

The places of the Passion

A week of prayer in preparation for Holy Week

Introduction

Places can be very important to us as people. We can all think of places that have marked significant moments in our lives. Perhaps you still remember the place where you first learnt a new skill such as riding a bike or swimming, or the place where you met someone whose friendship and support would be significant in your life. Some of us have special memories of a significant holiday destination or beautiful church, one that we sometimes dream about on a dull and rainy day. When we revisit a favourite childhood place the sights, sounds and the smells bring up memories that we thought we had long forgotten. Once again we are four years old, playing in the sand, or splashing in the water.

This week is a chance to mentally visit some of the places where the Passion story first unfolded in order to shine a new light and perspective upon the events of the first Easter. These stories have become very familiar to us, and yet looking at them from a new angle can open us up to God's Spirit, who gently calls us to spend some time at the foot of the cross of Christ so that we may lay down our burdens of guilt, sin and sorrow and step into new life and joy this Easter.

Use these reading and meditations in the week after the 5th Sunday of Lent in the season we call 'Passiontide'.

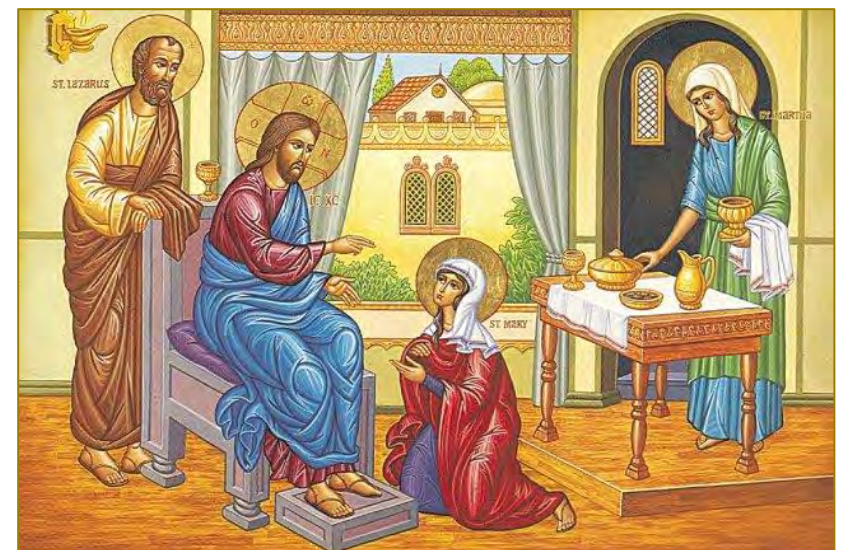
Monday of Passiontide

The welcoming home of Mary and Martha

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. (Luke 10:38)

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:1-3)

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. (Mark 11: 11)



Mary and Martha welcomed Jesus into their home, which they shared with Lazarus their brother. Amidst the turmoil and drama of the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, cleansing of the temple, and the plots and accusations of the chief priests and pharisees it must have been wonderful to have a place of love and welcome to return to. Bethany is still a beautiful place, situated half an hour's walk away from the city, although visiting the sites has been made more complex by the existence of the West Bank barrier wall. In biblical times Bethany must have been a real refuge of normality away from the politics and pressures of the city of Jerusalem itself. Yet it wasn't merely the distance away from the city which made it such a refuge: It was Martha's cooking and Mary's attentive listening to Jesus, helping to meet his needs at a very practical level so that he could meet their spiritual needs.

Pause for thought...

- Is my home a haven?
- How can I be more hospitable, following the Benedictine principle of treating every guest as if Christ himself were visiting me?
- Are there places that I go to find a haven of peace away from my work?
- Do I need to visit one of these places again soon?

Tuesday of Passiontide

The Temple: Place of teaching & revelation

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written,

'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers.'" (Matthew 21: 10-13)



Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him. (Luke 19:47)

Throughout the last week of his life, Jesus kept returning to the temple to teach and talk to the people, yet the Scribes and Pharisees constantly tried to trick him by posing seemingly impossible questions. Jesus must have gathered enormous crowds as he taught the people and he was immensely popular, so much so that the authorities dare not arrest him there. Yet, for all its popularity as a place of prayer and sacrifice, the temple must have been a sad place; it was meant to be the house of God and the holiest place in the world, and yet the temple structures were corrupt. The priests were often petty in their interpretation of the law, but they also allowed such lax practices as the moneychangers disturbing the peace in the only part of the temple where non-Jews were allowed to pray. However, the most climatic moment in the temple in Holy Week happens when the veil cutting off the Holy of Holies from the people is torn in two at the moment of the crucifixion. The tearing happens from top to bottom, pointing to the fact that this is an act of God, not humanity. The way to the presence of God is now open to everyone, not just the High Priest. This is why St Paul has the courage to tell us that we are the temples now, temples of the Holy Spirit.

Pause for thought...

- How can we enable others to experience the closeness of the presence of the Living God?
- Am I enabling others to pray, or disturbing them when they are trying to listen to the voice of God?
- What does the fact that I am a temple of the Holy Spirit mean for me?

Wednesday of Passiontide

The Gardens: Eden, Gethsemane & the graveyard

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

(Genesis 3:12-13)

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him... Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." .. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. (Luke 22: 39-44)

Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!"

