

# PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

The final Sunday of the Lenten season, as its rather lengthy title suggests, engages us in a full dress rehearsal for the liturgies of the great Three Days about to be celebrated: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil.

Mass begins with a commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He arrives on a domestic animal, a donkey, not on a warlike horse, much less in a chariot. Though acclaimed enthusiastically with palm branches and hosannas, he comes in peace and subverts popular expectations of a political messiah.

The second highlight of today's liturgy is the proclamation of the Passion narrative. This year it's Mark's account that we read. We already know that in a week's time we shall be celebrating resurrection. Hearing the full story of Jesus' suffering and death today cautions us not to try and get ahead of ourselves. We may be tempted to try and take a short cut to glory. Victory certainly beckons, but it will not be ours before we have accompanied Jesus on the way of the cross.

## A reading from the prophet Isaiah

50:4-7

## First Reading

The Lord has given me  
a disciple's tongue.  
So that I may know how to reply to the wearied  
he provides me with speech.  
Each morning he wakes me to hear,  
to listen like a disciple.  
The Lord has opened my ear.  
For my part, I made no resistance,  
neither did I turn away.  
I offered my back to those who struck me,  
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;  
I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.  
The Lord comes to my help,  
so that I am untouched by the insults.  
So, too, I set my face like flint;  
I know I shall not be shamed.

Readings from the prophet Isaiah feature throughout Holy Week. More exactly, what we hear are four passages from the book of the prophet Isaiah generally known as the "songs of the suffering servant".

The meaning of these texts is disputed, but their use in this week's liturgies invites us to read them in the light of Jesus' redemptive suffering. The figure of the servant is mysterious; it could be a person or it could be Israel as a people. The songs suggest that this servant has been chosen by God for a mission that will entail opposition and suffering but will bring vindication. Because the songs are quoted often in the gospel accounts of the passion, Christian readers cannot fail to be struck by the parallels with Jesus' experience of betrayal and suffering in the cause of right.

The text for today (proclaimed again on Wednesday) is the first part of the third servant song. Spoken in the first person, it depicts the experience of the servant. First of all the servant is a disciple, one who listens to the Lord and then speaks out what he has heard. As a result he meets with violent opposition but does not retaliate with violence. He puts his trust in the Lord.

This is serious business. The text invites the reader to enter into the mind of the servant and to speak with his voice. The congregation needs to sense the servant's determination to remain steadfast in the face of hostile attacks. Readers should adopt a solemn, but not morbid, tone and proclaim the text at a measured pace.

## Responsorial Psalm

Ps 21:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

All who see me deride me.  
They curl their lips, they toss their heads.  
'He trusted in the Lord, let him save him;  
let him release him if this is his friend.' R.

Many dogs have surrounded me,  
a band of the wicked beset me.  
They tear holes in my hands and my feet.  
I can count every one of my bones. R.

They divide my clothing among them.  
They cast lots for my robe.  
O Lord, do not leave me alone,  
my strength, make haste to help me! R.

I will tell of your name to my brethren  
and praise you where they are assembled.  
'You who fear the Lord give him praise;  
all sons of Jacob, give him glory.  
Revere him, Israel's sons.' R.

## Responsorial Psalm

The response to the psalm will resonate immediately with the congregation. As they hear it announced with due deliberation, they will recognise it as Jesus' cry on the cross. Long before that it was the arresting opening line of Psalm 21/22.

Taken on its own it sounds bleak, close to a howl of despair. That is certainly how the psalm begins. It continues with a litany of complaint and cries of anguish, alternating with the memory of trust in God. As the psalm progresses, confidence comes to the fore and allows praise and thanksgiving to prevail.

This transition from distress to praise is made clear – if rather abruptly – in the verses selected for today. The first three focus on the psalmist's sufferings, but the fourth is a burst of joyful praise. The reader will need to proclaim them accordingly – with pathos for the first three verses, and with joy for the fourth.

