

## UNDER PRESSURE

Today begins what's known in traditional Church circles as "the Triduum." Related to the Latin word for "three," "the Triduum" refers to the great three days of the Christian faith—Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the celebration of Easter from sunset on Saturday until sunset on Sunday. In these three days, it's long been held one finds the heart and soul of the Christian faith. One can hear this in the creed "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ shall come again." The only part of that formulation we don't have in the Triduum is "Christ shall come again." And we don't have to wait very long for this missing element to appear since it shows up towards the end of the Easter season on Ascension Day. In the Triduum, the three-day festival that begins tonight, we've got the nuts and bolts of our faith. We are first and foremost a movement or a people who preach and teach Christ crucified and risen. But there's a part of this good news, a part of this gospel, that we perhaps don't appreciate as much as we should.

When God raises Jesus from the dead, God is passing judgment on all who have opposed or rejected his Son. When God raises Jesus from the dead, God validates or vindicates everything Jesus has said and done prior to the grave. This Jesus, God says, has a mission for our lives together and for our lives apart. Pontius Pilate and Rome, the superpower of the time, might have thought they had a better blueprint for life, but God did not. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he forever said, "This is the guy. Listen to him. He's got a mission for you and it's in your best interests to make it your own." And already tonight we begin to look forward to this vindication and validation of Jesus' mission for our lives on the part of God.

That Jesus has a mission for our lives, a mission that God shall soon uphold through the resurrection, is embedded in the name for this celebration. "Maundy," as in "Maundy Thursday," is derived from the Latin word "mandatum;" responsible for our own closely related word "mandate." And on Maundy Thursday, Jesus definitely hands down some mandates; in the process giving us his mission for our lives in the simplest form possible. There's the mandate to wash one another's feet, the mandate to celebrate holy communion, and the mandate to love one another as he has first loved us. Tonight, Jesus gives us our marching orders, and again, through the resurrection in a couple of days God shall forever endorse these marching orders; making them our mission. One might say that Jesus tonight begins to pressure us to act and to live a certain way and on Easter God ups the pressure even more. It's a sequence which may not sit very well with us because we're already under a lot of pressure. Under a lot of

pressure as it is, tonight and throughout the weekend we may just want a Savior named Jesus and not a Lord named Jesus. If this is where we're at, it's somewhat understandable as to why we would be.

Just think of the pressure with which we're already contending. For over a year now, the pandemic has added worries to what we were already worried about. We've been under the pressure to keep ourselves and others alive. We've been under the pressure to remain attentive to little things like handwashing and how long we stay in close quarters without a mask and we don't know when all this is going to lighten up. And pandemic pressure isn't our only pressure.

Prior to the pandemic there was already another epidemic under way—the opioid epidemic. Here in Johnstown and up in Centre County I've seen and felt how addiction has pressured people to do all that they can to save a loved one before it's too late and worried and worried that they won't succeed in this endeavor. Think also about increased life expectancies. Even with the numbers dropping during this year of the plague, we know that modern medicine has been enabling people to live longer and longer. This allows us to enjoy those we love more, but it also increases the pressure to take care of them as they age and grow frailer. I know a lot of people who have been contending with this kind of pressure too. And then there are the young families working two or more jobs and ferrying their children around to an ever-growing list of activities. This too becomes a pressure cooker. And to top it all off, there's the pressure of the everyday, rat race itself. The pressure of just trying to be a good person who does good things at work, at home, and out in the community. Given all the pressure we're already under, it would be understandable if we let out a sigh when Jesus begins to pressure us himself this evening, with God the Father following suit through the resurrection. We might say or think, "Back off. Ease up. Stop piling on. Give me a break. Lay off. I thought you said your yoke was easy and your burden light." If they exist, now or later, how might we offset such feelings so we can get around to doing what our Lord Jesus would have us do?

Well, let's start with the promise I've referenced. The one where Jesus says, "Come to me all you who are weak and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light." This is a favorite at funerals; sometimes being heard as an invitation for the weak and heavy-laden to enter the Church Triumphant. I think we can hear it in this way and am glad we can. But it's also important to recognize that it's a promise also meant for the living and the healthy and I don't think it's point for people like us is that Jesus is going to be lax and undemanding. This is, after all, the guy who elsewhere describes discipleship

as the process of denying ourselves, taking up our respective crosses, and following after the one who was abused, nailed to a tree, and stuck with a spear. That doesn't sound too light or easy. It sounds pretty demanding. But you know what! Sometimes, the end result more than justifies the work involved and I'd suggest this captures a good bit of what Jesus was trying to say when he described his yoke as easy and his burden as light.

With Jesus as our Lord, there shall be no bait and switch. With Jesus as our Lord, there shall be no fine print we discover later much to our chagrin. Do it Jesus' way and things will work for our benefit. Period. Period. Period. This is why Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. The rewards more than justify the cost of discipleship. And this does accord quite nicely with what Lutherans have said God is after when he turns up the pressure in our lives. We've said that when God turns up the pressure it's because God is worried the other pressures of life are going to lead us to miss out on the abundant and much superior life we can have in him. We've said when God turns up the pressure it's to drive us away from death and towards life; with Jesus being the source of that life both now and later. In Jesus, we've said, we don't have a Lord who piles it on just to pile it on. We've said that in Jesus we have a Lord who died for us and whose past and present goal for us is the best possible life we can have both now and later.

And so, with the benefits far outweighing the costs, with our Lord always having the best, possible life for us in mind, let's serve one another, even if it might not involve foot washing itself. Serving one another, keeping our pride and ego in check, will get us in the habit of keeping this community and its needs first; which is how we love one another as Christ first loved us. And finally, let's also experience how Christ comes to love us anew each and every time we obey his command to celebrate holy communion. What we'll discover through this obedience to the mandates and the mission we receive tonight is that love, our love for another and Christ's eternal love for us, is what leads us away from death and towards life; making the pressure to love a pressure we should never ignore. And so, as St. John the author of tonight's gospel puts it in the first epistle bearing his name, "Let's love, not in just word or speech, but in truth and action too." Though heavy at times, the rewards of love shall eventually make it feel as easy and light as Jesus has promised his yoke and burden will be. Amen!