



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

March 25, 2018

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

Today's Scriptures

Today's Gospel is the Passion of Jesus according to Mark. Mark's account of the events that lead to Jesus' death is sparse, realistic, and sad. In Mark's narrative, Jesus knows his death is near. He prepares his disciples for what is coming. His every action suggests that Jesus is cooperating with a plan already set in place. Once Jesus enters Jerusalem, Mark's report is very straightforward. It reveals a very human Jesus, frightened as he prayed in Gethsemane, abandoned by his friends in sleep, abandoned by them physically once he is arrested, and seemingly abandoned by God at the end. Jesus is alone as he voices the words of Psalm 22 on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"

Despite his sorrow and suffering, Jesus does not resist God's will, but remains steadfastly obedient to it. Each of today's readings offers some insight as to why Jesus, who was with God in the beginning (Jn. 1:1), would allow himself to be handed over to sinners to face a sinner's death.

In Isaiah, we hear of the "suffering servant" whose experience prefigures Jesus; this servant has received God's word and has been formed by it. In fact, his relationship with the Lord has allowed him to have perfect trust and confidence in God, even in the face of rejection and suffering. St. Paul makes this same point: Jesus is so trusting of God that he never waivers in his obedience to God's will. Jesus' obedience began when he emptied himself into human form and ended in death on a cross. Mark tells us that Jesus had absolute faith in the Father, even trusting that he would rise again: "after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (v.28). Out of love for the Father and for us, Jesus endured human suffering and death so he could accomplish what the Father desired: our salvation and reconciliation with him. For his obedience, God lifted Jesus up again: this time in glory, as Lord of all.

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Isaiah 50:4-7

He opens my ear that I may hear.

- The first reading from Isaiah is taken from the third "Song of the Suffering Servant."
- It shows us the disciple whose faithfulness is based on fidelity to God.
- Although the passage was originally written about someone else, when we read this passage we immediately think of Jesus.

Responsorial Psalm: 22: 8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24 **My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?**

Reading II: Philippians 2:6-11

He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.

- The second reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians is a quotation from an early Christian hymn that proclaims the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.
- Even though Jesus was God, he obediently accepted the humiliation of the cross, and God raised him in glory.
- Paul's challenge is to make Jesus' attitude our own.

Gospel: Mark 14:1-15:47

The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- The Passion story from the Gospel according to Mark shows Jesus to us as the suffering servant portrayed in the prophecy of Isaiah.
- Mark places Jesus' suffering and death in the context of the Passover meal which draws on Jewish theology.
- In Mark's account of the Passion, Jesus is alone with no one to comfort him as he approaches the ultimate sacrifice.

Reprinted with permission. LifelongCatechesis.OSV.com



Interpreting the Passion

As we enter the sacred time we call Holy Week, the church overwhelms us with liturgy, Scripture and symbols. Each day has its own particular theme until we reach the climax of the liturgical year in the three-day-long liturgy we call the Triduum. Today's celebration, commonly called Palm Sunday, invites us to contemplate Jesus' last week on Earth, anticipating all that we will relive symbolically Thursday and Friday. Our readings from the Gospel of Mark begin with the crowds' exuberant but shallow adulation and end with Jesus' death on the cross.

Unlike many other Christians, Catholics have cherished the crucifix, the image of Christ on the cross, as a "sacramental," a rich and challenging symbol of our faith. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, sacramentals are an extension of our liturgical life. For many of the faithful, the sacramentals and especially depictions of Jesus' passion, are emotion-laden, tangible reminders of their relationship with Christ.

Some crucifixes seem almost bland, portraying a nearly emotionless Jesus. Others show him with an expression of immense sadness or in terrible suffering. The Eastern church which favors stylized icons over lifelike representations, maintains a practice of iconography carried out according to a carefully disciplined and well-developed theology. Every crucifix or depiction of the Passion is an interpretation of this mystery and communicates a theology, often all the more powerful for being visual rather than verbal.

Latin American churches are famous for depictions that emphasize Jesus' awful and bloody suffering. These images, like some famous Peruvian ones which portray Jesus with hands and feet distorted by unrelenting toil, emphasize Christ's union with those who suffer. People can gaze on him and know that God sympathizes with every human pain. Another related image, often called the Just Judge, depicts Jesus after he was flogged, crowned with thorns and seated with a wooden staff for a scepter. He looks at the observer as a judge who has experienced the height of injustice. The Just Judge reveals that God knows the same feelings as those who have been treated wrongly and that God will not forget them. All of these images make the truth of the Incarnation palpable by showing the depth of God's identification with those who suffer. Often people's response to those images is to touch or even kiss them in gratitude and solidarity.

Then, we have crucifixes which present Christ in some variety of priestly garments and/or wearing a crown. The icon called "The Great High Priest" depicts the victorious Christ garbed in a chasuble. This proclaims that Christ is, indeed, the high priest chosen by God to speak to humanity on God's behalf. He reigns over all things, including death. The message here is just what the Letter to the Hebrews says of Christ: He shared in humanity so "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death ... and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life" (Hebrews 2:14-15). In much less formal language, James Alison, in his book *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, describes this image as akin to Evel Knievel's extraordinary motorcycle stunts. Only after Knievel rode his bike over an abyss and through fire could other bikers think it was possible and eventually try it themselves. Similarly, Christ's victory on the cross, his ability to accept the cruelest sort of death with all its shame and abandonment, allows his followers to believe that, like Jesus, they can trust completely in the love of God. Christ crucified reveals that nothing, no loneliness or rejection, no humiliation, no pain, not even death, is more powerful, more valuable or more vital than the love of God. In Alison's words, "Jesus' death and resurrection is God's way of proving that he is able and willing to hold humans in being through death ... So that we can, already, start to live as if death were not."

One typical icon of the crucifixion depicts Jesus at the moment of death. His blood, flowing from his hands, feet and side into the opened earth, symbolizes that the redemption reaches all who have died. Four women are grouped at his right, holding and comforting one another; all they can do is be present to him and to one another. On the other side, John hides his face while the centurion looks up, declaring what no one else could say in the face of this scene: "Truly, this man was the Son of God."

Holy Week is overwhelming. It bursts with liturgy and symbols to lead us ever deeper into the mystery of our faith. One way to take that in is to contemplate different depictions of Christ's passion. We can allow the art to interpret what we have heard. As we gaze upon these scenes, they will lead us to reinterpret our own lives as well.

Mary McGlone, CSJ

Reprinted with permission. *Celebration Magazine*, March 2018.