

PASSIONTIDE

Passiontide, the last two weeks of Lent, is a period of special preparation for Easter, a mini season in its own right which, in its observance, is older even than the Church's observance of Lent. It is an echo of the Jewish fourteen-day preparation for the Passover, from the beginning of the month until, 'On the fourteenth day of the first month, towards evening, will be the Passover of the Lord' (Ex 12:6; Lev 23:5).

To focus more sharply on the sufferings of Christ, all glorious and highly coloured objects of devotion — statues, paintings and the like — are veiled in sombre, penitential purple. It is as if the saints themselves cannot bare to look upon what is just about to happen. But in that case, why cover crucifixes? Surely we should at least be able to gaze on the crucified Christ at this time of the year, shouldn't we?

The Gospel for today was, for centuries (and still is in the Traditional Latin Mass), an account of a confrontation between Our Lord and the Pharisees. Our Lord declares that 'Abraham, your father, rejoiced that he might see my day.' The Pharisees retort 'Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?' Then, stunning the Pharisees with His reply, Our Lord proclaims, 'Before Abraham was, I AM' (Jn 8:58). Our Lord, by using the holy name of God too sacred to be pronounced, proclaims Himself Divine. The Pharisees are outraged, and prepare to stone Him for blasphemy. However, the Gospel passage concludes, 'But Jesus *hid Himself*, and went out of the temple' (v.59).

At Christmas, we celebrate the Incarnation when, having emptied Himself of the trappings of Divine glory (Phil 2:6-7), Our Lord's divinity is hidden from our eyes (with just one brief glimpse of it on the Mount of Transfiguration). Now, beaten and scourged, tortured and crucified, He appears to us as one 'marred... beyond human semblance' (Is 52:14). In other words, in Passiontide, even His humanity seems to be hidden from us as well.

Of course, Our Lord is no more hidden from us than the Father is from the Son on Calvary even though, in His humanity, Our Lord *feels* that the Father is hidden from Him when He cries out, 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34).

So, to mark this passage in the Gospel when Our Lord hid Himself, and to whet our appetite, as it were, for the now hidden Christ, even crucifixes are covered during this mini season.