

From Exodus to Emmaus

The readings of the sacred paschal Triduum

By PAUL TURNER

Two journeys bookend the Scripture readings for the sacred paschal Triduum: the Exodus and Emmaus. In between, in three short days, the Lectionary releases a full flood of some 20 passages from the Bible, not counting over a dozen responsorial psalms and canticles. This rich buffet gives almost too much material for the preacher, the proclaimer, the musician, the catechist and the participant. Mercifully, the same readings return each year, so they invite an ever deeper exploration.

The Lectionary, one of the richest fruits of the Second Vatican Council, samples some of the most sublime passages of the Bible to aid those who celebrate the sacred three days: Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. More than recalling the death and resurrection of Christ, these readings show the extent of God's plan through salvation history. Furthermore, they accompany believers into a participation in these mysteries. The readings do not simply repeat stories. They make us live them anew. After six weeks of repentance, the people of God feel physically and spiritually one with Christ as we join him on the journey from cross to resurrection, from Exodus to Emmaus.

Holy Thursday

The Liturgy of the Word on Holy Thursday opens with an excerpt from the Exodus. In preparation for their liberation from slavery in Egypt, the community of Israel receives instructions not just for a fortifying meal, but for its annual observance. The blood of a slaughtered lamb becomes the sign of their protection. This reading foreshadows the institution of the Eucharist and the saving blood of the Lamb of God. The Passover marks the transition from slavery to freedom, and from prison to property. It affirms Israel as God's own people. These themes return in the Easter Vigil, when the paschal candle, the Christian pillar of fire, leads a new chosen people from darkness to light, from sin to freedom, from death to life.

Paul explains to the Corinthians how Christ instituted the Eucharist, and that Christ asked them to do this in his memory. Paul wrote this letter before the evangelists wrote their Gospels. The second reading at the Holy Thursday Mass is the earliest existent record of the Last Supper.

Psalm 116 perfectly bridges the first two readings. It recalls the offering of sacrifice to God, and it borrows a

refrain from a Christian Scripture letter, "Our blessing-cup is a communion with the blood of Christ."

John's Gospel has no account of the institution of the Eucharist. Instead, John devotes all of Chapter 6 to a meditation on Jesus as the bread of life. When the disciples gather for the Last Supper, in the place where the reader expects to find the institution of the Eucharist, a different experience takes place: Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. On this night when Jesus instituted the priesthood and the Eucharist, he tied both these sacraments to humble service. The Missal exhorts the presider to build these three themes into his homily: "the Priest gives a homily in which light is shed on the principal mysteries that are commemorated in this Mass, namely, the institution of the Holy Eucharist and of the priestly Order, and the commandment of the Lord concerning fraternal charity." This is one of the few places where a liturgical book gives a particular direction to the preacher. All will profit from meditating on these passages with these three themes in mind.

As the liturgy unfolds, the Missal recommends singing verses from this Gospel during the washing of the feet, and a verse from the second reading during the sharing of Communion. They echo the themes of the readings.

Good Friday

From Isaiah, we hear the prophecy about a servant who bore our infirmities and endured our sufferings. This is the fourth such servant song. The Lectionary presents the other three on the first weekdays of Holy Week. They

culminate in this dramatic depiction of a servant upon whom the Lord laid our guilt. This passage concludes with the assurance that the servant shall take away the sins of "many" — a Hebrew word that implies "all." According to Matthew and Mark, who knew the word "all," Jesus used the word "many" at the Last Supper when giving his own assurance about those for whom he would pour his blood. The disciples surely connected Jesus' words with the familiar Isaiah 53. Jesus chose "many" not to describe who would be saved, but to reveal who does the saving. Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

Most people remember that Jesus hauntingly quoted the opening of Psalm 22 from the cross, questioning why God had abandoned him. However, on Good Friday, the responsorial comes from Psalm 31. Jesus quoted it when



he entrusted his spirit into the hands of the Father. The Lectionary repeats some of the most painful verses of this psalm, but concludes on a note of hope. Psalm 22 is used each year on Palm Sunday. Although the Missal does not include a communion antiphon on Good Friday, it now recommends singing Psalm 22 while taking and eating the body of Christ on this day.