**A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Philippians 2:6-11**

His state was divine,  
 yet Christ Jesus did not cling  
 to his equality with God  
 but emptied himself  
 to assume the condition of a slave,  
 and became as men are,  
 and being as all men are,  
 he was humbler yet,  
 even to accepting death,  
 death on a cross.  
 But God raised him high  
 and gave him the name  
 which is above all other names  
 so that all beings  
 in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,  
 should bend the knee at the name of Jesus  
 and that every tongue should acclaim  
 Jesus Christ as Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.

**The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark****15:1-39 (Short Form)**

First thing in the morning, the chief priest together with the elders and scribes, in short the whole Sanhedrin, had their plan ready. They had Jesus bound and took him away and handed him over to Pilate.

Pilate questioned him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' 'It is you who say it' he answered. And the chief priests brought many accusations against him. Pilate questioned him again, 'Have you no reply at all? See how many accusations they are bringing against you!' But to Pilate's amazement, Jesus made no further reply.

At festival time Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone they asked for. Now a man called Barabbas was then in prison with the rioters who had committed murder during the uprising. When the crowd went up and began to ask Pilate the customary favour, Pilate answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?' For he realised it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over. The chief priest, however, had incited the crowd to demand that he should release Barabbas for them instead. Then Pilate spoke again. 'But in that case,' he said 'what am I to do with the man you call king of the Jews?' They shouted back. 'Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'What harm has he done?' But they shouted all the louder, 'Crucify him!' So Pilate, anxious to placate the crowd, released Barabbas for them and, having ordered Jesus to be scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

The soldiers led him away to the inner part of the palace, that is, the Praetorium, and called the whole cohort together. They dressed him up in purple, twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on him. And they began saluting him, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' They struck his head with a reed and spat on him; and they went down on their knees to do him homage. And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the purple and dressed him in his own clothes.

**Second Reading**

The reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians may have originated as an early Christian hymn. Whether this is the case or not, the text we have is a profound confession of faith whose meaning is inexhaustible.

Paul's use of the hymn is a prime example of what happens often in his letters. The practical problems that prompt him to write become a springboard for theological exploration. In this case the issue is division and dissension in the Christian community. Paul appeals to the Philippians to be "in full accord and of one mind" and to "let that same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus". This inspires him to quote the hymn we read today. All this is worth checking out by turning to the scriptures and finding chapter two of the letter.

The reading is a poetic gem that sums up the entire mystery that we are about to celebrate, the mystery of Jesus' incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection and exaltation. Because every phrase is laden with meaning it needs to be proclaimed slowly, deliberately and with great conviction. This is our faith!

Readers will note that the NRSV offers the text in inclusive language.

**Gospel**

Every year on this Sunday the story of Jesus' betrayal, passion and death is told at length. The reading is taken in turn from one of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark or Luke – because we always read John's account on Good Friday. This year we read from Mark.

No two versions of the passion narrative are the same. They have much in common but differ in the detail. It is helpful to think of each evangelist as an artist painting a portrait. Portrait painters are creative artists that are not satisfied with presenting a surface likeness; they seek to uncover a deeper truth. What they produce will appear very different, even if the subject is the same.

For all the brevity of Mark's gospel, his passion narrative is just as long as that of the other evangelists. Thus it looms larger in the overall work. In his introduction to the gospels (*The Living Voice of the Gospel: The Gospels Today*. Mulgrave: John Garratt, 2006, pp 62-64), scripture scholar Frank Moloney points out that "Mark tells the passion and death of Jesus in two coherent sequences: Jesus, the disciples and the Jewish leaders (14:1-72) and the Roman trial, crucifixion, death and burial (15:1-47)".

Each is composed of short scenes, eleven in the first, nine in the second. In the central scene of the first sequence, "poignantly . . . the failing disciples and Jesus share a meal". The corresponding scene in the second is the crucifixion of Jesus. Moloney remarks, "This rapid movement from one brief scene to another adds urgency to the narrative. It enables Mark to describe the never-failing presence of Jesus, Messiah, Son of the Blessed, Son of Man (14:61b-62) and Prophet (v. 65) to an ever-failing group of disciples".