

## **The Meaning of Holy Week**

The first Holy Week, by the plan of God, was the most important week in the life of Jesus Christ. This Holy Week, likewise, should be the most important week in the entire year for each one of us. It should be a week of prayer and meditation, in understanding the events of the Passion of Our Lord, knowledge of the Scriptural account of Holy Week is invaluable.

### **PRELIMINARIES:**

1. Place - The entire Passion took place in Jerusalem (the Capital of Palestine) and its environs.
2. Time - Probably in the year A.D. 30, during Passover Week, from the 9th to the 16th of the Jewish Month Nisan (March-April). Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims.
3. Political Conditions - The Jewish Nation was subject to Rome. The Roman Governor was Pontius Pilate; the Jews were ruled by their High Priest, Caiaphas, and the Council of 70 elders, the Sanhedrin. Galilee, the region in the north of Palestine, had Herod as king.
4. Recent Developments - Jesus of Nazareth, who for three years had been preaching the Kingdom of God, working miracles, and finally claiming to be the Messiah, was so growing in popularity that the High Priest and the Jewish authorities saw in Him a serious threat to their authority over the people. The recent resurrection of Lazarus had caused many to believe in Jesus. The Jewish leaders planned to kill Lazarus, to kill Jesus as a seditionist, and so to end this threat to their power. However, as a subject nation, they could not put anyone to death. Only the Roman Governor had the power to condemn a criminal to death. Now Passover Week, with the great influx of pilgrims to Jerusalem, was a hand. Under such circumstances Holy Week began . . .

### **PALM SUNDAY**

Jesus as well as the people knew of the opposition of the authorities and yet Jesus moved without fear of hiding. On Sunday morning of Passover Week, when pilgrims were traveling to Jerusalem, Our Lord went openly from Bethany to Jerusalem, by the most direct road. He even sent His disciples in for a donkey, thus encouraging a celebration. The enthusiastic followers made a triumphal procession, and in triumph Our Lord entered the Holy City. As He saw the Temple and the city spread out before Him, Our Lord predicted its destruction and wept over the city. This triumphal procession was the greatest length to which Our Lord permitted His Messianic Kingdom to be proclaimed. Great excitement prevailed in the city upon His arrival. Toward the end of the day He predicted His death by being "lifted up from the earth," and told the people: "Yet a little while the light is among you. Walk while you have the light, that darkness may not overtake you." It was the twilight of the Light of the World. At dusk Our Lord returned with His disciples to Bethany.

## **MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

The events for the next 3 or 4 days are not clearly divided in the Gospels, but the pattern is shown in Our Lord's actions on Monday. His activity during this period was intense. We are not told all of the activities. He was protected in disputations with the authorities by the good will of the people. Our Lord would come into Jerusalem in the morning; He would spend the day there, teaching and discussing in the Temple; at night He would leave the city, cross the Kidron, and withdraw to the Mount of Olives (where lay Bethany and Gethsemani). Coming into Jerusalem early on Monday, Our Lord cursed the fig tree which had leaves but no fruit -- a symbol of Judaism, whose religion had much foliage and practices, but no interior spirit and no fruit.

## **TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK**

This was the day of great disputations -- a busy, stormy day of public debates with the scribes and ancients. They challenged the authority of Our Lord... Our Lord told the thinly-veiled parable of the vine dressers... He answered the question of tribute to Caesar... the case presented by the Sadducees about the woman with seven husbands and the resurrection... the Greatest Commandment .... Our Lord questioned them about the "Son of David." He concluded the debates with a denunciation of the Pharisees and the "Seven Woes," expressed an anguished lament over Jerusalem, and commented on the widow's mite. Leaving the city, He crossed over to Mt. Olivet and sadly predicted that there would be left "not a stone upon a stone." Asked about the end of Jerusalem and the world He gave the eschatological discourse, and told the parable of the virgins to teach watchfulness.

## **SPY WEDNESDAY**

On this day the same schedule was followed. The high priest was worried; the Jewish authorities wanted to eliminate Jesus; they had to act while He was still in the city, and before the Passover. They had to act quickly. At their meeting help came from an unexpected source -- from Judas, one of the Twelve, who for thirty pieces of silver agreed to betray Our Lord. They were "glad" -- it would be easy to arrest Jesus quickly and secretly.

## **HOLY THURSDAY**

This was the preparation day for the Passover. Jesus sent in from Bethany to reserve a place for the Passover meal. At evening they gathered together for the Paschal meal, and Our Lord washed the feet of the Apostles. Toward the end of the meal Judas, identified as the traitor, left. Our Lord instituted the Blessed Sacrament as His eternal memorial. He foretold the betrayal by Peter and in the Last Discourse encouraged them to love one another. Going to Gethsemani, He took the three Apostles and began the Agony in the Garden.

## **GOOD FRIDAY**

It was past midnight when Our Lord again awakened the three Apostles. Judas and the soldiers approached to capture Our Lord. "It was the hour of darkness." Around 2 A.M. He was taken to the house of Annas, the "power behind the throne," for a preliminary investigation. Next He was taken across the courtyard to Caiaphas the High Priest, who, with members of the Sanhedrin, made interrogations in preparation for the full religious trial. Around 5 A.M. the full Sanhedrin met in extraordinary session. There were many false and contradictory witnesses. The High Priest at length solemnly asked Our Lord if He was the Messiah, the Son of God. When Our Lord answered affirmatively and predicted that they would see Him coming as their judge, all shrieked that it was blasphemy and that He was worthy of death. So ended the religious trial. During and between these hearings Our Lord was insulted by the guards, Peter denied Christ and repented, and Judas, hearing of the death sentence, committed suicide.

Around 7 A.M. Pontius Pilate, holding court at the Lithostrotos (Antonia) heard the prisoner accused of political sedation. Seeing no guilt in Him, Pilate sent the accused to Herod, King of Galilee, who sent Him back in a robe of mockery. Pilate, trying to release Jesus, was forced to release Barabbas. Still trying, he had our Lord scourged and presented to the people. They still demanded crucifixion. A threat of being reported to Rome made Pilate give in; around noon he handed Jesus over to them to be crucified. Carrying the crosspiece the scourged victim staggered the distance to Golgotha (about 1/4 mile), and there, between two thieves, our Lord was crucified. Around 3 P.M. He died. The body was taken down and placed in haste in the nearby tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

## **CRUCIFIXION**

In ancient times criminals were executed by crucifixion. This was an Oriental technique of execution which the Romans had adopted: the word "crucify" in Latin means "fix to a cross." In our day capital punishment is rare. Criminals are executed by the electric chair, hanging, gas chamber, firing squad, or lethal injection. But the Romans crucified.

The idea was to have the condemned man die as publicly and terribly as possible. So it had to be a public spectacle. The condemned was scourged first, to make him a bloody figure. A procession of death moved through the city streets, with a sign advertising why this man was being executed. The place of his dying had to be public -- for example, near the city gates or on a hill -- with the sign over the dying man's head as a lesson to all.

When fixed to the cross by nails or ropes, the dying man would be elevated. His feet were at about head level of passers-by. So in pitiable state he would await death, looking out at the passing crowd, out of reach of all but their stones and insults. He could live for days -- unless weakened or unless death was hastened by beating,

stabbing or fire-induced suffocation. In earlier days the dead body was left to decay on the cross, carrion food for birds. But later special permission was given to bury the body. In this way Jesus Christ was crucified, died and was buried -- for us sinners.

Source: Daily meditations for Holy Week contained in The Vatican II Weekday Missal, Daughters of St Paul, 50 St. Paul's Avenue, Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA 02130, 1975.