

The Holy Thing of Holy Week

This week we bring you a short piece by the Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl, longtime president of the Crossings Community board of directors and current rector at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in South Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Steve wrote this piece for his parish newsletter. As he explained to us by e-mail, he intends it to serve not as a deeply sophisticated theological meditation on Holy Week, but rather as an exhortation to his parishioners to "keep Holy Week holy, to sanctify it in their hearts, to hear and experience anew the great drama of redemption accomplished by Christ's death and resurrection that is presented to us every week through the One Word and its Sacraments." I think you'll see that he succeeds in that goal.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Palm Sunday through Holy Saturday marks that period of time in the Church year known as Holy Week. What makes this week holy is not primarily what we do as Christians, but what God did for the world in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

True, we as Christians certainly do lots of things in Holy Week. We do whimsical things like Easter egg hunts; we do serious things like fasting; and we certainly do worship—lots of worship! And we do these things precisely to keep the week holy, as the third commandment bids us to do when it says "remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy."

The word 'holy' literally means "to be set apart." Setting apart is what we do when we regard something as special or unique or worth keeping. For example, if we set aside some money for a long desired vacation, we set it apart from our other money so

that we can use it for the special purposes for which it has been “hallowed” or “sanctified.”

But the holy thing about holy week is not primarily what we do but what God has done for us. First and foremost, God set apart his Son; he sanctified Jesus Christ to be our savior. What’s more, in sanctifying his Son he sanctified us; he set us apart to become children of God, by adoption, as Paul says, and heirs of eternal life through faith in Christ. In other words, we set apart Holy Week to remember anew how God set apart his Son to redeem us from the power of sin, death, and the Evil One.

Perhaps the word ‘redemption’ sounds foreign to our modern ears. Perhaps we do not even know what the word means. In New Testament times, ‘redemption’ referred to that process by which a slave could become free from his or her master (Cf. 1 Cor 6:20, 7:23). Though it may sound trivial, when we speak of “redeeming” our coupons at the local store we are using the term in a way that echoes this New Testament usage. The item to be redeemed is “enslaved,” so to speak, until it can be released through the exchange of a coupon.

We Americans tend not to think of ourselves as enslaved. After all, we live in a free country, or so we say. But the kind of political freedom we enjoy is only a shadow of true freedom. A slave is someone who lives and acts in accordance with the will of another, that “other” being the slave’s “lord.” And that kind of slavery is all around us. For example, acting according to peer pressure or being ruled by the materialism of our culture is that kind of slavery. The very fact that we do things that we know are wrong, but we do them anyway, indicates that we are not living freely, but according to the will of another—the Evil One, or the power of sin, as Paul calls it (Rom 7:12-23).

As C. S. Lewis points out in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, the

fact that we cannot see this other who enslaves us does not mean that the slavery and the enslaver do not exist. Rather, casting doubt about the fact of our enslavement is a major part of the strategy this “lord” uses to maintain power over us. For the most part, then, the work of the Evil One is generally not like that depicted in those scary movies like *The Exorcist*. The Evil One is more patient and more subtle than that. His work can be seen in the everyday, almost taken-for-granted ways that life is diminished all around us. He works by holding death in our face just enough so as to lead us into believing that by following his ways we can preserve our life. But what’s even worse is the fact that the Evil One turns us into God’s enemies. After all, being the slave of God’s enemy is really no different from being God’s enemy.

What a deceiver this Evil One is! By enslaving us, he pushes us onto the front lines of his battle against God—exploiting our selfishness, making us subject to the judgment of God’s law, and abandoning us to the law’s sentence of death. Enslavement to the Evil One is the human predicament that all humanity is born into. It is another way of speaking about Original Sin.

Holy Week is all about how Jesus Christ came to free us from the power of the Evil One and the mess he has gotten us into with God. Jesus’ relationship with us is the very opposite of that of the Evil One’s. For Christ chose to side with us sinners while we were still enemies of God (Rom. 5:6-11). He took upon himself the judgment of God and the sentence of death that belongs to us all. By placing himself in the battlefield between unholy sinners and holy God, he conquers sin, death, and the Evil One. He establishes peace with God and gives to us his righteousness, his resurrected life, and, indeed, his very self as our Lord, our savior, our brother. In a real sense, Jesus gave his life on the cross as the price (the coupon) of our redemption. In the cross he exhausted the heavy arsenal which the Evil One uses

against us, and in his resurrection he makes possible true peace between sinners and God. What a holy, special, unique thing! We call it Easter!

We at St. Mark's Episcopal Church will be sanctifying (keeping holy) Holy Week by participating in Jesus' sacramental care of us on Maundy Thursday, by adoring the depths of his sacrificial love for us on Good Friday, and by celebrating him as our new Lord and savior now and forevermore on Easter Sunday. Sanctify Holy Week in your hearts! Set apart time to let your faith erupt into worship!

Your servant in Christ,
Fr. Steve