APRIL 14, 1946

I greet you all, noble countrymen and countrywomen, with the words: Let Jesus Christ be praised.

 If the life of the Savior was one long, uninterrupted evidence of his power as God-man, the suffering of Christ beginning in the Garden of Olives and ending on Calvary is the solemn and undeniable evidence of God’s mercy. The point of the culmination of Christ’s earthly miracles and those deathly sufferings is the death of Christ the Savior. Having been nailed with large sharp nails to the gnarled and rough-hewn wood of the cross with his arms drawn across the arms of the cross and head crowned with thorns leaving raw wounds, he faced his death. His flesh torn with fever pulses and weakens. The heart of Christ is assaulted with blasphemies and insults. The Savior’s Soul feels totally abandoned. The Christ of love and mercy pays the price of redemption. The depth of that redemption must have been extremely great since it demanded such a payment, - the Son of God. Christ dies on the Place of the Skull with in this terrible way in a way that only the Son of God could die. If we bring to mind those last moments, if we examine the last human words, what a mixture that is of love and hatred, despair and expiation; how empty and without meaning the words found in the last good bye. The thief, going to the electric chair or about to be hung, threatens revenge; the murderer shakes from fear and fidgets like a maniac; the father yells in anger at his frightened children; the miser in despair curses his beloved treasures; the pagan prince directs his wife and slaves to be burnt alive with his remains; I hear the poet Goethe how absorbed in the dark moments before death cries out despairingly “open the window and let in more light.” I hear the words of Edward Gibbon, the historian-non-believer – “All is lost, without hope, finally lost!”

 The memory of the Savior’s suffering on the way of the cross, the remembrance of the fact that Christ gave his life to give us life eternal, fill the souls of the believers with faith and hope and that is why in the last moment they whisper: “ Jesus, my Jesus!” - A certain learned man at the hour of his death, said to his family: “All the bridges built by man are at this moment destroyed. There remains only the crossing of the Savior!” St. Bernard wrote: “In the Suffering of the Lord are hidden the treasures of salvation, true wisdom and preternatural knowledge that from the Suffering of the Lord flows the understanding that Christ’s Passion merits the great gift.”

FROM THE MOUNT OF OLIVES TO THE PLACE OF THE SKULL

 Before we approach the Mount of Olives it is worth to momentarily stand before one of Jerusalem’s gates. The Holy City glistens in the rays of the orbiting sun as it sets. The temple roof takes on a glowing color. The sun‘s rays are curiously transformed. They lose their brilliance and fade. In the blink of an eye the sun reddens. You would say that the Creator threw upon it some scarlet cope and turned it blood red. Perhaps that some sign some sort of prophecy which Providence plans for the future? But enough of musing.

 In the distance at the site of this scarlet rainbow a group slowly grows. In the distance a song is heard: “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord. Now the denizens of Jerusalem come out of their homes. It seems that all that lives hurries to meet Jesus, the Teacher, who adorns his teaching with miracles. Come kind of curious emotion overtakes these people who take off their cloaks and create a path; they break off palm branches and throw flowers at Jesus while singing: Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, King of Israel!” Take a closer look at the faces of the people. Their faces express joy and happiness, the lips in song. Unfortunately, these joyous shouts of thanksgiving turn into jeers, hatred and blasphemies. The palm laden “hosannas” turn into Friday’s shout: “Crucify Him! King of the Jews” – words of a banner place on the Cross on which he hung with thieves as a criminal. The “teacher” became the “revolutionary”. A good example for our lives - not to seek the approval of others. Let us not seek praise so easily or awards from our fellow human beings. Those who praised us one day may throw mud at us the next.

 The scene changes. It is Thursday. Yes. Holy Thursday. It is an evening hour. The streets are empty and silent. People go to rest. It is a star-studded night. The door of one of the homes opens and the Savior comes out in the company of Peter, John and James. The go to the top of Mount of Olives, where they find a garden. Christ goes alone to meditate and talk to the Father. The Evangelist tells us that Jesus became lonely and anxious. We need to remember that Jesus was not only the Son of God but also Son of man. And so he had two natures: God and man. His human nature feared suffering and wished to avoid it. During his prayer, it is said that he saw in his inner mind the sins of the whole world, of all people. In addition he visualized the place of his passion, the instruments of his suffering, his judges and his executioners. He also saw the scenes of his betrayal, denial, and abandonment. Is it no wonder that He underwent fear and sweated blood? It is no wonder that in the depth of his soul, he uttered,
“My soul is sad unto death.” But He accepted the bitter chalice with pain and prayed, “Father, not my will but thine be done.” And with one gulp he emptied the chalice.

