

## Celebration of Tenebrae expresses expectation, suffering

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 20, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

The Wednesday of Holy Week, at least at my church, features the celebration of Tenebrae, a deeply moving and ancient liturgy that combines the services of Matins and Lauds for the Triduum and anticipates them by one day.

Tenebrae serves as a vigil for the Triduum. Moving these services up to the night before, as Tenebrae does, shows that there was a fair amount of flexibility regarding liturgical practice in earlier times, something some liturgists want us to forget.

Be that as it may, the central feature of the service is the gradual extinguishing of the candles on a large, centrally placed, candelabrum called the hearse. Finally only the Christ candle is left and it is taken out of the sanctuary at the end of the service (?the dying of the light?) at which point, after a moment of silence, loud banging sounds are made. The people and ministers depart in silence.

Of course, at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, we are spoiled to have such a magnificent choir and music is integral to the singing of the Divine Office in a public setting. If you are in the Washington area, or come visit during Holy Week, Tenebrae at St. Matthew's is a must.

The singing of the Lamentations of Jeremiah literally transport you out of our modern, busy, technologically proficient world and back to a pre-modern moment in which the ancient Hebrew words combine with the medieval chant to remind you that there was a time before computers, before telephones, before factories, before lightbulbs. There was a time before self-help, before Oprah and Dr. Phil, before Freud and Darwin, before Descartes and his Cogito.

The music of Tenebrae brings you back to that pre-modern world which is always good to visit. The chants at St. Matthew's tonight are like the windows at Chartres, a reminder that the pre-moderns had a knack we moderns seem to have lost, a knack for capturing the exquisite beauty the relationship of man with God calls forth.

In the event, the beauty of Tenebrae is focused on the expression of two emotions that we moderns distinctly do not like to encounter: expectation and suffering. Let me take the last first.

When my mother died six years ago, I was surrounded by euphemisms. We no longer say a person died, not even in an obituary. They "passed on." Funerals are now called "a celebration of the life of" the deceased.

People invite you to remember the happy times, as if the real love and growth did not come out of the difficult times, the harsh times, the cruel times: Who could forget those and why would you want to?

Go to the card store and try and find a sympathy card that even mentions the word "death." Our culture does not like the idea that suffering is a part of the human condition, that there is no pill for it, no exercise regimen, no course of therapy, to remove it, so we remove the words and hope the reality will follow.

The mystery of suffering is at the heart of the Christian faith because, of course, it is at the heart of this Holy Week. Too often, people accuse us Catholics of using the word "mystery" when we are unable to provide rational explanations for our beliefs.

That is not what we mean when we say "mystery." We mean that the mystery in question, in this case suffering, is something that can be examined rationally but that it transcends rationalism, it requires us to ask questions that take us beyond Descartes and his Cogito, indeed, questions that take us beyond our Catechism. Suffering brings us to the point in our lives where we ask the difficult questions.

In a masterful essay some years ago, on the subject of grief counseling, Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete wrote:

[T]he roots of grief arise from a wound deeper than the psychological or the cultural. It is at that level in ourselves where we decide what we can or cannot expect of life, what is just or unjust, what is the purpose and value of our existence. To the degree that grief counseling ever ignores those questions, it does not deal with grief; it leads us to suppress it.

What we can or cannot expect of life -- that is something our consumer culture invites us to avoid.

Expectancy is the other emotion we must attend to on this great Vigil of the Triduum and its difficulty comes from the fact that we know how the Holy Week story ends.

Growing up, I recall that during the reading of the Passion, the people would say "Crucify Him!" when those words came up in the reading of the Passion. Now, all the words of the Passion are read by the minister. I suppose there is a liturgical reason for this, but having the people say those words helped locate us emotionally inside the story.

Of course, we like to think we would have not been like Jesus' contemporaries, we would not have urged his destruction, but we kid ourselves. We need to place ourselves imaginatively in the precincts of the Praetorium two thousand years ago if we are to truly experience the Triduum.

They did not know what was coming. Would this man Jesus save himself? Was he an imposter as charged? They did not know the answer to that question and it will help us to find that answer if we can imagine what it felt like not to know.

In the meantime, we wait.

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