

The Mystery of the Paschal Mystery^{*}

We hear a lot about the paschal mystery during Lent and Easter time. Those of us who listen to homilies, and especially those of us who deliver them, think we know what it's all about. But do we?

Most commonly, the paschal mystery is thought of as the death and resurrection of Christ—which is not wrong, but this thought does not get to the heart of the matter.

Mystery

The word “paschal” is not a problem. It comes from the Hebrew word *pesach*, which means passover. Jesus was put to death around the time of the Jewish feast of Passover. As we shall see, the paschal mystery is a sort of passing over.

The word “mystery” is a bit more of a challenge. Most of us think of a mystery as something that we don't understand. Who-done-it novels are called mysteries because we don't know until the end who committed the murder. Ask Christians for an example of a mystery, and they're likely to name the Trinity as something they don't understand but just take on faith.

This is not, however, how mystery—*mysterion* in Greek, *mysterium* in Latin—was thought of in the ancient world. Around the time when Jesus lived, a mystery was something that could not be put into words even though it was known through experience. In the so-called mystery religions, people participated in rituals that enabled them to have spiritual experiences that they could not fully explain.

Today, people also talk about the mystery of evil. Why do bad things happen to good people? It's a mystery, they say. But that's not really a mystery in the ancient sense of the term. That's really more like a problem, intellectual puzzle, something to be figured out with the mind. It would only be a mystery if it were something awful that happened to you, and you could not figure out why. You would be experiencing evil but not understanding it.

It has been said that the difference between a problem and a mystery is that a problem is something that you have, and a mystery is something that has you.

Not all mysteries are bad, however, not even most of them. Probably everyone's favorite mystery is the experience of falling in love. You can't make it happen. It just hits you. And when it does, love has you in its grip, and you can't shake it. It's a wonderful mystery, so much so that people have been writing poems and songs about it since the beginning of history. Because we never fully understand the mystery of love, the supply of love songs is endless.

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Easter

Every year, if we live in a place that has seasons, we experience the rebirth of life in the spring after the dormancy of winter. Ancient peoples noticed this as well, and most of them celebrated this mystery of the resurrection of life. In northern Europe, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring was Eastre, and in England this name was kept for the Christian feast of the resurrection. In most other places, the feast was named after Passover, for example, Pasqua in Italian and Pâques in French.²

Just as nature is reborn in the spring, as it were, life in general tends to reassert itself after death. People die, but life goes on. After a war or natural disaster, people put their lives back together. We lose something very precious to us and, after a period of sorrow and loss, we begin to find ways to live without it, and hope returns. For every door that closes, the saying goes, another one opens.

This cycle of death and rebirth is certainly a mystery, and it is certainly worth celebrating. But it is not a specifically Christian mystery. It is celebrated in many cultures and religions of the world.

Heroism

We get a little closer to the paschal mystery if we think about individuals who perform heroic deeds. Heroes—whether men or women—often risk their lives for other people. They do things that others cannot do for themselves. Because of this, heroes are frequently regarded as saviors.

Whether we think about the heroes of mythology (Hercules and the rest) or about comic book superheroes (Wonder Woman and the rest), we see the same pattern: individuals who put themselves at risk and do something altruistically, not for any reward but because it helps people. Robin Hood robs the rich and gives the money to the poor, the Magnificent Seven protect a little town against bad guys, and Erin Brockovich fights a corrupt corporation through the courts.

When we read or see stories of heroes in action, something inside us often wants to emulate them. We ourselves would like to do extraordinary deeds, but our everyday lives give us few opportunities to be heroes. Yet when disaster strikes, as on September 11, 2001, people find themselves rising to meet the challenges they see before them, sometimes paying the highest price as they try to save others.

Jesus was called a savior because in some ways he fit the hero pattern, giving his life so that others might live. Most often, however, heroes perform acts of violence in accomplishing their task—slaying the dragon, killing the villain, arresting the criminals, and so on. Jesus himself did not live a life of violence, however, nor did he exhort his followers to violence. Heroic action is close to the paschal mystery, but it is not the same.

Agape Love

Heroism, as we have seen, entails the exercise of one's abilities on behalf of others. Most often, the abilities involved are strength, stamina and other physical abilities, as well as courage in the face of danger. Jesus certainly exhibited courage when confronting the religious leaders who challenged him, and he did not try to escape the political consequences of his ministry. He chose to die rather than renounce his mission.

One mystery that Jesus preached, however, and the mystery that he lived all the time, was God's love—*agape* in the Greek that the New Testament was written in. This word is usually translated as “love,” but “love” in English is a feeling word (as in, “I loved that movie.”) and *agape* is more like an action word. It is better translated as “care” or “caring,” and in its verb form by such phrases as “care for,” “care about,” and “take care of.”

Thus, when Jesus exhorts his followers to “love” one another, what he is really saying is, “Take care of each other the way I have taken care of you.” He also said, in effect, “There is no greater act of caring than laying down one's life for a friend” (Jn 15:12-13).

The famous passage in 1 Corinthians 13 describing the qualities of love makes much more sense when we realize that Paul is speaking of caring about and caring for others. To paraphrase, “A caring person is someone who is patient and kind, not jealous, not boasting or conceited, not rude or selfish, not easily offended, and not resentful. Someone who is caring does not enjoy the failure of others, is happy when people tell the truth, and is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and put up with whatever comes along.”