(John 20: 11-16)



There are two gardens mentioned in the events of Holy Week, and yet a third garden is hiding behind the scenes. This hidden garden is the garden of Eden and the story of the fall of humanity. The "apple" moment comes to each and every one of us sooner or later: the time when we stare temptation in the face, crumple under its glare and our Eden is destroyed. Those moments generally only bring grief and sorrow in their wake.

In the second garden we see the unwillingness of Christ to die. He loves life, and yet is obedient to God's plans, even if they cause him suffering. The garden also plays a crucial part in the arrest. It is a quiet place, where the guards can arrest Jesus without causing a riot in the city.

In the third of these gardens Mary hears the words of joy, her own name upon Christ's lips. She mistakes him for the gardener, and yet, in a way he *is* the gardener. He is the one through whom the gardens of our world were made, and he is the one who also delicately tends our souls, like plants that are wilting and in need of extra care.

Pause for thought...

- Which garden do I most relate to?
- Have I ever had something I could define as an "apple moment"?
- What part of my soul needs the most tending from Christ the Gardener?
- Turn these thoughts into a prayer of confession or help.

Thursday of Passiontide - The Upper Room

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. (Mark 14:12-16)



When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19-20)



Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying. (Acts 1:12)

The Upper Room, like the house in Bethany was a place of hospitality and safety. It was the place where Christ held his last meal with the disciples and where he turned the ancient Passover liturgy on its head, transforming the Passover cup of redemption into the cup of his own blood and sharing the unleavened bread that he had terrifyingly labelled as his body with the awestruck disciples.

After Christ's death the disciples seemed to find this room a place of safety. Perhaps they felt that they could not travel as far as Bethany without being discovered and arrested. They locked the doors to keep themselves safe, but even locked doors could not prevent Christ from entering this room and meeting them there. Even after Christ's Ascension when he commands them to stay in the city they seem to remain in this room. It plays an important part in the most horrific moments of their lives, but also the most wonderful moments, when the living Jesus shows them his hands and his side and proves that he is alive.

There is a tradition amongst the Syrian Christians of Jerusalem that this room was John Mark's house and that he was the man carrying the jar of water. In our day and age this sign passes us by, but in ancient Jerusalem men *never* carried water. It was a demeaning task. The old-world order is, once more, being overturned by Christ, even in this simple action.

Pause for thought...

- Where do I feel safe?
- Are there parts of my life that I try to lock away from God?
- What would my life be like if Jesus had never instituted Holy Communion?
- Do I take this wonderful sacrament for granted?

Friday of Passiontide - The Praetorium

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. (Matthew 27:27-29)



In a world where most of the buildings were small houses the great public buildings of the Romans must have been daunting and intimidating with their white stones soaring many feet into the sky, dominating the streets all around them, visible for miles.

They were the very opposite of the loving home provided by Mary and Martha - here Mary and Martha provided food and the gentle company of friends. By contrast, a whole cohort of Roman soldiers only provided sickening costumes and insults.

Like the Romans themselves, these buildings were cold, hard, brutal and a constant reminder that the city was under foreign occupation.

Pause for thought...

- What am I intimidated by?
- When I think about the invading Roman armies what world situations spring to mind?
- Pray for those world situations and for all those who have been unfairly imprisoned.



Saturday of Passiontide - The City Streets

They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matthew 21:7-9)

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him. (Luke 23: 26-27)

On Palm Sunday the city streets were ringing with the praises of the people as Jesus rode into town upon a donkey, declaring his Messianic kingship by doing so. Yet within the space of less than a week those same streets were witnessing a very different procession, that of a condemned criminal stumbling to his death, so incapable of carrying his own cross that a bystander has to be forced into helping.

A few years ago I was visiting Jerusalem on a Friday, and trying to find my own way around the *Via Dolorosa*, the traditional route that Christ is supposed to have taken to his death. At first, I was disturbed by the noise, hustle and bustle of the city. The *Via* passes through the market with many different people calling out and selling their wares, shopkeepers arguing with customers about a good bargain, and delivery boys trying to push barrows through the crowd.

I wanted a quieter, more prayerful atmosphere to mark the gravity and holiness of these streets. Then, suddenly my eyes were opened and I realised that it would have been exactly the same in the first century. Heads would hardly have even bothered to turn at the procession of yet another condemned criminal. The streets would have been noisy, dirty, smelly and busy. Yet it was within these very mundane and noisy streets that something extraordinary was happening; the passage of a procession that would change the world and our futures forever.



Pause for thought...

- Have I ever sensed the presence of God in unexpected or busy places?
- There are some events that we only realise the significance of much later.
- Give thanks for those events and the things you have learned from them.

Palm Sunday - The Place of the Skull

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23: 33-34)

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. (Hebrews 13:11-12)



Golgotha was known as the place of the skull. It was the place that no-one wanted to go, the rubbish heap where the scum of society was disposed of. We don't know why it was called the Place of the Skull, perhaps because the rock of the hill was skull-shaped, or perhaps, more chillingly, the remains of previous executions may just have been lying around, bones bleached white in the rays of the unrelenting sun. Yet it was in that horrific place that our own rubbish was dealt with and death itself was put to death in a way so wonderful, so mysterious that "In vain the first born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine".

Pause for thought...

- Think of places where no-one wishes to live, but where people are living, nonetheless. Pray for those people and all who feel that they are worthless.
- Simply spend some time giving thanks for the fact that Jesus was willing to be tortured and to die to save us from our own destructiveness.

