18 March 2018: Matins
Passion Sunday
Ps 142; Exodus 24: 3-8; Hebrews 12: 18-29
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+ ‘Let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe’ (Heb 12: 28)

Last week we interviewed for the post of Succentor in the Cathedral, and as part of that process we asked the candidates to give a short presentation on ‘What is the point of liturgical worship?’ The varied and fascinating accounts that we heard in response to that question came back to me when I started thinking about the readings prescribed for this morning. For these texts contrast sharply two quite different sorts of worship: that offered by Moses in the desert as a means of sealing the covenant between the people and the Lord, and that which, thanks to Jesus, the ‘mediator of a new covenant’ (Heb. 12: 24), believers can hope to enjoy in the presence of God in the heavenly Jerusalem. What does it mean to offer ‘acceptable worship’ to God? Have we sufficient reverence to convey our awe in the presence of our God who is, indeed, ‘a consuming fire’? And how should our worship change at different points of the liturgical year?

This feels a particularly relevant question today on Passion Sunday. This day, the fifth Sunday of Lent, marks the start of the final two weeks of this penitential season, often called Passiontide; it will end with the Vigil on Easter Eve. As many of you will be aware, the institution of Lent as a liturgical season marked out by particular practices and forms of prayer and worship only developed gradually in the early Church. It did not acquire anything approaching its later form until the fourth century, even though the keeping of the Easter Feast and that of Pentecost seem to go right back to the earliest days of the apostolic church. Today we frequently draw a connection between Lent and the forty days that Christ spent fasting in the wilderness immediately after his baptism by John in the river Jordan, a period of time in which, although he was tempted, he did not sin (Heb 4: 15). Lent is reckoned as the forty days from Ash Wednesday up to and including Holy Saturday, but without counting the Sundays.
Yet, Lent did not in fact originate as an historical commemoration of the time our Lord spent fasting in the wilderness. Nor did early Christians adopt a long period of fasting before the keeping of Good Friday and Easter. A fast of a single day before then can be traced back to the first Christian community in Jerusalem (probably adopting Jewish practice); from that may have evolved the custom of the keeping of the whole of Holy Week (starting the day after Palm Sunday) as a time of particularly strict fast.

Lent itself derives from the special discipline expected during the final stages of preparation by new converts, catechumens, for their baptism at Easter. The timing of that sacrament was, of course, pregnant with meaning, so that the neophytes would die to sin and be reborn in Christ at the moment when Christ passed over from death to resurrected life. For three weeks before that time, the catechumens attended special classes on Christian doctrine, and they marked this time with fasting. In the fourth century, perhaps encouraged by the growth of interest in asceticism and monastic life in the same period, the wider body of the already-baptised faithful began to join the catechumens in their pre-baptismal fasting; the clergy often encouraged them, too, to take refresher courses in Christian doctrine.

By the middle of the fourth century, the period devoted to these spiritually-beneficial exercises had increased to six weeks. Only then, retrospectively, was a connection drawn between Christ’s fast in the wilderness and the forty days of Lenten observance. In the middle years of the fifth century Pope Leo the Great preached a series of Lenten sermons assuming a six-week fast, yet it was not until the later seventh century that a full total of forty days of actual fasting began to be observed in Rome, with the addition of Ash Wednesday and the three days thereafter before the old beginning of Lent on the Sunday. (Interestingly, Cranmer’s collect for the first Sunday of Lent in the Book of Common Prayer which begins ‘O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights’ has echoes of the old collect ‘At the beginning of the fast’ found in the Roman Missal, which presupposed that Lent would begin on that Sunday).

So, if Lent only evolved gradually, emerging from the private initiative of members of the laity to share the solemn preparation of the catechumenate for the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, the solemnisation of the final fortnight as a more intense version of that discipline that we now call Passiontide must have emerged even later.

