

The Paschal Mystery ... In the dying is the rising

BY PATRICK MALLOY

The Triduum we will celebrate in 2009 — the three-day feast often called “the Paschal Mystery” that celebrates the passing of Jesus from life to death to glory and our share in the pattern of his life — will not be like the Triduum we celebrated in 2008.

It was only one year ago, but the world was different then, so the three-day feast was different, too, than the one we celebrate this year.

It will not be the same, because we are not the same. The story most people tell about their lives and their world this year is not what we told just one year ago. Yet, the wonder of how God-in-Christ passed from eternity into time, and from life into death, and from death into glory, has not changed. We have changed, our world has changed, but God remains.

The Triduum celebrates a dynamic that God revealed in Jesus. It is, at once, the dynamic of divine life and the dynamic of human life. Jesus, in his divinity, reveals that God forsakes everything for us mortals; and, when all is finished, God remains glorious. The human Jesus reveals that when mortals like us forsake everything for the sake of God, we share in God's glory. The mystery is the same, whether we consider Jesus as the divine mortal or as the human God.

All of this goes entirely against the grain and defies logic. Death and life are opposites; they cannot be intertwined. Yet, the story of Jesus is that they are. Anyone who would be Jesus' disciple must claim it as true, even if it seems impossible.

This year more than last, our world is facing the death of so much. What can we, as disciples of the crucified yet risen Lord, say in the face of such loss? How can we declare to the world that, as the Lord has shown us, death can be a passage into glorious life?

We Christians must speak courage in the face of fear, hope in the face of despair. The story we tell across the Three Day is as true today as it was when first it unfolded in Jesus' life. What looks like death can be life. Jesus is the proof.

Here are bits and pieces of what I wrote last year about the Triduum for Diocesan Life.

Addicts speak of “hitting bottom” as if it were the greatest gift they had ever received. Recognizing their own powerlessness, they simultaneously admit their need for a savior. They call it their “Higher Power.”

What allows addicts to rejoice in the day they hit bottom is that only there

did they finally find God. In the midst of the suffering is the salvation. In the midst of the loss is the gain.

In the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus wrote a poem in honor of a supposed relic of the true cross. It has come into the Hymnal 1982 as *The Royal Banners Forward Go*. What Fortunatus captures so beautifully and so clearly is that, in the passing of Jesus from life through death into glory, grace was never absent. Never had God deserted the Son; rather, even in what seemed like tragedy, God's saving hand was already at work. So the cross, rather than being ugly and shameful, an unfortunate part of the story better left behind, is instead a thing of beauty and honor. Already on the cross, Jesus' glory had begun.

*O tree of beauty, tree most fair,
Ordained those holy limbs to bear
Gone is thy shame, each crimsoned bough
Proclaims the king of glory now.*

Some people think it odd, if not a bit macabre, that we Christians dangle crosses around our necks and hang them on our walls and mount them above our altars. They liken it to using miniature electric chairs as jewelry or art. What Christians see in the cross, however, is not the destruction of a life but its fulfillment; not defeat but triumph.

*Fulfilled is all that David told
In true prophetic song of old:
How God the nations' king should be,
For God is reigning from the tree.*

The cross is not an electric chair. It is a throne.

As he gave himself to his disciples as fragile Bread and Wine; as he made himself their servant, stooping even to the task of washing their feet; as he knowingly and willingly allowed his betrayer to be free even if it meant his own death; as he stood clear and proud and strong before Pilate, Jesus was living the glorified life.

Jesus is the glory of God made flesh; at no time in his earthly life was it so clear as during those last days.

Every year, the church celebrates those days in a feast called “The Paschal

Triduum.” It stretches from sundown on Maundy Thursday (which, according to the way the liturgical day is calculated, is actually the beginning of Good Friday) to sundown on Easter Sunday. The three 24-hour days are, in fact, one liturgical day. They celebrate, not three distinct events, but one complex dynamic. They celebrate that the self-offering of God in Christ reveals God's glory. The resurrection is but one facet of how the Divine Majesty is revealed.