The second reading stitches together two separate passages from the Letter to the Hebrews in order to join the themes of the high priesthood of Jesus and his obedient suffering. Like the first reading, this one also proclaims God's suffering servant as the source of our eternal salvation.

The proclamation of the Passion is an emotional highlight of the Good Friday liturgy. At no other time of year does the Lectionary provide such a generous excerpt for the Bible, spanning two complete chapters of the same book. The synoptic accounts of the Passion are heard in rotation on Palm Sunday. But John's account, rich in detail, exalted in Christology, rings out every year on Good Friday. The Passion of John uniquely includes the memorable images of Jesus entrusting his mother and the beloved disciple to each other, as well as the pouring of blood and water from his pierced side. Whenever the Passion is proclaimed, the community kneels for a few moments at the announcement of Jesus' death. This devotional exercise recalls the solemn weight of the past and our remorse for sin in the present.

The Easter Vigil

Nine Scripture readings may be proclaimed at the Easter Vigil. Many churches reduce the number, but those that use them all experience the full power of the Lectionary — a generous outpouring of readings, a careful selection of psalms, a well-paced Liturgy of the Word, and anticipation for the proclamation of the good news of resurrection.

In general, these passages provide one final catechesis on baptism for those approaching their initiation. They also remind the community about their own baptism and the wonder of the Resurrection.

The lengthy first reading from Genesis tells the creation of the world, though it may be abbreviated to just a few verses. The reading envisions that both the resurrection of Jesus and the baptism of a Christian express new creations. Just as God once granted birth to the world out of nothing, so God promises a new birth to followers of Christ.

Either Psalm 104 or Psalm 33 may follow. Both express views of creation. The first asks God to send the Spirit and renew the face of the earth — the same Spirit who hovered over the waters at the beginning of time. The second rejoices that the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord.

The eerie second reading recounts Abraham's preparations to slaughter his own son. Isaac foreshadows Christ on Calvary, the beloved son who carries wood uphill in preparation for the sacrifice — and is mysteriously rescued from death. On their way up, Abraham told Isaac that God himself would provide a sheep for the holocaust, which Eucharistic Prayer IV recalls when it asks God to look upon the sacrifice that he himself has provided for the church.

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As Isaac escapes death, so Psalm 16 rejoices that God will not abandon the singer's soul to the netherworld. This psalm appears in the Liturgy of the Hours every Thursday at night prayer because sleep and awakening foreshadow death and resurrection.

The account of crossing the Red Sea can never be omitted from the Easter Vigil. It is the fulcrum upon which the liturgy balances the old and new covenants. As the chosen people of God reached safety from their enemies in the waters of the Red Sea, so the new chosen people reach safety from sin and temptation in the waters of baptism.

The responsorial continues this reading by singing the very next verses from the Bible. At the pope's Easter Vigil in the Vatican, the reader does not even conclude with the usual dialogue that begins, “The word of the Lord.” Instead, the musicians begin the song immediately after the reading, continuing the proclamation of the miraculous story. Some Catholics have objected that this canticle is too bloodthirsty. The enemies of the Israelites who lost their lives also deserve mourning, just as do any soldiers who die in warfare. We do not understand how, but we trust that God offers the possibility of redemption even for those who lose their lives as enemies, not heroes.

Isaiah 54 presents the endearing image of God espousing Israel even after her sins. Psalm 30 reaffirms God's pity on the sinner. It declares that God brought Israel up from the netherworld, an image that bears special resonance on this night. As Jesus descended among the dead and rose again, so sinners are brought up from the netherworld into the presence of a forgiving God.

Isaiah 55 returns more clearly to the baptismal theme as the prophet extends God's invitation to the water. God will renew the everlasting covenant. This joyful promise leads to a canticle from Isaiah 12. For the second time on this night, the responsorial comes not from the psalms but from another book of the Hebrew Scripture — first Exodus, and now Isaiah. It promises water to drink from the fountain of salvation. Although baptismal water is for bathing, not drinking, it will refresh the soul.

Baruch asks Israel to hear God's commandments. Those who had forsaken the fountain of wisdom will thereby

walk by light into splendor. The baptismal imagery shimmers throughout.