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In England, the importance of observing the whole Lenten fast according to the rite of the Roman Church was commended at a Church council held in the year 747. Although that text made no reference to Passiontide, recent research has identified in a tenth-century manuscript now in the British Library a collection of special chants, readings and prayers assigned especially for the two weeks before Easter. The opening of the sequence has been lost, so it begins incompletely without the materials for Passion Sunday, but now starts with provisions for Monday in the fifth week of Lent. This suggests that in England by the end of tenth century these two weeks were already distinguished from the earlier weeks of Lent as a time for the offering of a particular kind of acceptable liturgical worship.

Today we mark the season of Passiontide by abandoning our Lenten purple in favour of a dark red liturgical colour both for the frontal on the altar and for the vestments that the ministers will wear at the Eucharist. You will also see, if you look towards the altar now, that following ancient custom, all the statues and the crucifix on the reredos have been covered with purple veils, concealing them from our sight; the statues of Our Lady and St Frideswide are similarly veiled. I am not wholly convinced by the explanation offered in some sources that this practice has any connection to the final verse of the Gospel reading appointed in the BCP for today. From St John’s gospel, this reports how the crowd picked up stones to cast at Jesus and ends with the words: ‘but Jesus hid himself and went out from the Temple.’ (John 8: 46)

I do think, however, that there is a specific devotional purpose to hiding these images from our sight. That act helps us to focus on the penitential nature of this season, reminding us that all the joy we take in our worship and our celebration of the glory of God is possible only because of the offering that Christ made of himself for our sake upon the cross. Denying us the distraction of visual images helps us to focus on Christ’s suffering, passion and death. If the Cathedral had a sequence of the stations of the cross around the walls, those images, and those alone, would not be veiled during this fortnight, encouraging the faithful to focus their prayers on the narrative sequence to Calvary. Here in Christ Church, we may find it easier to undertake such a spiritual pilgrimage as an imaginative journey inside our heads if we see the veils as a blank canvas on which to project our own mental images.

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Further, the presence of the veils over the statues which for the rest of the year we can use as aids to worship reminds us of the contrast between the access to God that Christ’s salvic work opened for us, and the different way in which ancient Israel worshipped him. When Moses met God in the burning bush, he hid his face because he was afraid to look on him (Ex. 3: 6). So terrifying was the sight of God on Mount Sinai when Moses talked with him and received the Ten Commandments that, as quoted in the letter to the Hebrews, Moses said “I tremble with fear.” Similarly, Aaron and his successors as high priest were forbidden to approach the divine presence in the holy of holies, first in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple, where a veil separated the earthly dwelling place of God’s presence from the rest of areas to which people had access. Only once a year might the high priest pass through that veil to make atonement for the people’s sins (Ex. 30: 10; Lev. 16: 2; cf. Heb 9: 1-9).

Our readings this morning skilfully contrasted Mount Sinai with Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, as a means of expressing the different ways in which humanity had access to God under the different covenants. Under the old covenant the people could not approach the divinity directly; they needed Moses, and then their high priests, to act as their intermediaries. Darkness, gloom, fear and trembling characterised their meetings with God, while their worship required sacrifices and the shedding of blood. But now, as we were reminded in an earlier passage in the letter to the Hebrews, ‘Now we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God…; we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.’ (Heb 4: 14-15)

The two weeks of Passiontide running until the evening of Holy Saturday give us an opportunity to recall some of the darkness and fear that characterised the encounters between Yahweh and the Israelites who lived under the law; the veils over our statues remind us that there was a time when the people needed intermediaries to approach the Almighty on their behalf, when he was veiled from their sight. They also serve as a warning that we should not veil our own hearts and minds from the truths of God’s teaching, nor allow the visual to distract us from our devotions. Instead we should look deep within ourselves for the resources we need to worship Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.
As we prepare to walk to Calvary and witness the crucifixion of our Lord, we will be assisted by the liturgical worship offered in this place to reflect sorrowfully upon our own sins and weaknesses, the sins for which Christ suffered and died. The reverence and awe that will characterise that worship – the music and the movement, the readings, silence and intercessions – will all draw us closer to the divine presence, transforming us into his people. May it be our prayer that we use this penitential season to our own profit, so that through our participation in God’s acceptable worship, we may be drawn towards the life of the divine and so be made ready to meet the risen Christ.