

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Palm Sunday  
Year C  
10 April 2022



### Collect

Almighty ever-living God,  
who as an example of humility for the human race to follow  
caused our Saviour to take flesh and submit to the Cross,  
graciously grant that we may heed his lesson of patient suffering  
and so merit a share in his Resurrection.  
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.  
**Amen.**

### Readings and Commentaries

The procession with palms in commemoration of the Lord's entry into Jerusalem (along with other features of our paschal liturgies) can be traced back at least as far as 4<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem. Pilgrims flocked to the holy city after the peace of Constantine. One of them was a devout lady, perhaps a Spanish nun, named Egeria. Keen to share her experiences with her circle of friends, she kept a diary of her stay in Jerusalem around 384-385. It contains invaluable descriptions of the liturgies in which she took part.

On Palm Sunday afternoon, she reports, the faithful gathered with palms on the Mount of Olives and processed down to the city to the place of Jesus' resurrection (now the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), chanting on their way. Over 1700 years later, a procession with palms and chants still takes place on this day in churches around the world.

All four gospels contain a great deal of material in between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his betrayal. They testify to the growing tension that eventually reaches crisis point. This in-between time is ignored by the liturgy, making today's transition from "Hosanna" to "Crucify him" shockingly abrupt. It's reminiscent of what happened in the synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus "won the approval" of his townsfolk only to have them swiftly become enraged and murderous (Lk 4:22-30). In each case, the time frame has been condensed but the trajectory of Jesus' reception truthfully reflected.

## A reading from the prophet Isaiah 50:4-7

The Lord has given me  
a disciple's tongue.  
So that I may know how to reply to the wearied  
he provides me with speech.  
Each morning he wakes me to hear,  
to listen like a disciple.  
The Lord has opened my ear.  
For my part, I made no resistance,  
neither did I turn away.  
I offered my back to those who struck me,  
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;  
I did not cover my face against insult and spittle.  
The Lord comes to my help,  
so that I am untouched by the insults.  
So, too, I set my face like flint;  
I know I shall not be shamed.

## Responsorial Psalm Ps 21:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

**R.** My God, my God,  
why have you abandoned me?  
All who see me deride me.  
They curl their lips, they toss their heads.  
'He trusted in the Lord, let him save him;  
let him release him if this is his friend.' **R.**  
Many dogs have surrounded me,  
a band of the wicked beset me.  
They tear holes in my hands and my feet.  
I can count every one of my bones. **R.**  
They divide my clothing among them.  
They cast lots for my robe.  
O Lord, do not leave me alone,  
my strength, make haste to help me! **R.**  
I will tell of your name to my brethren  
and praise you where they are assembled.  
'You who fear the Lord give him praise;  
all sons of Jacob, give him glory.  
Revere him, Israel's sons.' **R.**

## First Reading

The book of the prophet Isaiah is the longest of the prophetic books and the most frequently used in the Lectionary. The breadth and diversity of its material allows particularly pertinent passages to be chosen for liturgical seasons such as Advent and Lent. This is especially the case in Holy Week. Each day features a reading from one of the four oracles known collectively as the Servant Songs. They are scattered through chapters addressed to the exiles in Babylon.

The servant is a mysterious figure who could be the prophet himself, Moses, another salvific individual, or the people of Israel personified. Parallels with the suffering undergone by Jesus have led to the songs being given a Christian interpretation. Like Jesus, the servant is singled out by God for a mission that provokes hostility and involves suffering but advances the cause of salvation. The last and longest of the songs is proclaimed in full on Good Friday because the servant's ordeal is described in terms that are matched in the various passion narratives. Today's reading, from the third of the songs, is chosen for the same reason. It reports the servant's personal experience. He identifies himself as a disciple who declares what he has heard from the Lord, suffers physical abuse in return, but refuses to resist. "I set my face like flint," he says, in words that echo how Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51).

