

THE PASSION OF A COMPASSIONATE CHRIST

Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday – Year C – 14 April 2019

Blessing of Palms: Lk 19:28-40; **Readings:** Is 50:4-7; Phil 2:6-11; Lk 22:14 – 23:56

“Jesus did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to become a slave” (Phil)

Three Scriptural Signposts

1. The focus of today’s liturgy (Procession and Eucharist) is the palms and the reading of the passion narrative according to the Gospel of Luke. In the ‘Proclamation of the Lord’s Coming’ (procession), we hear about Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem—open and bold. He chooses to ride a colt. To go to war, a king rides a horse; to come in peace, he rides a colt. Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecy of Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding ... on a colt” (9:9). So far, Jesus has been evading arrest from those who seek to destroy him. However, now, he is ready; for “everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled” (Lk 18:31). The crowds cry out: ‘Hosanna!’ In Hebrew this means, “Save now!” The Jews want Jesus to liberate them from Roman might, from political bondage. Jesus will bring them a far greater liberation. He will free them from sin, evil, darkness and death.
2. ‘Passion’ comes from the Latin *patior* meaning ‘to suffer’ or ‘to undergo’, and ‘*com-*passion’ means to ‘to suffer *with*’ or ‘to endure *with*’. Jesus’ passion is, thus, not some isolated event in his life but the inevitable outcome of his compassion—a life lived in solidarity with, in suffering with, the last, the lost and the least in society. In his passion, Jesus undergoes the severest of sufferings: mental, physical and spiritual. The agony in Gethsemane’s garden is mental suffering since Jesus is painfully aware that he will suffer and die with his disciples deserting him. The physical suffering comes with his brutal scourging, crowning with thorns and crucifixion. Finally, he seems to feel forsaken even by *Abba*: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But, Jesus never loses faith.
3. Remember that every Gospel was written primarily as a detailed ‘passion narrative’ and the other parts were pieced together as a series of events leading to Christ’s climactic crucifixion. Moreover, each evangelist gives a particular focus to his passion narrative: Mark emphasizes the pain, torture, isolation, betrayal and God-forsakenness of the passion; Matthew shows how Christ fulfills all Messianic hopes in his passion; John portrays the royalty of Christ who defies Pilate’s power with divine authority and whose cross becomes a throne. And, Luke—whose Gospel we listen to, today—stresses *pathos* in the sense that, even in his passion, Jesus reaches out to others in compassion, love and forgiveness. In the midst of deep suffering, Jesus is sensitive to others. He has time to console the “daughters of Jerusalem” (24:28-31), he forgives those who have condemned and crucified him (24:34), he assures a criminal of paradise (24:43), and, finally Jesus dies with serene surrender: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” In Luke’s passion, Jesus is continuously proclaiming “good news”, which is precisely God is with us in all our sufferings and God’s Spirit strengthens us in our pain.

Today's First Reading and this Week's First Readings:

Today's first reading is from the 'Third Song' of Yahweh's suffering servant. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Good Friday of this Holy Week, we will read and reflect upon a series of 'Suffering Servant Songs' (Isa 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13 – 53:12). True, the Messiah is King; but, this King is crowned not with gold but with thorns, He reigns not from a throne but from a cross, and His reign is marked not by self-aggrandizement but by self-emptying. The sole aim of the suffering servant is to do God's will "to sustain the weary". He suffers silently, without resisting, never turning back; for he knows: "God helps me. I shall not be put to shame."

The Linking of the Second Reading to the Theme

The second reading (Phil 2:6-11) is the well-known kenotic hymn of the Christ who does not cling to his privileges with God but empties himself. Paul invites us to "have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" – in other words, to let go of all power, privileges and pleasures in order to love, to serve, to sacrifice. It is only from such emptiness that God can bring about fullness.

Three Current, Contextual Concerns:

Passion in the Time of Election: Our country is going through a period of general elections. This is one of the most fiercely fought polls of all times. Elections place choices before us. When faced with choices, Peter, Judas, the male disciples, Pilate, the Pharisees, scribes, priests, and others, failed miserably choosing evil over good; death over life; self-survival over self-emptying. What do I choose? How do I choose? Whom do I choose?

Passion amidst the Lures of Power: Power is widely sought—be it political, economic, social or religious power. Power acts like a drug. One is never satisfied with the power one has—and craves for more and more of it. Jesus is one with moral authority. Hence, he can stand tall before the Sanhedrin, his accusers, Pilate and Herod.

Passion and the Call for Compassion: Everyone who is compassionate will necessarily have to undergo a passion. The passion is salvific not because suffering is beautiful; it is not! However, the passion and its sufferings become salvific simply because these are undergone for the benefit of others. Thus, ultimately they will bring about new life.

Reflection:

Jesus' passion is not yet complete. Jesus suffers with us, in us. The mental trauma, physical pain and religious alienation He underwent continue to challenge us. Jesus does not take away suffering, Jesus transforms it by giving it new meaning. This meaning comes from realizing that God is always with us, as we too respond to our suffering – and that of others – with a spirit of service, selflessness, sacrifice and surrender.

Prayer:

Conscious that Christ is crucified on the other side of our own crosses, we pray:

"Lord, may your passion strengthen me, and may it lead me to deeper compassion."
