

GOOD FRIDAY

The 6th century hymn, 'The Royal Banners forward go' (122 CP) addresses Jesus' cross in the words, "O Tree of Glory, tree most fair," and a verse in the 20th century hymn, 'Lift High the Cross,' says, "O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree." Why is the Cross described as a tree and is this significant?

The Book of Deuteronomy (21:23) records a curse being called down on anyone who hangs themselves (like Judas), or anyone who was executed. It says, "Cursed is he who hangs on the tree. In London, the gallows at Tyburn where many English martyrs met their gruesome fate was described as the Tyburn tree.

On the hill of Calvary there were three trees – three crosses on which three men were hung. In his CD entitled, "The Jewish Roots of Holy Week," Brent Pitre asks the question why St Mark's gospel records that on the Monday of Holy Week Jesus curses the fig tree (Mk 11:12-14; 20-25.) Normally this event is interpreted as a lesson in faith, but Pitre says that Jewish Traditions at the time point to a deeper meaning.

He says we have to go back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In that Garden we read of two trees. One was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and that is thought of as an apple tree although the word translated as 'apple' is the generic word for any fruit. In Jewish Tradition this tree was a fig tree, and if you remember when Adam and Eve realised they were naked after they had eaten the forbidden fruit, they sewed fig leaves to cover themselves.

On the Monday following Palm Sunday, Jesus curses the fig tree and says to it, "May no-one ever eat fruit from you again." Jesus is indicating that he will defeat the curse that God imposed on Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The curse involved them being barred from Garden in case they ate of the fruit of the Tree of Life. So Jesus curses the curse of the Fig Tree and access to the Tree of Life will soon be restored.

Three days later, immediately after the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples go to another Garden – the Garden of Gethsemane which is an olive grove. Again, according to Jewish Tradition, the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden was an olive tree. When Noah sent out the dove after the Flood to see if the water had subsided, the dove returned with an olive branch – a sign of new life and new beginnings. The Church blesses olive oil during the Chrism mass in Holy Week to be used for anointing at baptism, ordination, confirmation and healing.

In the Passion of Jesus two trees are significant – the fig tree, the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Olive Tree, the Tree of Life. Jesus brings a third tree, the Tree of the Cross which stands between the other two trees on which the two thieves were hung. Jesus' arms are outstretched to grasp the evil in one hand and life in the other. Through Jesus' self-offering, Evil and Death are destroyed and Life and Freedom are restored.

“When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left.” (Lk 23:32) “One of the criminals railed at him saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”” (Lk 23:39). The other said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom” (Lk 23:42).

The two thieves had a choice as we all have a choice. The penitent thief chooses Life and his cross becomes the Tree of Life. The unrepentant thief rejects Christ, so his tree becomes the tree of Evil

The choice is Life or Death. When Moses addressed his people before they entered to Promised Land, he said to them, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse: therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.

Shortly the cross of Jesus will be adored. In your hearts and minds approach and reverence the most glorious tree on which our Lord was hung. Beside him there are two other crosses. In your adoration, make your choice for life or death. Jesus invites you to gaze on him and choose Life because the gateway to the Garden of Eden has been opened and paradise restored.

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