Jesus

There is no doubt that Jesus was a caring person. He cared about the sick and the lame, the sorrowful and even the insane. He didn't care whether people were rich or poor, but he did care about whether they were honest and willing to turn their lives around if they needed to. He cared about social outcasts, and he didn't care about public opinion. He cared about doing what was right and doing good for others, even if it meant disregarding religious laws.

Jesus described God as a loving father. God cares for all of creation, even the most common birds, so if we have faith in that care, God will take care of us. It is not that God has tender feelings for us, as we might think when we hear it said that God loves us. God's love is *agape* love—the same kind of love that energized Jesus—and *agape* means caring.

Discipleship

In many ways, Jesus invited his listeners to care about and take care of others just as God took care of them. Such caring manifests itself in many ways. He told them to comfort the afflicted, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned, to be makers of peace, to forgive even their enemies (see Matthew 5 and 25).

Not everyone tried to put Jesus' words into action, but those who did were called his students. Jesus was called *rabbi*, which in Hebrew means a teacher. Those who listened were called *mathetes* in Greek, *discipulis* in Latin—from which we get the word “disciple” but it actually means a student.

Jesus the teacher did not have many students. Many people heard him speak, but only a few tried to practice what he preached. The gospels record the names of twelve men, but there were others as well, including Mary Magdalene and other women. After Jesus' death, however, their numbers grew, for people were attracted by the Jesus way of living. Followers of “The Way,” as it was originally called, were eventually referred to as “Christians.” (Acts 9:12; 11:26) They were filled with the spirit of God, the spirit of Christ, which they received after God raised Jesus from the dead.

Being a Christian means being a follower of Jesus, a student of his, putting into practice what he preached. Christians are called to be caring people, and to live lives of caring for others. He urged his listeners to invite God's caring spirit into their hearts, and he declared that whenever God's love rules their behavior, they are living under the reign of God, living in the kingdom of God.

Quiet Heroism

Such behavior can be called heroic when it stands out from the ordinary and provides us with a model to imitate. We can think of Father Damien and his caring for the lepers of Molokai. We can think of Mother Teresa and her caring for the dying in Calcutta. But we can also think of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, and her caring for the wounded in the Crimean War. And we can think of the police and firefighters caring about the people trapped in the burning World Trade Center.

Whether we imitate Jesus or other models of caring, when we begin to practice *agape* we begin to enter the paschal mystery. We may not do it to a heroic extent, but we still do it. In fact, caring people do it all the time.

Examples of the paschal mystery are all around us. It is lived by parents who get up in the middle of the night for a crying infant, by teenagers doing a service project for the elderly, by teachers working long hours to help their students, by social workers and nurses, and indeed by most people in what are sometimes called the helping professions. And indeed by anyone, whenever they give priority to the needs of others. This is not to say that they are always caring in the sense of practicing *agape*, but it is to say that whenever people practice *agape*, they are living the paschal mystery.

Passing Over

We human beings are naturally self-centered, even selfish at times. As children, we have to be taught to share, we have to learn to think about how others feel, and gradually we discover the reward of helping others. We pass over, as it were, from self-centeredness to caring. In biblical language, we die to ourselves so that others might live. Not all the time, but we do it nonetheless. Whenever we do it, we are letting God reign in our heart and we experience the paschal mystery.

Jesus taught that such self-giving is the secret of living a richly rewarding life. People naturally care about family and friends, he pointed out, but it is possible to go beyond that to care for strangers, and even to care about enemies. He himself cared for the sick and the outcast, and he invited those who would follow him to pass over from self-centeredness to caring as a way of life.

Jesus himself lived the paschal mystery, and so do we when we live the way he taught. We die to ourselves so that others might have more life, and in doing so we ourselves become more alive. Some people do this in heroic ways—and so may we, occasionally—but more often people do it in quiet ways, whenever they care about and care for others.

Celebrating

Living the paschal mystery ultimately means passing over into a life of giving life to others, and in doing so, receiving life more abundantly. But we also live the paschal mystery whenever we let go of our own concerns and show concern for others.

People sometimes comment that when they help others they feel good. Extending ourselves on behalf of others is often a rewarding experience. At the time when we are caring for someone we may not notice it, but in the long run it is deeply satisfying. We get a taste of heaven, as it were. Whenever we obey the Lord's command to do unto others as we would have them do unto us, we find ourselves in the kingdom of God.

This certainly is something to celebrate, and in fact Catholics do this in the Eucharist. At Mass we celebrate the paschal mystery, not just as something that Jesus lived but also as something that we as the body of Christ continue to experience. Jesus taught the secret of life, as it were, and if we are his disciples we have learned that secret and have put it into practice. In doing so, our lives have been enriched, and so we thank God for the many blessings that we have received from living this mystery.

We know, however, that we do not live the paschal mystery perfectly, so at the beginning of Mass we acknowledge our shortcomings, and in the Liturgy of the Word we are reminded of how we are supposed to live as Christians. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist we thank the Father for sending his Son to reveal the paschal mystery to us, and in receiving communion we acknowledge our unity with the dying and rising Christ.

We also celebrate this mystery in a special way during the Triduum—the liturgies of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil—for these stretch out for close inspection, as it were, the death and resurrection of Christ, and they invite us to enter more fully into the paschal mystery. For living this mystery is the secret of life, and it is certainly something to celebrate.