What these liturgies (or, rather, this protracted liturgy) celebrate is a current reality, not something long past. That is because what we celebrate in those days is not just what happened to Jesus long ago or even who Jesus once was. It is what happens still, and who he is still. Always and forever, it is of God's very nature to give the Divine Self for the sake of what God has made.

To do these liturgies so that they are experienced as one continuous event requires skill and effort. To celebrate them with a vigor and ritual fullness that can reveal the Mystery they contain demands deep understanding, focus, time, and a great deal of work. It is worth it. It is worth it because, to understand what this three-day-long day celebrates is to understand and to actually experience the God revealed in Christ.

The 2009 Triduum will not be like the 2008 Triduum. The world has changed. We have changed. In the face of so much fear and the death of so much certainty, how can we celebrate that

God's life cannot be conquered no matter what else dies? How can we enact the wonderful and ancient rites of the Prayer Book so that we emerge from them knowing in our very bones that in the midst of the dying is the rising? How can we be strengthened to gracefully let go of what will be snatched from our hands, whether we are willing to let it go or not? Think of the economy.

So much is slipping through our fingers. This is a hard, concrete fact. It is not a theological concept, and people cannot escape just how real it is. Can we proclaim the Divine pattern to them:

from life to death to glory?

“Even at the grave,” the burial rite says, “we make our song: Alleluia.” The Triduum 2009 brings us face-to-face with an essential question. Do we really sing Alleluia in the face of death, and mean it? Do we dare sing it at the edge of the grave and the foot of the cross? Are we certain — with the fragile certainty of faith — that in the dying is the rising and in the cross is the crown, and are we willing to stake our lives on it?

Only if we are that daring is the Triduum worth celebrating. With such daring, we can live in the midst of death, confident that it conceals, thinly at best, new and glorious life, and that, by Baptism, the life is already ours.

Father Patrick Malloy is rector of Grace Allentown and author of Celebrating the Eucharist. The people of Grace Church invite members of the Diocese of Bethlehem whose parishes do not celebrate the Paschal Triduum to join them for the feast. The church will assemble at 7:30 on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and at 8:30 — after sundown — on Holy Saturday.



THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION

A freely chosen global fellowship of churches in communion with one another and with the See of Canterbury in England, some 80 million people in 44 self-governing churches in more than 160 countries. www.anglicancommunion.org

Archbishop of Canterbury
The Most Rev. Rowan Williams
Lambeth Palace
London, England SE1 7JU

Episcopal Seat:
Canterbury Cathedral
www.archbishopofcanterbury.org



THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

One of 44 self-governing national churches within the worldwide Anglican Communion, 2.4 million members in 7,679 congregations in 110 dioceses in the U.S. (95), Mexico and Central America. www.episcopalchurch.org

Presiding Bishop
The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Episcopal Church Center
815 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10017
212-716-6000 • 800-334-7626

Episcopal Seat:
The Washington National Cathedral
www.episcopalchurch.org/pb



THE DIOCESE OF BETHLEHEM

The Episcopal Church in eastern and northeastern PA, 66 congregations in 14 counties: Berks, Bradford, Carbon, Lackawanna, Lebanon, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming. www.diobeth.org

Bishop
The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall bpoffice@diobeth.org
Assistant Bishop
The Rt. Rev. John P. Croneberger
Archdeacon
The Ven. Howard Stringfellow
archdeacon@diobeth.org
333 Wyandotte St. • Bethlehem, 18015
610-691-5655 • 800-358-5655



diocesanlife

The Diocese of Bethlehem edition of Episcopal Life, the monthly newspaper of the Episcopal Church, USA. Copy deadline is the second Monday of the month. Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Bishop or the Diocese of Bethlehem. Send articles and letters to the Editor.

Editor: Bill Lewellis blewellis@diobeth.org
Art Director: Jenifer Gamber

Episcopal Life ISSN 1050-0057 USPS#177-940 is published monthly by The Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, Inc., 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodical postage paid in NYC and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address to Episcopal Life, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000. Send change of subscription address to Episcopal Life Circulation Department, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000, elife@aflwebprinting.com, 800/374-9510.