

A Word to the Clergy
for
Holy Tuesday 2020
from Bishop Alan Gates

As shared in our online gathering, Tuesday, April 7, 2020.

Good morning, my colleagues and friends. It is good to be gathered, even in this unaccustomed and virtual way. It is good to catch a glimpse of one another – and to affirm early in this week that we are making this year’s very strange Holy Week pilgrimage *together*.

Our deep thanks to our Dean, Amy McCreath, to her staff, and to the musicians, who have fashioned this brief time for us.

Our purpose this morning is not the sharing of information, which we are doing our best to do through our periodic communiqués and the regional Zoom gatherings. Rather, this morning is simply a brief opportunity for song, prayer, and a word of gratitude.

I do want to underscore the diocesan worship offerings forthcoming: The liturgy for Maundy Thursday, from the Society of St. John the Evangelist, with a sermon from the Superior, Brother James Koester; worship for Good Friday, from the Sisters of St. Margaret, with a sermon from Bishop Suffragan Gayle Harris; and worship for Easter Day, from our Cathedral Church of St. Paul, with a sermon from your Bishop Diocesan. These pre-recorded liturgies will be posted to the diocesan website on the morning of each respective holy day. We hope they will be a blessing.

I want to urge you – especially the parish clergy - if you have not done so already, to develop contingency plans for the possibility of yourself becoming ill. Please consult with your colleagues so that everyone will know how your parochial responsibilities – pastoral, liturgical, and organizational – will be handed off for a time should you be unable to carry out your duties for a time. Scrambling for coverage while feeling ill is nothing anyone wants. Do this now as yet another way of “bearing one another’s burdens.”

Speaking of support systems, I want to express my gratitude not only for the work that you all have been doing so faithfully – but also, gratitude to your companions and supporters – whoever they are. Friends, colleagues, the sympathetic voice on the phone; families, near and far. If you have a spouse and/or children in the house with you, then Tricia joins me in extending a special prayer of gratitude to them. We know quite well that when your home gets turned into the substitute parish office – with calls and Zoom meetings and intense work all day long – this represents a sacrifice of boundaries and time for them as well. We send our blessing.

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Holy Week is a spiritual and liturgical “thin place;” vocationally it is at once both exhilarating and altogether fatiguing. This strange combination makes for a very tender time at our Holy Tuesday gatherings – and I am sad to miss it.

I have experienced both my greatest vocational purpose and fulfillment, and my greatest vocational inadequacy and exhaustion in parish observances of Holy Week. I suppose this might be considered ironic.

But then, irony and paradox are prominent features of Holy Week, aren't they. There's the irony that the same crowd shouts “Hosanna!” on Sunday, and “Crucify him!” on Friday. There's the irony of Judas' betrayal setting in motion an act of cosmic redemption. The Grand Salvific Irony is affirmed in John's Gospel: *Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* [Jn 12:24-25]

Dr. Emilie Townes, dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, suggests that as people of faith, we are acquainted with irony. She suggests this can help equip us for such times as this pandemic crisis. “The paradox of our particular moment is impossible to deny,” she writes. “To save each other, and to save ourselves, we must unite in a shared commitment to separation. Forgo touch. Keep our distance. Hunker down. “There's an irony there,” Townes says, “and folks who don't appreciate irony, which is one of the things that deep faith teaches us, have a hard time, I think.”ⁱ

This Christian embrace of irony is related to a piece in this morning's *Times* citing the psychological benefits of what it calls “tragic optimism” – the capacity to find small points of light, which give us hope even in crisis. So, paradoxically, we are uniting ... by staying apart. And we are finding deep nourishment by our sustained fast.

Here are three things I want to say to you, each of them touching in some way upon the matter of paradox.

- 1) Clergy are often expected, in both administrative and pastoral situations, to be problem solvers. There are plenty of problems to be solved. But “creative response” is one thing, and “fixing things” is another thing altogether. Do your best, by God's grace, to be an agent of creative response. But do not expect to Fix Things. You will not, because you cannot.
- 2) Similarly, as leaders, you will be called upon to have a lot of answers. Paradoxically, a leader who is honest about not having the answers is much more reassuring than the one who makes up nonsense. Do your best, by God's grace, to discover answers with your wisest companions. But do not expect to have a lot of Answers, because you don't.
- 3) Finally, abandon perfectionism. One of your deanery deans said, during our last group conversation, “The clergy are afraid that we are going to do this

wrong.” Well, why wouldn’t you? We are doing things we were never trained to do, in a context no living person has experienced before. As Barbara Harris reminded us so often: Our goal is not success; our goal is faithfulness. I know that you will be faithful, because I know that you are faithful.

Here we are in Holy Week, when we see that our Savior Jesus Christ solved problems, dispensed answers, and modeled perfectionism. Right? Well, no. Here we are in Holy Week, when Jesus shared burdens, eschewed bombast, and embodied vulnerability.

Dear friends in Christ, in these days of wilderness journey, I bid you once again: Keep it simple. Focus on what matters most. Pace yourself for the long haul. Be patient with yourself and with one another. Find those moments, even now, to share some joy and laughter. Be genuine. Be generous. Be grateful. Love one another. Spare a word to the lonely. Contribute to the neediest among us. And say your prayers.

In the words of St. Paul, *“I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”* [Ephesians 1:16]

ⁱ Emilie Townes, “Living with Irony,” in **The Lily**, v. 4, issue 27, published online by The Washington Post.