fall.
- ◆ All creation is to share in the resurrection and glorification of Christ; all creation is to find its place in the Paschal Mystery; all creation will at last become what God intended it to be.
- ◆ And all because Jesus rose from the dead.

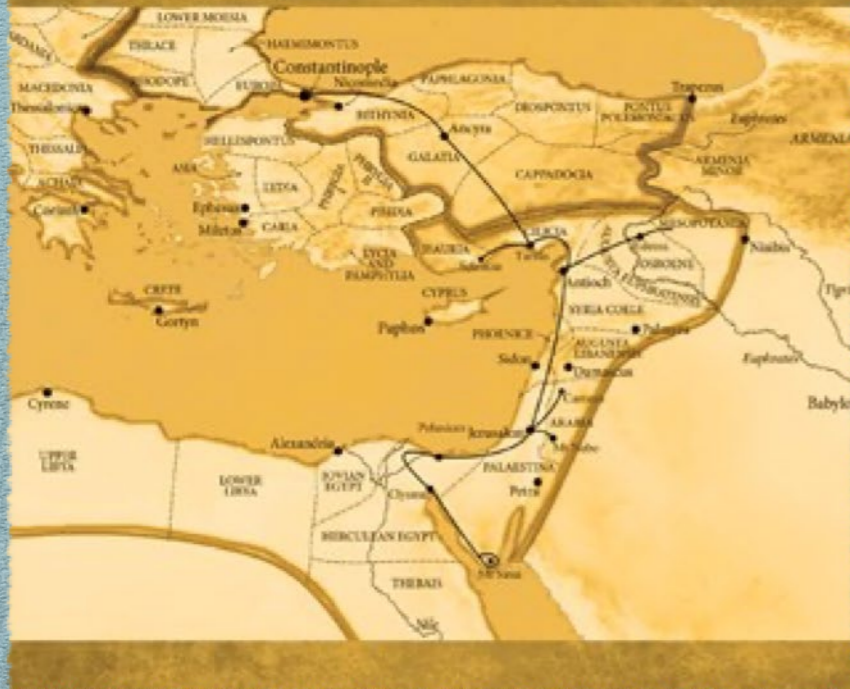
Concluding remarks

- ◆ Preachers, knowing their congregations, how they listen, what their particular needs and challenges are, will be able to discern how best to communicate these points.
- ◆ Our discussion groups in the afternoon will provide an opportunity to consider the particular needs of different pastoral contexts.
- ◆ Whatever our circumstances, the more we understand the liturgies of Holy Week, the more meaningful they become to us, and the more fully we can respond to the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It's a task for a lifetime!

Anne McGowan
Paul F. Bradshaw

The Pilgrimage of Egeria

*A New Translation of the
Itinerarium Egeriae
with Introduction and Commentary*



ANCIENT
CHRISTIAN
WRITERS



DIARY OF
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The Pilgrimage of Egeria Diary of a Pilgrimage

Liturgical Press

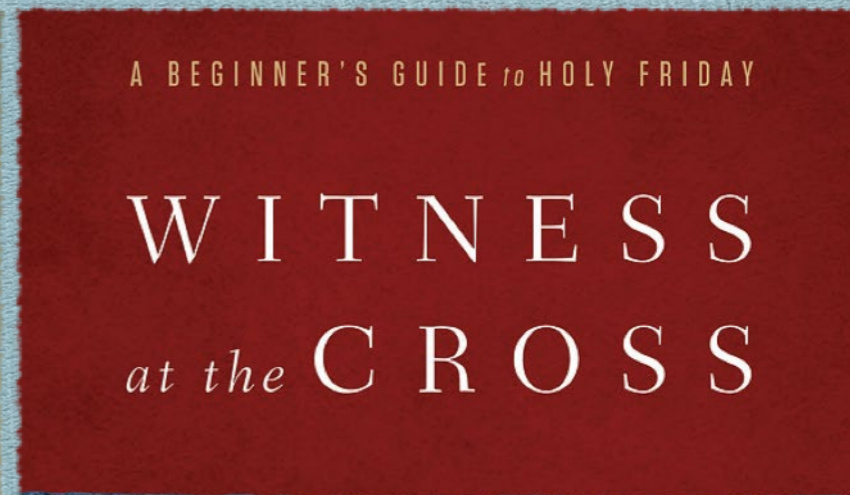
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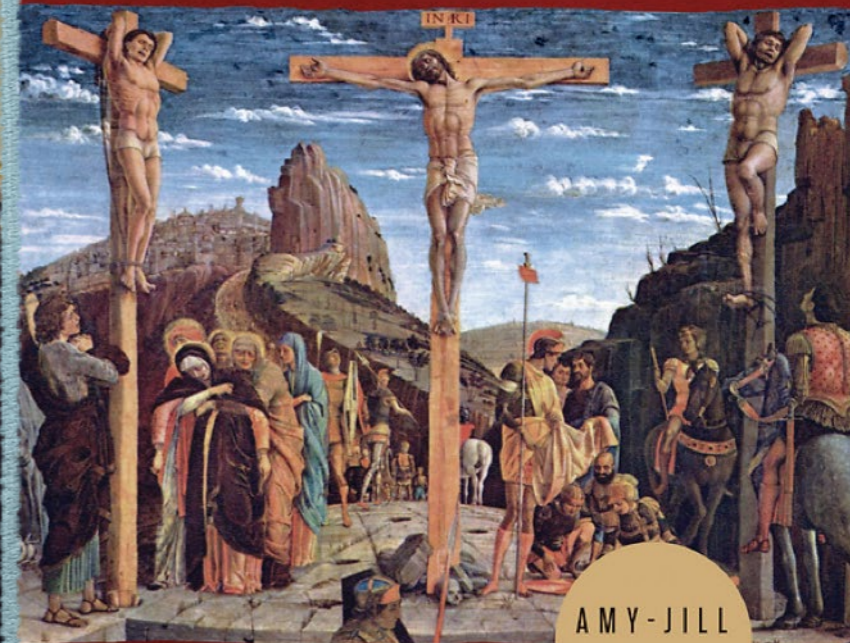
ENTERING THE PASSION *of* JESUS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to HOLY WEEK