Psalm 19 bolsters this encouragement with praise of the refreshing law of the Lord. As in the Holy Thursday Mass, the psalm's refrain is taken from a Christian Scripture source; here, the Gospel of John. In Chapter 6, after Jesus concludes his discourse on the bread of life, several listeners walk away. The message was too much for them. Momentarily concerned, Jesus asks the disciples if they are also planning to leave. Peter responds, asking, "Where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life." Peter's profession of faith reechoes on the lips of the assembly as the refrain to Psalm 19 — in the moments before the faith-filled elect are baptized.

Ezekiel provides the final Hebrew Scripture reading for the Easter Vigil, prophesying that God will sprinkle clean water over the people and give them a new heart. This foreshadows baptism, which will cover people outside with water, while creating inside them a new heart. Psalms 42 and 43 follow. You can almost hear the elect praying the refrain: "As a deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, my God." If there are no baptisms, then the responsorial comes from Isaiah 12 or Psalm 51, the first expressing thanks for God's great deeds, the second praying for a clean heart.

The epistle makes the clearest connection between resurrection and baptism. Paul expressed similar imagery in Colossians 2:12, but Romans 6:3-11 practically sings of dying with Christ and rising with him, not only in baptism, but also at the end of our lives. This passage will have its strongest impact in parishes that practice baptism by immersion, rather than by pouring.

The psalm that follows performs a double function of Gospel acclamation and responsorial. The refrain is a threefold alleluia, a word that rings out in the church for the first time in six weeks. Recommended also as communion music for the Vigil, Psalm 118 is a favorite for the Easter season. It states confidently, "I shall not die, but live," and it calls the rejected stone a cornerstone. The apostles used that verse to describe the role of Jesus Christ. Some of the psalms contain the word *alleluia*, making it an appropriate refrain, but Psalm 118 is not among them. Still, we sing the word primarily as the Gospel acclamation, and the three verses add extra glory to the acclamation's return.

The Gospel of the Easter Vigil rotates through the synoptic accounts of the Resurrection in years A, B and C of the cycle. This year our communities will hear Mark's account. As the second reading on Holy Thursday was the first ever written account of the Last Supper, so this Gospel is the first ever written account of the Resurrection. Especially unexpected is the way that Jesus sends the women back with the news. Not only did he send them to go and tell the disciples, but explicitly and pointedly he added "and Peter." Peter especially needed to hear what had happened. Jesus seems anxious to see him.

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Easter Sunday

The first reading on Easter Sunday is not an account of the Resurrection, but of preaching about the Resurrection. We hear from Peter, the object of Jesus' immediate concern. Peter summarized the original core Christian belief. Passages such as this influenced the development of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The same verses from Psalm 118 at the Vigil return on Easter Sunday. They prophesy the resurrection of Jesus.

Two options supply the second reading. The first had been the epistle at the Vigil in the pre-conciliar liturgy, and the second was the epistle for Easter Sunday. After Vatican II, Romans 6 became a central reading at the Vigil, and the passage from Colossians was moved to an optional position on Easter Day. The choice is hard. The first stirs up hope in sharing resurrection with Christ, while the second celebrates sacrificial redemption. A verse from the second is recommended as the communion antiphon for this Mass.

John's account of the Resurrection serves as the Gospel, but the Lectionary permits the pertinent account from the synoptics. In Year B, for example, Mark's account could be proclaimed both at the Vigil and on Easter Sunday. In the evening, the Lectionary permits a reading of Luke's account of the journey to Emmaus. That event took place on the evening of the Resurrection and resembles the two principal parts of Mass. Jesus explained the Scriptures to the disciples on the road, and they recognized him in the breaking of bread. This passage may be proclaimed on Easter Sunday night, at the same time as the events it describes. The central proclamation, "The Lord is truly risen," is one of the options for the entrance antiphon on Easter Sunday.

The Lectionary offers a profound sweep through key biblical passages over the sacred paschal Triduum. Beginning and ending with readings about journeys, they remind us of our lives, the pilgrimage we make by participating to small and large degrees in the greatest mystery of all: the death and resurrection of Christ.

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