 On the road leading to Jerusalem through Cedron to the Olive Garden cruise a gang amist laughter and shouts. By lantern light whipping instruments may be seen. Leading the group is the Apostle, the traitor and seller who greats his Teacher with “a kiss.” – “Greetings, Master” and giving the signal to his cohorts, he gives Jesus a kiss. Jesus knowing what Judas is up to, asks, “What is it that you want?” The traitor lowers his head in silence. Looking at the group, Christ asks, “Whom do you seek?” “Jesus of Nazareth,” they cry out. “I am he,” Jesus answers calmly. On hearing this, it seemed like lightning hit the group. They backed away and fell to the ground. In this scene Christ shows divine mercy and His might. When the group came back to consciousness they “threw themselves upon him and captured him.” They tied Him up and threw a chain around his neck and arrested him.

 From the palace of Caiaphas come loud and sharp words. The Jewish Elders sit in the judgment seats. Caiaphas takes the leadership role. They wait for Christ, the Christ of whom they said, ”Unless we stop him, all will believe in him.” Finally, the doors open and the soldiers push Jesus into the room. The process begins. The judge forgets his role in the process and becomes the accuser, and asks, “Are you the Christ, the son of God.” Jesus gently replies, “I am.” The answer surprised those listening. What Jesus had said, they regarded as blasphemy. Those present added: “He deserves death.” They decided to imprison him in a damp underground cell. Caiaphas shouted, “Blasphemer!” They blindfolded him and pushed him and punched him shouting, “Guess!” The sun is setting. There is an unusual disturbance outside. The elders congregate. Christ, accompanied by guards proceed to the palace of Pontius Pilate. Pilate comes out on the portico and asks about the charges against Christ. “This man is making waves, doesn’t pay his taxes, and claims he is a king.” Pilate does not believe the crowd but asks Christ: “Are you the king of the Jews? Jesus replies: “My kingdom is not of this world. I came into this world to give testimony to the truth.” Pilate threw up his arms: “What is the truth?” Pilate looks out at the angry faces of the mob and said with disdain: “I find no fault in this man!” When the crowd told Pilate that Christ is a Galilean, Pilate send Christ to the leaders in Galilee, to Herod. John had had St. John beheaded. Herod heard much about this Teacher and thought that he would perform some sort of miracle for him. Jesus however stood before humbly before Herod but didn’t perform any kind of miracle and didn’t speak. Herod dressed him in a white robe as a sign of disdain and sent him back to Herod. There was a tradition at that time to release one of the more important prisoners. At time, Barabbas, a thief and a revolutionary was in prison. Pilate convinced of the innocence of Jesus, and wishing to release him, asked the crowd who was to be released Jesus or Barabbas? Surprised, he heard the crowd yell, “Barabbas!!!” “What is he guilty of? Pilate asks. The crowd exclaims, “Crucify Him!” In other words “What should I do with Jesus,” Herod asks. “Crucify Him.” Herod then gives Jesus to be flogged. And he said to himself, “When they see him flogged perhaps in their mercy they will ask for Jesus’ release.” Without further ado, Herod tells the guards to escorted Jesus outside the palace walls. A short pillar stood there. Pilate picked out six men. The tied Christ to the pillar with a belt and rope. Christ stood slumped at the pillar. Three groups of men stood by, each group replacing those who went before them. Christ’s flesh was scarred and blooded, and the flesh black and blue. His bones were countable. He looked more like an “insect” rather than a man.

 They not only flogged Christ but crowned his head with thorns. Pilate presented Christ to the crowd who harbored no mercy for Him. They jeered and laughed at Him. They shouted while jeering him, “Hail, King of the Jews. The sight of his bloodied body made no impression of them. They only shouted, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him.” Despite the fact that Pilate “found no fault in him,” feared and washed his hands of the whole affair. He wrote the death sentence. They brought in two thieves to be crucified with him who were sentenced to death. The Captain of the Horse Guard organizes the parade to the cross. They place crosses on the shoulders of the accused. Other soldiers carry with them the instruments for the crucifixion and other items of the sentencing, ladders, nails, hammers. Others carry the banner with the name and crime description. When the cortege exited the courtyard, they were surrounded by curious people; one has to remembered that Jews from the surrounding territories came to celebrate the Holy Days. All had heard of the teaching and the miracles of Him who called himself the Son of God, and now had to die a death by the hands of blasphemers and revolutionaries. So the locals as well as guests grouped together and walked along the guards and the soldiers, to see this unusual spectacle in minute detail.