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to HOLY FRIDAY

WITNESS *at the* CROSS



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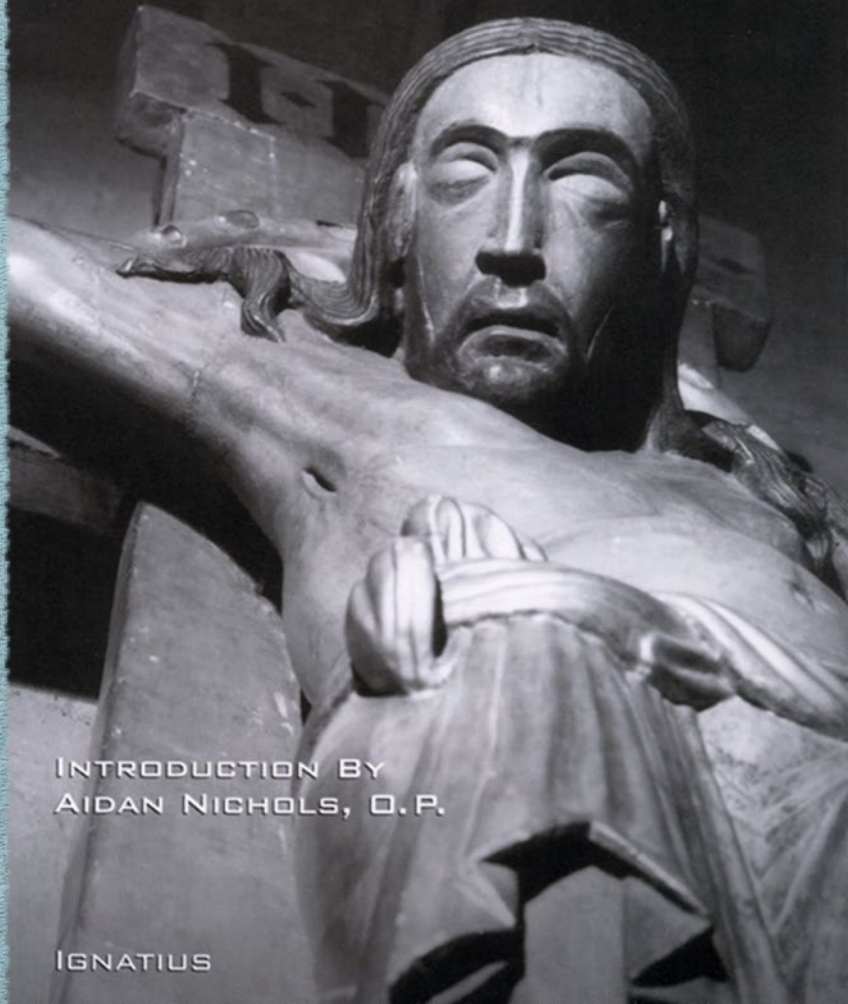
Entering the Passion of Jesus Witness at the Cross

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HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

MYSTERIUM PASCHALE

THE MYSTERY OF EASTER



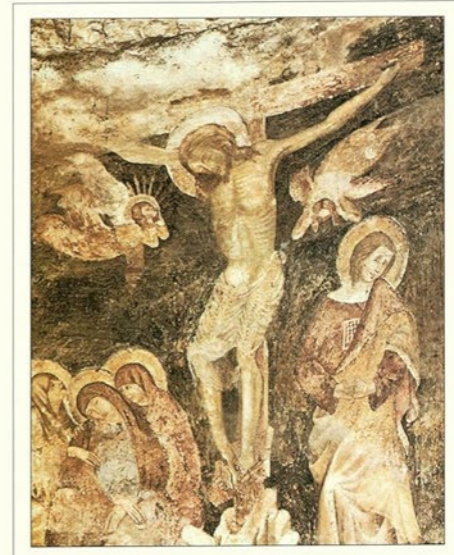
INTRODUCTION BY
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MYSTERIUM PASCHALE



Hans Urs von Balthasar
Introduction by Aidan Nichols, O.P.

Mysterium Paschale

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