

Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday) – Year B

Holy Week, the most solemn week of the Church's calendar, begins with Passion or Palm Sunday. On this day we recall and celebrate Christ's entry into Jerusalem, an event that sets in motion the accomplishment of the paschal mystery, i.e. the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Luke 19:28-40 The procession of palms re-enacts the occasion when Jesus entered Jerusalem and was recognised by his followers as the one who came in the name of the Lord as Messiah and king. The reading from the gospel of Luke before the procession tells the story of the disciples taking the colt to Jesus. The earliest Christians saw in this event a fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9) which reads: 'Behold, your king comes to you; triumphant and glorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey.' Strictly speaking the king should come mounted on a war-horse or a noble stallion that would reflect the triumph of the conqueror. In this case the king is a king of peace and his peaceful intentions are represented by the choice, not of a horse, not even of a donkey, but of the humble foal of a donkey on which to ride. This contrasts with Pontius Pilate who is arriving at the other side of Jerusalem in military procession with a show of power in order to exercise crowd control during the festival of Passover.

Some Pharisees looking on think that the disciples of Jesus are going overboard in their enthusiastic acknowledgement of Jesus as king. But Jesus responds to their protest by pointing out that the truth cannot be suppressed.

Isaiah 50:4-7 The first reading in the Mass of today comes from the book of Isaiah and is the third of the so-called suffering servant songs. It tells of the experience of the prophet who speaks on God's behalf but is not acknowledged by the people. In fact, he is given a hard time by those who oppose him, who refuse to accept that he is from God. The servant did not turn away from God even though he was persecuted for his loyalty. Instead, he put up with insult and injury confident in the assurance that God would vindicate him in the end.

Even though this passage refers to the prophetic figure undergoing rejection and, like so many of the Lenten readings from the book of Isaiah, was written while the people of Jerusalem were in exile in Babylon (587-539 B.C.), it has an uncanny application to the sufferings that Jesus endured in the twenty-four hours before he died. This text and others like it had been used in the prayer of Judaism for four hundred years before Christ, but to the disciples of Jesus, who saw their master arrested, publicly mocked and physically, emotionally and sexually abused before being crucified, these words of the Scriptures rang true as prophecy fulfilled.

Psalms 21/22 The responsorial psalm continues the sentiments of the suffering servant who feels abandoned by God in the face of persecution, abuse and ridicule. In fact, this psalm begins on a note of near despair, but then traces a whole spiritual journey to confidence and hope in the Presence.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus

Philippians 2:6-11 In one sense it is a pity that this reading from St Paul to the Christians in Philippi does not include the previous verse: 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.' Paul, after all, is encouraging the Philippians to reflect on the way Jesus humbled himself to take on the condition of a slave and submit to torture and death in carrying out God's will. Paul is urging Christians to follow the example of Jesus Christ and live in unity, in a spirit of obedience to God and service of one another. Jesus, himself said that he had come not to be served but to serve, 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27) and it is clear that Jesus saw most of his mission in terms of service. This, of course, will become apparent on Holy Thursday at the ceremony of the washing of the feet. We will be reminded that Jesus encouraged his followers to wash one another's feet in imitation of his own act of service.

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 The gospel reading is the passion according to Mark. The first part of the account describes the episode of the woman who poured expensive ointment on Jesus' head while he was dining in the house of Simon the leper. Simon may well have been cured of his condition, but the stigma of uncleanness would remain over him and his household. This point alone shows how Jesus has little regard for ritual impurity when compared to the graciousness of accepting the hospitality of a fellow human being. With Jesus, it is always people before regulations. The scene also presents Jesus taking advantage of human hospitality to continue his

mission. In the Middle East, nard (a highly perfumed luxury ointment made from crushed tubers of the spikenard plant) was used in cosmetics and burial rites. There is a telling response from Jesus in his reply to those who expressed righteous protest at the waste of nard. 'Leave her alone,' he said. 'she has done what she could.' Isn't that all Jesus asks of us? Mark highlights the symbolism of Jesus being anointed for burial since, in fact, he will not receive a proper anointing later on. Mark then slips in the account of Judas going to the chief priests with an offer to hand Jesus over to them. We will never know why Judas did this. Perhaps he was disillusioned by Jesus' lack of political or revolutionary action against the occupying Romans; perhaps he saw Jesus as a traitor to the zealot cause. Clearly, he misunderstood Jesus and his mission.

Mark then goes on to describe the Last Supper, which was the last time Jesus was to sit and enjoy the friendship and intimacy of a meal with his friends. It is a feature of the mission of Jesus that he was fond of sharing meals with people. In fact, he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard in contrast to the abstemious character of John the Immerser (Matt 11:19). However, his view was that table fellowship was a foretaste of the messianic banquet that was to come. Jesus appears to have been convinced that when individuals came together as God's people their good will, purity and unity in God are expressed in the intimacy and sharing of the meal. As a lay person Jesus saw these fellowship meals having the same effect as the priestly sacrifices in the temple. Like the sacrifices, the meals were a reaching for God and a communal striving for oneness with God present in the world and in the community. There is a reminder here of the sentiments of Psalm 133, that God is present where there is unity among people of good will:

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

The agony in the garden brings home to us the humanity of Jesus who humbled himself to become like us in every respect except sin (Heb 2:17; 4:15). It is the conviction of Jesus that his impending suffering and death are part of God's plan for him and so he surrenders to the divine will. It is also important to note that the ones engineering the death of Jesus are those who have the power to bring it about, namely, the chief priests. Jesus has obviously threatened their religious influence by putting ideas into people's heads that could well undermine their version of Judaism. Their aim is to simply eliminate this troublemaker. Never forget that the arrest, torture and execution of Jesus were entirely political on the part of the religious and civil authorities.

Jesus was outstanding for not judging people prematurely

Apart from gaining a deep appreciation of the love Jesus has shown for us through his passion we might also reflect on the fact that he was viewed by the religious leaders as a heretic and a danger to the faith of his fellow Jews. Jesus was judged and condemned out of hand by the hierarchy of his day – a hierarchy that was too attached to its religious tradition and not open enough to allow that Jesus might have had a worthwhile formula for giving ordinary people access to God that was uncomplicated, free and open. All the way through his ministry Jesus was outstanding for not judging people prematurely. 'Judge not and you shall not be judged' he said (Matt 7:1) and he practised what he preached with regard to sinners, the ritually unclean, and all who approached him. There is food for thought as we contemplate Jesus' open, loving and peace-filled attitude to the relationships in his life – the relationship with his Abba and with all those he encountered along the way. His is not a defensive religion that is narrowly focused on defending dogmas but a free and loving faith that embraces all people as companions on the journey to God.



Withhold judgement and criticism. The human way is to judge in haste the actions of others, but the divine way is to remain quiet and loving.

White Eagle

You judge by human standards; I judge no one.

Jesus (John 8:15)



There was a young man who wanted to become a great writer and write stuff that millions of people would read and react to on an emotional level, cry, howl in pain and anger, so now he works for Microsoft writing error messages.

Laurie Woods