

## ANAMNESIS



1 Corinthians 11:23, where St. Paul writes: "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

Recently, one of our parishioners confided to me that they were glad that the Holy Week Services this year would all be only online, because they didn't really much like the Holy Week Services, because they were too much like "play acting," they said. It was all too much "pretending" for them. First we pretend that we are part of the crowd that welcomes Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, crying out 'Hosanna, Hosanna', often uncomfortably forced to wave palms in the air, and sometimes

worse yet, to parade outside on the street, where voices usually fall silent from the songs they are meant to sing. It's all too much "play acting," they said. Then we are forced to pretend that we are part of the riotous crowd before Pilate during the reading of the Passion Narrative, the ones who cry out "Crucify him, crucify him!" when Pilate offers the release of Barabbas. Indeed I know a lot of Christians who don't like being forced to be the 'bad guys' in the Crucifixion story.

But our 'play acting' doesn't end there. On Maundy Thursday, tonight, we usually pretend that we were there at the Last Supper. We are invited to have our feet washed as the disciples did on that night, which is particularly uncomfortable for many people, who feel too vulnerable to present their naked feet to another. Then we strip the altar just as the guards at the Cross stripped Jesus of his robes. We are sometimes even invited to "keep watch" at an Altar of Repose after the Service, as though we were there in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus was grieved and agitated in prayer. "Can you not keep watch with me one hour," Jesus asked Peter, but was he also asking us?

On Good Friday, the "play acting" often continues as we are encouraged to walk the Way to Calvary, stopping at each of the traditional Stations of the Cross as though we were there, as though we were witnesses to those events, participants in the saddest day of the year in the life of Christians, which the

Church oddly calls "Good Friday." Some services will include veneration of the cross on that day, perhaps with a kissing the feet of a crucifix, after hearing the moving Passion Narrative of John's Gospel. I know one parish where every attendee is asked to come forward and loudly hammer a nail into a crude wooden cross, as though we were the soldiers who crucified Jesus.

Finally some of us are used to participating in the Great Vigil of Easter, and pretend that we are actually in the dark tomb with Jesus, and then that we witness the Resurrection in the birth of the new fire, with a light that spreads out from the church in song and jubilation to the farthest corners of the world, the culmination of all the Scriptures that have come before us. And then finally, early on Easter Sunday morning, even many who will have skipped most of the 'play acting' during the week, will join the women at the tomb and joyfully announce the Resurrection, complete with all the blooming flowers of spring.

One friend said, 'I don't mind the Easter Egg hunt, that is fun for the kids, but so much else of what we do is just silly,' it is just play-acting. It's embarrassing. So why do we do it? Indeed, as noted, many do not.

"Do this in remembrance of me," said Jesus at the Last Supper. For many Christians, that is the very commandment or

'mandate' that Jesus gives to us this night, from which this day gets its very name, "Maundy" an old English word from the Latin "mandatum;" which is also the first word of the ancient Latin antiphon derived from the scriptural verse, John 13:34, which was traditionally sung at the ceremony of the washing of the feet, a ceremony which has taken place on the Thursday night in Holy Week since at least the seventh century, thus for more than 1,300 years. Calling tonight "Maundy Thursday" reminds us of those words in this evening's Gospel where Jesus says "a new commandment (a new mandate) I give you, that just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The usage is also relevant in response to the Eucharistic commandment "to do this in memory of me" and also in the mandate in the Garden of Gethsemane "to watch and pray" with Jesus.

When Jesus commands us to do these things in remembrance of him, the Greek word here is "anamnesis," which is usually translated as "remembrance," as in "to do this in 'remembrance' of me," but the Greek word here really means much more than simply to "re-member" what was done. It implies in some sense, making the past present again, and thus actually participating and sharing in the remembered event. The English word "re-present" is perhaps closer to the real meaning of "anamnesis,"

and of what we do each year when we celebrate Holy Week, looking for Jesus' 'real presence' among us as we do so.

When I served as Rector at the historic Trinity Church in Portsmouth, Virginia, a group of Civil War "re-enactors" responded enthusiastically to this concept, for that is exactly what they said they were trying to do as 're-enactors,' they were making the historical battles and events of the past, present and real for us today.

Jews in celebrating Passover this week practice a form of 'anamnesis', for they are not simply 'remembering' with the Seder meal their ancestors escaping slavery in Egypt, they believe that they are somehow participating with them in that liberation, that it is their story too.

Thus during Holy Week the Christian Church "re-presents" many of the events of Jesus' last days, from the crowds waving palms and welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, to the washing of the feet and the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, the Watch in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday. To some people these services may indeed seem overly dramatic and artificially theatrical; they may seem like "play-acting" and "pretending." However, the real intent of these celebrations is "anamnesis." The purpose behind these actions is to make those "past" events "real" for us, thus allowing us to really be a part of them. Even so, many

Christians come on Palm Sunday and welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem and then only returned the next Sunday to discover the empty tomb at Easter, and thus miss out on all the events that occurred between those Sundays, as though they weren't part of the story.

The opposite of "anamnesis" in Greek is the far more familiar English word "amnesia." We all know what that is. An amnesiac is a person who cannot remember who they are, or where they have come from. They don't know or remember their past, and thus they are often confused in the present as to who they really are. A lot of Christians, I fear, are "amnesiacs," they don't really know their own story, it isn't real for them, it is not really a part of their personal story. No wonder they are sometimes confused and disoriented.

Thus it is my sincerest hope that the good people of St. John's will never be amnesiacs in their religious life, and that next year we will all again fully participate with a packed slate of in-person celebrations for Holy Week, and that we will all be instead "anamnesiacs," people who know the Christian story and are participants in the events of Jesus' life and last days. "For if we are united with him in a death like his," writes St. Paul, "then we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." +3Amen.