

TENEBRAE SERVICE

Betrayal forms the central theme of the Gospels during the early part of Holy Week. Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus mirrors the creation's betrayal of the Creator, known most particularly in our own sins. The implications of all these layers of sin and betrayal are expressed most fully in the Tenebrae service.

In the Middle Ages, the Tenebrae service was held at midnight before Holy Thursday. More recently, Tenebrae services have moved back to the evening, and sometimes now at 3 pm, on Wednesday of Holy Week. Consider adding Tenebrae to your Triduum services during Holy Week.

Tenebrae comes from the Latin, which means shadows or darkness. This service provides a foreshadowing of Good Friday. A Tenebrae hearse, a triangle of candles, is placed in the front of the church. A series of penitential psalms, passages from Lamentations and songs are read/sung to recreate the passion of Our Lord. After each Scripture a candle is extinguished.



Eventually all the lights are out, and a loud crashing sound emerges. These symbolize Christ's death, and the darkness and earthquakes that followed. Eventually one candle is relit at the top of the Tenebrae hearse, called the Christ light, to symbolize hope in the resurrection. The service ends unfinished, because the passion is not finished until Easter morning. Worshippers exit a dark church, haunted by shadows and discordant strains.

This service foreshadows what will come in the Triduum, and the service prepares us for the haunting implications of how sin betrays creation. The story of Judas Iscariot betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver forms merely the foreground story. The larger story follows the history of sin's betrayal before our Creator. We have marred His hopes for us, by the history of human sin, complemented by our individual sins.

The full consequence of our sin is the rejection of God. If Jesus is the light, then our rejection of Him leaves us in utter darkness. After the Tenebrae service we are shown the consequences of sin's rejection of the Creator. Instead of light there is darkness. Instead of truth there are shadows. Instead of harmony with God we have discord.

The rest of the Triduum shows us the way back: through the Eucharist, Christ's suffering on the Cross, to his triumph on the Cross through the Resurrection. Likewise, we move from the darkness of Tenebrae to the light of Easter morning, from despair to hope, from death to everlasting light, from the absence of God to the fullness of His Glory.