

Good Friday
March 29, 2024
Stations of the Cross

In the name of the Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

Darkness shrouded a formless earth before God spoke His created light into being. Darkness shrouded the Son of God, the Light of the world, in the space of the tomb. Light and darkness, life and death, they had long been coexisting realities observable by all men. By all appearances, on Good Friday, death and darkness had conquered life and light. Two thousand years ago, the world needed Good Friday. Though the events of that dark day reverberate forward into our time, into the Church throughout the world this day, we still need Good Friday. For the Church, the observances of Holy Week are religious rituals par excellence because they are the rituals that lead us to Christ, to repentance, and to restoration.

The world needs Good Friday because the world needs Christ-centered rituals. Rituals help us to mark time. There is nothing objective to make one day different from another. The march of time is irresistible, unavoidable, and unyielding. The cutting edge of progress is a rapier of such scope that no one is unscathed. We can get so caught up in the day-to-day rhythm of life that time soon escapes us. Days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months, months turn into years. This sense of all time blending together is made worse by the 24/7/365 deference we have for consumerism. Capitalism has trained us to see everything in relative terms; value is determined by individual tastes and the willingness to pay the price. For many, Amazon is experienced as a more present reality than anything holy or divine. Rituals can help separate a time from all time the way seasons do. Good Friday sets this night apart as sacred, a night that is not like other nights. Rituals allow us to have an orientation to time the way the horizon helps us orient ourselves in space.

Space can also be established as something sacred by ritual. In the ancient world, altars were set up as places to mark Divine encounters, where God interceded in space and time. Establishing altars helped us to feel a stronger connection with the outside world. Ritual is a way to move beyond ourselves and be a part of something bigger. In the West, we demonstrate a disregard for space as sacred, preferring to view space as a resource to be used, and underutilized space is a waste. There is no room for sacred space. Significant sites that we should inhabit are sights for us to pass by on vacation, on our way to the next sight that we can see through superficial eyes. This space here, many thousands of miles from the holy ground of Jerusalem, has been made sacred through ritual. It has been consecrated for sacred use. This space would not be sacred for us without Good Friday, without the blood-soaked altar of Christ's cross, which sanctifies our altar.

Our altar is the sacred place of gathering for us as a community. Our communal ritual is a symbol which shines a light upon the darkness of the world and reveals a deeper truth through an unveiling. As the darkness is driven away by the light, the reality of our unity in Christ is made concrete. This space is used, but it is never used up, like a natural resource. It builds community as

we linger here, content in our unproductivity, dwelling in sacred space during a sacred time. Ritual is not for the self-absorbed; “those who devote themselves to rituals must ignore themselves.”¹

When done correctly, ritual is not to be viewed as an end in itself, rather it serves as a means to an end. We have reached the culmination of our Lenten pilgrimage. From Ash Wednesday until now, our attention was drawn to the need for repentance, forgiveness, and God’s grace. Christ on the cross is the ultimate call to repentance. The infinite Word of God took on our humanity and willed to face death. The infinite faced annihilation for your sake, endured mockery for your sake, suffered for your sake, bled for your sake, and died for your sake. Before such a Suffering Servant, there should be no hint of self-righteousness. The fitting response for us is weeping and sorrow over our own sin, a sincere turning from our depravity, and renewed resolve to live a life worthy of our calling.

In our ritual tonight, we symbolized the *via Dolorosa*, the Way of Suffering which Christ endured. The ritual allows us to become witnesses to His road of torment. There on the cross, Jesus became more than a symbol for sin. He became sin for us, taking our sin into His infinite being, annihilating it for us in Himself. For much of the industrialized and technologized world, meaningful ritual is becoming rare. Certain parts of the Protestant Reformation, the Age of Reason, and the flattening impulse of our political philosophy have led to a degrading of ritual. Nothing is sacred. Today, people would pause before the cross of Christ just long enough to take a selfie but would fail to contemplate the weight of their own sin. Our self-absorption has led to a half-hearted repentance, one in which we justify the sin in our lives rather than turning from it. Life becomes a denial of death, a denial of the seriousness of our sin, and a denial of our role in Christ’s burden.

The cross tells us that there is no escape from death. Liturgically, we are observing the time of Christ lying in the darkness of His tomb. It is merely a ritual, but the ritual draws us into an experience of the past. Death marks this night. Darkness marks this night. The reality of sin marks this night. And as we consider the reality of the crucified Christ, scourged, beaten, mocked, bloodied, and dying, let us not deny the seriousness of our sin. We are to behold the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. As He breathes His last, His work is completed, and we contemplate the death that overcomes death and is for the life of the world. Seeing the crucified Christ, we fix our eyes on Him, holding the despised and shamed as the greatest treasure.

Much of the world runs around its frantic track, living as if nothing is different about this night. Good Friday is needed for the world’s restoration. We spend time in reverent silence, honoring His stripes by which we are healed. We cannot allow ourselves to be suffocated by our own noise and activity. Good Friday is like fresh air filling oxygen deprived lungs. The ritual draws our attention to what matters most, to the God of redemption, and to the restorative quiet of this communal experience. We will not pass by the cross of Christ engaging in the frivolous, thoughtless, and contemptuous conversation of the world. Here, we fall silent in adoration of Christ. Silence makes room for meaning and wonder.

Good Friday fills our hearts with sadness as we consider the darkness of our sin which threatens to dispel the light of God in us. Yet in this ritual God’s love is revealed in the

¹ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals* (Medford, Massachusetts; Polity Press, 2020), 7.

incarnational flesh of Christ, in the crucified flesh of Christ, and in the buried flesh of Christ. Here, in this quiet and sacred space, the small voice of God is heard, revealing to us the light that cannot be overcome by darkness and life that cannot be overcome by death. Our age is plagued by deep cynicism, and it robs us of wonder. The routine of life, the things we take for granted, and our failure to respond to His presence among us is what kills awe and wonder. The world needs Good Friday, we need this ritual, because “the dead emptiness in the heart is unbearable to living man.”² We know we need more, and God works through this ritual to unveil an unseen reality.

God’s work began in the darkness with a penetrating light. That light overcame the darkness. From the oppressive darkness of the tomb, the light of Christ breaks forth again, overcoming the darkness, in an act of new creation. The mystery of this night, the mystery of the cross and grave, is that through it, through Christ, all things are made new. The newness of life looks more like a return than a leap forward. It is a return to Eden, to a life of freedom in Christ, forgiven and delivered from sin and death and darkness. You are restored. In another ritual, your baptism, you are given new life, and your baptism is how you share in His death on the cross and the new life of His resurrection.

The world needs Good Friday, no less today than it was needed all those years ago. Ritual draws us into the events of that day in a participatory way. The supper we will share here draws us into the worship life of Israel, into the night of the Passover, and into the death and resurrection of Christ, the fulfillment of those ancient rites. This mystery should prompt in us silent contemplation. The contemplation that leads to repentance and the repentance that leads to restoration in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The ritual binds us together in space and time into the unified body of Christ, His Holy Church. We are united in Him, in our confession of sins, in the sorrow that leads to repentance, and in the faith in Jesus Who restores us. His blood redeems us from the darkness. His life restores us from death. His life becomes our new life that the Church lives together in Him. This is why we need Good Friday. We behold the man, the incarnate Deity, and we bend the knee in adoration because by His holy cross, He has overcome the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983), 113.