

Good Friday 2016

“March 25th: The Most Important Day in History”

Today is a day of significance not only because it is Good Friday but also the Feast of the Annunciation. This double commemoration reaffirms for us something at the very heart of Catholic Christianity. Catholic Christianity is an historical faith. We believe that God acted in history, is still acting in the present and will act in a decisive and final way in the future when Christ returns at the end of time.

Today in my homily, I want to focus on the significance of this date, March 25 so that we can affirm how God’s action in the past has implications for us in the present and therefore also gives us hope for the future.

So let’s think about the historical significance of this day. Tertullian who lived from around 150-207 and was an African ecclesiastical authority writes of a well known tradition in the Church of the second century. That is that not only was March 25th the celebration of the Annunciation it was also the date that Christ was crucified. Because of this association between the Annunciation and Good Friday, in Gaul, up to the sixth century, this was kept as the immovable date for the Easter Triduum (Maundy Thursday – Holy Saturday). So that the days come together today is very significant.

Now keep this association between the Annunciation and Good Friday in mind as I introduce another association with March 25 into what I am saying today. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam, the two hobbits who carry the ring to Mount Doom, where the ring is then destroyed, reach the Mountain Inferno on March 25th and it is on this date the Ring is destroyed.

What is the significance of the ring in this story? Tolkien, the author, makes it clear that the person who places himself within the golden circle of the Ring seeks not to be seen, and thereby wants to have power over others. Whenever the ring is put on, the person becomes invisible to others. Through the magic power of the Ring the wearer escapes the limitations of matter to enter the world of spiritual forces, but in the very act of doing so he becomes horribly visible to the forces of evil. In fact the Ring is partly a symbol of the sin of pride. It draws us towards the Dark Lord by tempting us to become like him. Its circular shape is an image of the will closed in upon itself. Its empty centre, suggests the void into which we thrust ourselves by using the Ring. Becoming invisible also means becoming untouchable by light; and since it is only light that allows us to be seen by others, wearing the Ring also cuts us off from human contact and relationship: it takes us, ultimately, into a world where we are alone with the Eye. In that world of evil there is no room for two wills: the wearer is either absorbed and destroyed, or he defeats Sauron and becomes another Dark Lord himself.”

In the “*Lord of the Rings*,” the Ring is destroyed on March 25. “This is mentioned in passing by Gandalf in a conversation with Sam. In the chapter “*The Field of Cormallen*” Gandalf tells Sam:

"But in Gondor the New Year will always now begin upon the twenty-fifth of March when Sauron fell, and when you were brought out of the fire to the King."

Its importance is also reinforced because it is the beginning of the New Year in Gondor when Aragorn, the true King begins his reign. March 25th is also the birth-date of Sam and Rosie's first child, 'a date that Sam noted.'

In the 'Catholic' world, 25th March is the Feast of the Annunciation: which is to say the moment of the Incarnation, when God indeed did at last take flesh in Mary's womb.

"Why was the ring so appropriately destroyed or 'unmade' on 25th March? Because of what this date says about Mary. She exercised her will in a way that is the exact opposite to the surrender of the will that happens to the wearer of the ring.

Now contrast the power of the Ring and its destructive force that leads to total self absorption with the Feast of the Annunciation.

March 25 represents Our Lady's "Yes" to the invitation to obey the will of God for the Incarnation. The incarnation of God is the death of sin, and of death. The Ring "represents the essence of sin, going right back to the sin of Adam, which ... led him to try to become invisible by hiding from God in the forest of Eden. The reason the Ring's destruction is linked in Tolkien's chronology to the Annunciation is simply that Mary's 'yes' to God's will, when it was expressed to her by the Angel, is the exact reversal of the creature's will to usurp power for itself. This was the moment in which Christ was conceived, and so it is the moment when the true King enters the world. As we join this date with the crucifixion, then it becomes even more appropriate, for this was the day of the Devil's overthrow, when Death was cast down from his throne by the sacrifice of Christ.

"If the Ring represents Sin, then we would expect that its destruction would be impossible without the help of divine grace, and that is indeed what we find in "The Lord of the Rings." Tolkien's Catholic genius therefore reveals itself in a final twist of the plot. On the very brink of success, his free will having taken him as far as it can, Frodo renounces the Quest and claims the Ring for his own. His ability to cast it away has been eroded by the task of bearing it to Mount Doom. His very assertion of ownership over the Ring signifies the loss of his self-possession, and the words he uses express this: he says, 'I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine.' Note that he does not say, 'I choose... I do,' but rather 'I do not choose... I will not do.' Frodo is, of course, saved by an apparent accident, for Gollum bites the Ring from his finger and falls into the Fire. This is in fact the consequence of Frodo's earlier (and freer) decision to spare Gollum's life. 'But at this point,' Tolkien writes in the Letters, the "salvation" of the world and Frodo's own "salvation" is achieved by his previous pity and forgiveness of injury.' Thus in the end it is not Frodo who saves Middle Earth at all, nor Gollum. It can only be God himself, working through the love and freedom of his creatures. The scene is a triumph of Providence over Fate, but also a triumph of Mercy, in which free will, supported by grace, is fully vindicated."

Here is the picture I want to leave with you this on this Good Friday. We live in a world where the power of sin is such that it destroys the lives of many through its willful self-centredness. And yet God has acted in history, most especially on this day March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation and Good Friday to overcome the power of sin. Such a power is overcome by Mary's yes to God and the Son's merciful sacrificial love that takes him all the way to the Cross. Obedience and merciful sacrifice were the ways sin was countered all of those centuries ago and it is still the way we counter the self absorption of sin in the present. As with Mary we learn to say "I am the Lord's servant may it be unto me according to thy word" and act with mercy, we access that power which is aligned to the Kingdom that is eternal, for it is the very power of God and his kingdom. This is a power which in the eyes of the world seems weak and ineffective but is in fact the way to life and liberation in the present while at the same time giving us hope for the future. For when Christ comes again the power of sin will be done away with forever and God will be all in all.

J.R.R. Tolkien understood this and wrote half a million words to express how March 25 is the most important day in History because on that day the Ring of Power was cast into the fires of hell and so destroyed.

Thanks be to God for such a story as the Lord of the Rings which is a retelling of the Greatest Story of all. The Redemption of the World by the most unlikely of characters. A teenage Jewish peasant girl living in the outskirts of the Roman Empire and her son Jesus, who carried the weight of sin all the way to Calvary.