

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Palm Sunday

Gospel of Palms:

(Mark 11.1-10 or John 12.12-16)

Jesus Enters Jerusalem

The procession of palms is joyful and sad at the same time. It is the triumphant entry of the Messiah as King into his holy city. The crowds were celebrating and singing the psalm for the festival as they entered the city, not knowing that they were, in fact, welcoming the Messiah at the coming of the Kingship of God.

Often in Mark the actors in the story do not realize the full significance of their actions, as when the Roman soldiers later mock Jesus as King, which we know he is.

As Christians, we believe that the Kingship of God was fulfilled or established by the death and Resurrection of Jesus, the drama that begins with this entry and ends at the story of the empty tomb. John tells us that it was only afterwards, when Jesus had risen from the dead, that the disciples realized the significance of the event. The Resurrection was the keystone of the arch, which at last made sense of everything, showed everything in a new light. John also tells us that this was the humble king of the prophesy, riding, not on a triumphant warhorse but on a humble donkey.

First reading:

(Isaiah 50: 4-7)

The Song of the Servant

In the Book of Isaiah occur four songs, of which this is the third, sung by a mysterious Servant of the Lord. It is not clear who this Servant is, but he is totally dedicated to the service of the Lord, a disciple who listens devotedly. Through suffering, this Servant brings to fulfilment the salvation that the Lord intends for Israel and for the world. Jesus saw himself in the terms of this Servant, and the four songs feature throughout the liturgy of Holy Week.

Second reading:

(Philippians 2.6-11)

Raised high through suffering

This hymn was probably not written by Paul himself, but taken up by him into the letter, a very early Christian hymn. It celebrates the triumph of Jesus through his selflessness. The assertions at the end are staggering. The hymn claims for Jesus the titles and the worship that are due only to God. What is more, this acknowledgement of Jesus does not detract from the glory of God, but is precisely 'to the glory of God the Father'. This is perhaps the fullest statement in Paul of the divine glory of Jesus, and it is won by his humiliation in death.

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The Passion according to Mark

Jesus deserted

The gospel of Mark is concerned to show Jesus as a real, human person. So the story of the Passion begins with the very real fear and horror of Jesus in the garden. Mark represents Jesus as almost beside himself with apprehension at the torture that he knew he would suffer. Again and again he returns to seek companionship from his disciples, to find them callously asleep. The Passion story ends, too, with a loud cry of agony as Jesus breathes his last.

The divine Jesus

The core of the Passion story is the trial scene. Before the high priest, Jesus acknowledges that he is the Messiah of Judaism, and the Son of the Blessed One. To these titles he joins 'Son of man'. In the Book of Daniel, the Son of man is a glorious figure who triumphs over persecution to receive from God all power on earth. So now Jesus claims to share God's throne as that Son of man. It is for these divine claims that he is rejected as a blasphemer and handed over to the Romans.

The triumph of God

When Jesus cries out on the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me', he is not in despair, but is beginning Psalm 22. The Psalm begins in persecution but ends in the triumph of God and the vindication of the sufferer. This gives the meaning of his Passion: by it, Jesus brings the triumph of God and his own vindication by God. The Cross is the moment, not of abandonment by God, but of the most complete union of Jesus to the Father. Jesus here establishes the Sovereignty of his Father by his total, loving obedience. This is why the centurion proclaims, 'Truly, the man was Son of God.' It is also significant that here for the first time in the gospel a human being recognizes Jesus as Son of God. And he is not a Jew but, rather, a gentile - the beginning of the spread of the gospel to all nations of the world.
