



Holy, Holy, Holy

Identifying with the Self-Emptying of Jesus

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Radical identification with Jesus—that is what Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion is all about. As Saint Paul tell us in the line in the Bible immediately before the selection that is the Second Reading for Mass: “Your attitude must be Christ’s” (Philippians 2:5). To have Christ’s attitude means to totally identify with Jesus, approaching suffering and trial and difficulty with the same trust and confidence he did. In short, it means to be holy.

The holiness that results from total identification with Jesus can only come about when we imitate Jesus’ free acceptance of helplessness and powerlessness. Our holiness must be a holiness in the image and likeness of the One who made Himself completely helpless and powerless on the cross, the Jesus who, as the Second Reading tells us, “emptied himself . . . humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7–8).

The journey of Holy Week that begins with Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion is the journey of growing in holiness because we empty ourselves as Jesus did, the journey of identifying with the powerlessness of Christ crucified, the total emptying of ourselves such that we know that only God alone can rescue us—not any of our power, not any earthly power, but God alone.

Then, and only then, can we begin to experience the transformation that is the very power of God. Christianity is a faith rooted in transformation. We must identify with the Passion, the sufferings of Jesus, not because they are painful or because we revel in the “unpleasantries,” but because we find our hope in the mystery of the passage: the passing over; the crossing over from death to life, from suffering to glory, from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from past to future, from human to divine, a passing over of which the cross of Jesus is the total and complete expression. If we look only at the painful side, we will not understand. But, if we have the trust and confidence to look at the whole passage, then we can see and understand the Passion in light of Jesus’ Resurrection. We can again look to the Second Reading: “Because of this”—because of this emptying—“God greatly exalted him.” So, if we identify with being filled up, we are lost; only emptying leads to fullness, and therefore to holiness.

We should take to heart the essence of Christian holiness as emptiness. At every Mass we proclaim the holiness of God as we sing or say the Holy, Holy, Holy as part of the Eucharistic Prayer. The triple acknowledgment of God’s holiness echoes the words of scripture, as found in the sixth chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah and also the fourth chapter of the book of Revelation. Whenever we proclaim the Holy, Holy, Holy we are proclaiming God’s dominion over heaven and earth, since they are full of God’s glory. To say that God is the God “of hosts” affirms that God is not just strong, not just mighty, and not just powerful, but that the power and majesty of God is beyond anything we could ever imagine. It’s a power and a holiness that, we know, was fully revealed in Jesus’ death and Resurrection, and therefore, it is a power and a holiness that is most clearly manifested whenever God raises up those who are empty, broken, and even dead. That’s something only God can do.

The Holy, Holy, Holy goes on to acknowledge, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” These words echo the acclamation with which the crowds greeted Jesus at his entry into Jerusalem—an entry that would lead to his handing over his life. To be blessed and to be acknowledged as one who “comes in the name of the Lord”—one who does the work of God—involves handing over one’s life in trust to the Father.

The heavenly powers know that the Paschal Mystery of dying and rising is the very life of God insofar as it is the journey the Son of God underwent and, as they acknowledge the holiness of that journey, we join in their song of acknowledgment every time we celebrate the Eucharist. “Holy, Holy, Holy”—every time we make that acclamation, it should be a recognition that holiness only comes from being in union with Jesus Christ, who handed himself over and emptied himself completely, and so was raised from the dead. It’s an identification we are asked to make.

