

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Passion Sunday

Today's liturgy concentrates on two very different events: the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as Messianic King and the events of a few days later, culminating in this agonizing and shameful death. This seeming end point was to be reversed by the explosion of new life in the Resurrection after three days, an explosion which constituted God's vindication of Jesus' loving obedience and the affirmation that it has overcome and wiped out the sin of Adam, human sin.

Gospel of Palms:

(Matthew 21.1-11)

How much time did Jesus spend in Jerusalem? The Gospel of John recounts four separate visits to Jerusalem, whereas Mark (and Matthew and Luke, who follow Mark's outline) compresses all Jesus' Jerusalem ministry into one visit, inaugurated by this solemn entry. As all the gospel incidents, this event is recounted by the evangelists in the light of their fuller understanding of the meaning of Jesus after the Resurrection. We see the colourful festal atmosphere of crowds going up to Jerusalem for a festival, waving palm branches as banners in their enthusiasm, and, of course, singing as they march. Jesus and his disciples join in. But it may be only later that the significance of this event was grasped: this was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah about the messiah coming into his inheritance, to complete his God-given mission and to proclaim peace to the nations. Matthew especially, writing for a community steeped in Judaism, actually quotes the prophecy and also the psalm verse about 'him who comes in the name of the Lord'. He stresses that Jesus is this Son of David, whose eschatological kingship is about to be established.

The Mass

The Mass begins with the usual two preliminary readings. These help us to understand the shocking story of the gospel.

First **Isaiah 50.4-7** presents this first Song of the Servant of the Lord. Jesus saw himself as this Servant who would give his life to save his people, fulfilling the destiny foretold long ago by the prophets.

Then Paul's exultant hymn in **Philippians 2.6-11** explains how Jesus' disregard for his own due honour won him the homage of all creation to the glory of God the Father.

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Gospel:

The Passion of Christ according to Matthew

The accounts of the Passion given by the four evangelists are not identical. The basic outline of these dreadful events was clear enough. It is confirmed by the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus, who tells us that Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate at the instigation of the Jewish leaders.

The task of the gospel writers is not to relay to us the raw facts, but to help to understand their significance. Each stresses a particular aspect. For instance, John underlines that this was the triumph of Jesus: he shows his divinity already at the arrest scene. He himself yielded up his Spirit only when he had completed his task.

Matthew's preoccupation with Judaism dictates that he show in detail how the events accord with God's plan revealed in the scriptures. Almost every incident is told in such a way that hearers familiar with the scriptures would catch allusions to the biblical writings: nowhere is this more obvious than in the account of the death of Judas.

Although Pilate the governor must bear the final responsibility, Matthew also stresses the pressure put on him by the crowd, manipulated by the politically adept Jewish authorities, culminating in the horrific cry, 'His blood be on us and on our children' - an allusion to the sufferings undergone by the next generation during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans.

The significance of the events is further underlined by the apocalyptic earthquake at Jesus' death, and by the immediate release of the blessed dead, who come at last into the Holy City