The road to Calvary is not long – about three thousand steps – but it was difficult and bloody, because of what preceded. The bloody sweat in the Olive Garden, Christ’s betrayal and seizure, the humbling arrest, the journey through the courts, the flogging, crowning with thorns, and finally the humiliating verdict of death drained Christ of energy. After the Last Supper He had nothing to eat or drink. The pain of the bruised shoulders from carrying the cross and the thorn ripped head devastated his flesh. The heavy and long cross deepened his wounds. In addition, the behavior of the jeering crowd of soldiers and the populace which had earlier shouted “Hosanna” ultimately robbed him of any strength that he had had. His countenance was mixed with blood and sweat; his bloodied eyes mixed them together and when dried irritated his skin. He stepped slowly quietly not with anger of vengeance but with forgiveness for those who made him suffer. Up to the last moment he moved on not thinking of self but of those whom he was saving. Listen to His words as he spoke to the women who accompanied the procession and wept. “Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me but for yourselves and for your sons.” One of the women wiped the bloodied face of Jesus with her kerchief. Christ looked mercifully at the lady in thanks leaving an impression of his face on the cloth. One of the soldiers, in an attempt to move him on, pushed him violently which made him fall to the ground. The cavalcade stopped. Christ lay without moving. The leader of the cavalcade turned his horse and went to the scene. He said that Christ had to be helped because he had not much energy left. No one volunteered. However, Simon from a distant city was passing by with his two sons. He stopped and looked mercifully at the fallen Christ. The soldiers had him help Christ carry the cross to the spot of the execution. On the left the mount rose; on the right was the garden of Joseph from Cyrene. This was Calvary. The way was even more difficult. The soldiers had not figured where the three figures would be crucified and so arguments arose. In the meantime, the Savior with heavy looks wished to take his followers in his arms like an eagle spreads his newborn under his wings. In response the populace who wished his death. Wherever He glanced he saw that people came to see him put to death. Who knows what was in the Savior’s mind and heart. Hence, His words: “People my people what have I done to you, what am I guilty of? The soldiers were occupied in erecting the crosses; other digging the holes. The Crucifixions were so painful and terrible that the Romans tried to assuage them. To do that they gave the sufferers some strong wine mixed with myrrh. The Savior had just enough strength to sip it from the chalice. He bent His head. The solders that took to executing the sentence. They divided his clothes and asked him to lie down on the cross. The nailing to the cross is bloody and emotionally disturbing. It is fearful just looking at the process. There is no purpose in a long description. The deed is done. The Savior is emptied, crucified. Blood oozes from the thorn crowned forehead crown amd from his hands and feet. The flesh twitches and utterances come from the lips. The eyes are turned towards heaven. The soldiers dragged cross on which the Savior was nailed and placed it in the designated hole, some held it while others secured it with soil and stones so that it would not move. Then they threw dice to determine who would take the Savior’s clothes. Shouts rang out, “He saved others, let him now save himself if he is the Christ chosen by God…if you are the Son of God then step down from the cross.” The Lord heard all of this and suffered without complaint. Pain became something living. A sharp penetrating pain shook the body in every member as well as soul and heart. The wounds on the back from the scourging at the pillar burned with pain and the fingers were glued to the wood of the cross with encrusted blood. It was difficult to raise the head because the gravity pushed it down. The inner body was gripped in fever; the tongue stuck to the pallet. Not a single nerve lacked pain; the entire body was in pain. From the bottom of the feet to the top of the head, not an organ of the body was healthy. He felt the bitterness of the crowd, the crowd which he fed and healed. His heart shuttered with the thanklessness of the crowd. Hanging above the earth, he felt alone and powerless and abandoned, the weakened voice murmured, “God, my God, why have you abandoned me.” The utterances were left unanswered. The calls to heaven were rfuitless, the insults were merciless; they wounded his heart. Minutes and hours dragged on eternally. The sufferings grew, cruel sufferings. God the Father remained silent in the eternal plan. Nature, however, took over the horror. Just past noon, the day began to fade The day began to fade away as if from fear and anticipation. The sun, even though there was not a cloud in the sky, began to lose its brightness. A deep silence occurred in the crowd. Hundreds began to separate themselves from the crowd and viewing with fear at the crucified on the middle cross, they fled to the direction of the city. A guard of soldiers remained at the scene, together with those who had an animosity toward Jesus, an a few weeping persons. The third hour beckoned. A bright cloud drifted over Calvary, creating an uncommon atmosphere. A lofty cross and on it the blanched flesh as white as snow. The chest was pushed up as with a deep breath. The rest of the flesh limped forth, the legs swollen. The arms were extended beyond their normal capacity and contorted by the pain. The fingers were skewed around the nail wounds which were covered with dry blood. The head, half-bowed, the eyes wide open, never looking and never capable of sight. The entire countenance, especially the nose, was indicative or unspeakable pains prophesying death. The lips quiver and utter in great weakness, “Father, into your hands, I surrender my spirit.” Come with me to Calvary. Stand with me underneath the cross, those perhaps who have suffered long in your life and you who perhaps not long ago, buried a loved one and you whose father, husband or son rest s not far away in a foreign land, look upon the cross. Does the sight compel you to say, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Go with me to the foot of the cross. You, the saddened, the hated, you the discouraged, and you the persecuted. Looking at the crucified Savior, I remind you gently: there is no life without suffering. Or as Szymanowicz wrote: “joy follows sadness; festivities follow the funeral!” And God knows what is best, what is for us most useful. Perhaps He is testing us; perhaps he wishes to be an aid to our souls. Out temporary sufferings are registered to be paid in percentages. And so we all should say, “You will be done, Lord on earth as it is in heaven.” Today, tomorrow and into eternity.