



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

## Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

April 9, 2017

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

### Today's Scriptures

Holy Week begins today with two readings from Matthew's Gospel. The first passage describes Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem for the Passover, where he is met by cheering crowds greeting him as a king. The second passage contains Matthew's account of the final days of Jesus's life. A reading from one of the "Servant Songs" of Isaiah, an ancient hymn to Jesus Christ used by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, and Psalm 22 round out today's readings. Taken together, these Scriptures help us to understand the person and mission of Jesus, and can assist us in finding meaning in the Passion and death of Jesus.

In the early Church, stories of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection circulated long before the first Gospel was written. The early Christians attempted to make sense of Jesus' death by remembering his words and actions and by studying the Old Testament Scriptures. Isaiah's Servant Songs described a servant of God, filled with his Spirit, and determined to do his will even in the face of suffering. Isaiah's Servant was a model of faithfulness for the people of his day, but the early Christians saw Jesus in the Suffering Servant. Like the Servant, Jesus spoke of God's salvation to a weary world. He did not falter in carrying out God's will, even in the face of great suffering and death.

Twenty years before Matthew's Gospel was written, St. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. The Christian community there was suffering the effects of external persecution and internal divisions. St. Paul began his letter by quoting an ancient hymn to Jesus. This portrait of Jesus could serve as a model of faithful obedience in suffering. Jesus, son of God, did not cling to his divine status but completely emptied himself into human form in order to fulfill the will of God. Jesus' self-sacrificing love accomplished God's plan of salvation. God glorified Jesus for his faithful obedience.

Matthew takes care to point out where the events surrounding Jesus' death fulfilled ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah. Jesus seemed to understand what was happening; he had accepted that his hour had come. While he was occasionally troubled, he did not waver. He revealed to his disciples that he understood the sacrifice he was making; it would be for the forgiveness of sins. He understood this as his Father's will. Even when sorrowful and distressed, he prioritized his Father's will over his own. Throughout his ministry, Jesus demonstrated his power but Jesus remained mostly silent and determined in the face of his suffering. His final words were the words of today's Responsorial Psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? This psalm begins with words of despair, but ends with a determined trust in God and in his promise of salvation. When Jesus died, the Temple veil was torn as nature suffered a violent quake. To Matthew, the death of the Messiah put an end to the reign of death; a new age had begun.

### Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

#### Gospel at the Procession: Matthew 21:1-11

This is Jesus the prophet from Nazareth

#### Reading I: Isaiah 50:4-7

The Lord God is my help.

- The reading from Isaiah is part of the third Servant Song.
- The song communicates the servant's belief that, no matter how cruel or indifferent people are, God's justice will prevail.
- Suffering is never an end in itself.

#### Responsorial Psalm 22: 8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

#### Reading II: Philippians 2:6-11

Your attitude must be Christ's.

- Paul's letter to the Philippians was written while Paul was in prison in Rome.
- Despite being imprisoned, Paul expresses confidence and joy in the Lord.
- Paul stresses that our salvation is Jesus' kenosis, the Greek word for Jesus' "emptying" of himself from glory.

#### Gospel: Matthew 26:14-27:66 or Mt. 27:11-54

The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- The Passion Narrative is among the earliest traditions to be handed down in written form.
- In Matthew's passion account, all the events proceed according to God's will as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- Jesus, the servant and Son of God, has poured himself out to overcome humanity's separation from God.

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# The Suffering Servant

The beginning and the end of Jesus' life are the times most prominently portrayed in Christian art. While we may not think about it often, each depiction, all the nativity scenes, sets of Stations of the Cross and images of the Last Supper have great power to communicate an implicit theology, one that, like our hymns, subtly forms our spirituality and thus our way of living our faith.

Through the ages, Leonardo da Vinci and his colleagues have shaped our religious imagination, telling us, among other things, exactly who was at the Last Supper. They hardly ever deviate from showing only Jesus and the Apostles — almost never depicting the women who accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem and witnessed his crucifixion and burial. (Remember, women were at the table in the early Christian celebrations of the Lord's Supper and we have no evidence that they were excluded from Jesus' table.)

There is a little more breadth in representations of the Passion. We have graphic paintings and sculptures emphasizing physical suffering, Jesus' great loneliness, apocalyptic cataclysms and even portrayals of a victorious, priestly Christ. Often the disciples who stood at a distance or at the foot of the cross — almost always pictured as in John's Gospel, portraying the beloved disciple as more prominent than the women.

What if we would turn to Isaiah and Paul instead of allowing Mel Gibson and Leonardo to be our primary interpreters for the events of this Holy Week? We can begin by trying to understand Jesus as the Suffering Servant of God. In today's passage, the third of the servant songs, Isaiah depicts a servant-disciple, a prophet and more. As a disciple, his every day begins with obedient listening; he is in intimate communion with God, sharing God's own heart. Because he is a prophet, the rest of his day is spent in speaking God's word to the weary, or as Isaiah says in another place, giving hope to those who walk in the shadow of death.

More than any other prophet, Isaiah's servant submits to suffering, accepting it without complaint. The difference between Jeremiah who loudly lamented his suffering and the one who gave his back to those who beat him demonstrates the distinction between a Jeremiah who, even knowing what it costs, does what the Master asks, and the suffering servant whose communion with God is so profound that he understands the rejection he suffers as a rejection of God and believes that God shares that rejection with him. There is no complaint because they are undergoing it together. Paul

intensifies this interpretation of Jesus by giving us the hymn of Philippians 2. This depicts Jesus as the image of the self-emptying God, the God for whom no sacrifice is too great on behalf of beloved humanity.

The key difference in these interpretations is whether we conceive of Jesus as face to face with God, a servant sent on God's behalf, or as the son who flows from the heart of God, as we say in the creed, God from God, light from light. When we interpret Jesus' passion through the lens that understands it as divine self-giving, thoughts of "paying for sin" fade along with every hint that God could have anything to do with violence. Jesus brings home that idea when one of his followers cuts off somebody's ear. Jesus had taught his followers to contradict coercion with prophetic action by turning the other cheek; he had taught that God has nothing to do with vengeance but sends rain on the just and unjust. When we allow Isaiah and Paul and Jesus' own words to interpret his passion, we get the picture of Jesus as the expression of God's unfailing love, a love rejected but never overcome.

Entering into this holiest week of our year, Matthew, Paul and Isaiah invite us to look again at Jesus and to see him through their eyes. As we grasp the idea that Jesus was both victimized and invincible, we understand more fully how he was truly the revelation of God's way of being.

If we believe in Jesus as the revelation of God's unceasing love, our own notions of sin and punishment and forgiveness will begin to mirror God's mercy. Then our communal life will be capable of offering the world what it most needs: a living image of Jesus, the revelation of God's great love.

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