

Reflection for Palm Sunday Year B

As places of worship reopen this weekend albeit with ongoing restrictions, we now stand at the threshold of the holiest week in the Church's liturgical calendar starting with Palm Sunday. God's drama will unfold the week. Humanity's drama, however, continues to unfold as it comes to terms with Covid-19. The vaccine continues to be rolled out across the world while, at the same time, there is concern of a third wave beginning to manifest and mutate in different parts of Europe. We are living in a time of great uncertainty and insecurity. We can also feel a little frightened. As spring arrives, we would all like to plan. Many of us would like to have booked a holiday abroad for some Mediterranean sunshine. Some would like to visit a restaurant and have a nice bottle of wine and others would simply be content to welcome people into their homes without any fear of contracting the virus. We all need to be patient and it is not easy. We all hope, one day, that we might be able to look to a brighter and more secure future. For many Christians, this is the week when we plunge ourselves into the mystery of God in a profound and radical way. This week is not a soft option; nor is it for the faint-hearted. The contours on our personal map of faith may shape and determine where we might experience our faith in a creative, new and life-giving way. A freedom in faith is a freedom for life in God. This is not the end; it is about a new beginning. It is not about death; it is about life with God, living a renewed experience of faith in an authentic and energising way. Many people will probably pause on Good Friday to remember Calvary and the Cross. Memories of Hiroshima, 9/11, Iraq and other historical events often play a part on our reflections on Good Friday. Light still conquered darkness when Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was destroyed in 2019. These events remind us of humanity's fragility, brokenness and woundedness which often find their answer in the Cross of Calvary. Perhaps these words from Thomas Casey, s.j, an Irish Jesuit and philosopher, might help us contemplate the Easter Mystery with a very human face.

“Whether we are Jewish or not, we should not let our thinking forget the sinister shadow of Auschwitz that lurks behind us. Auschwitz is above all an actual place where unspeakable things happened, a harrowing symbol of the extermination of millions of Jews throughout the Nazi era. It has come to represent all the horrific world events that have fractured sense and meaning. Auschwitz is not dead: this horrible memory still threatens to put our world into a coma from which it might never wake up. There is also a darkness looking over our culture because of the many other inhuman acts that have cast a pall over the last century. Yet the long and terrible wound of Auschwitz can keep us vigilant and awake, precisely because it has sliced open the flaccidity of complacent theology and self-indulgent spirituality. With the memory of Auschwitz in our hearts, we more more easily resist the temptation to descend into sweet and saccharine spirituality, or to become warm and fuzzy Christians. It ensures that we will remain real, even if reality is not always as nice as we would like it to be.

Auschwitz raised troubling questions for the Jewish people. Many Jews had taken God's omnipotence for granted because of the stories of creation and Exodus. But this understanding of God abruptly went up in smoke, like the clouds that rose from the chimneys of the death camps. How could they reconcile the Creator of the universe and the Mighty Liberator of the Israelites with the apparent powerlessness of the “Omnipotent” one in the face of the Jewish suffering during the holocaust? After wrestling with agonizing question for a long time, Emmanuel Levinas, (a French Jewish Philosopher) came up with a novel answer. He decided that God had pulled back as it were, not because he did not care, but in order to allow the rest of us freely to decide what kind of people we wanted to be: lifesavers or killers. God withdraws in self-effacement in order to allow human beings the space and freedom either to respond to others or else to petrify into stony egoism.”

Thomas G. Casey, s.j, **“Humble and awake: Coping with our comatose culture,”** pages 61/62