This reading signals a marked change of mood after the upbeat celebration of Jesus' palm-strewn entry into Jerusalem. Readers should deliver this oracle with a deliberate degree of pathos.

## Responsorial Psalm

Just as the Servant Songs foreshadow the passion narratives, so too do some of the psalms, most especially Psalm 21/22. This is the prayer whose unforgettable opening words – "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" – are cried out from the cross by Jesus. As the response for today's responsorial psalm, they plunge the assembly directly into the depths of his suffering.

However, there is more to the psalm than a cry of dereliction. Lament and pleading dominate the first half but their sombre tones are gradually lightened by renewed trust and praise as the psalm unfolds. This evolution is reflected in the responsorial psalm. The first three verses are full of anguish, while the fourth is a confident call to praise.

The passion narratives draw explicitly on this psalm. Mocking crowds, holes torn in hands and feet, clothing divided up by lot – all are familiar elements of the scene on Calvary. Perhaps Jesus' last words in Luke's account – "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" – reflect the latter part of the psalm.

Like the first reading the psalm needs to be proclaimed with respect for its serious content. While the last verse is quite different in tone, it is prepared for by the prayer at the end of the preceding verse, "make haste to help me!"

**A reading from the letter of St Paul  
to the Philippians**

2:6-11

His state was divine,  
yet Christ Jesus did not cling  
to his equality with God  
but emptied himself  
to assume the condition of a slave,  
and became as men are,  
and being as all men are,  
he was humbler yet,  
even to accepting death,  
death on a cross.  
But God raised him high  
and gave him the name  
which is above all other names  
so that all beings  
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,  
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus  
and that every tongue should acclaim  
Jesus Christ as Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

**The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ  
according to Luke** 23:1-49 (Short Form)

The elders of the people and the chief priests and scribes rose, and they brought Jesus before Pilate.

They began their accusation by saying, 'We found this man inciting our people to revolt, opposing payment of tribute to Caesar, and claiming to be Christ, a king.' Pilate put to him this question, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' 'It is you who say it' he replied. Pilate then said to the chief priests and the crowd, 'I find no case against this man.' But they persisted, 'He is inflaming the people with his teaching all over Judaea; it has come all the way from Galilee, where he started, down to here.' When Pilate heard this, he asked if the man were a Galilean; and finding that he came under Herod's jurisdiction he passed him over to Herod who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

Herod was delighted to see Jesus; he had heard about him and had been wanting for a long time to set eyes on him; moreover, he was hoping to see some miracle worked by him. So he questioned him at some length; but without getting any reply. Meanwhile the chief priests and scribes were there, violently pressing their accusations. Then Herod, together with his guards, treated him with contempt and made fun of him; he put a rich cloak on him and sent him back to Pilate. And though Herod and Pilate had been enemies before, they were reconciled that same day.

Pilate then summoned the chief priests and the leading men and the people. 'You brought this man before me' he said 'as a political agitator. Now I have gone into the matter myself in your presence and found no case against the man in respect of all the charges you bring against him. Nor has Herod either, since he has sent him back to us. As you can see, the man has done nothing that deserves death, so I shall have him flogged and then let him go.' But as one man they howled, 'Away with him! Give us Barabbas!' (This man had been thrown into prison for causing a riot in the city and for murder.)

Pilate was anxious to set Jesus free and addressed them again, but they shouted back, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' And for the third time he spoke to them, 'Why? What harm has this man done? I have found no case against him that deserves death, so I shall have him

**Second Reading**

At the very outset of Jesus' public ministry, as we heard on the first Sunday of Lent, the devil tempts him to use his divine powers for his own interests. At the very end, while Jesus hung upon the cross, onlookers taunted him to save himself (Lk 23:35). From start to finish Jesus refuses to play god. These stories are crystallised in the early Christian hymn that is today's second reading. "Christ Jesus did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself . . . and became as human beings are . . . even to death on a cross."

Coming on Palm Sunday, this reading serves as an overture to the Paschal Triduum, encapsulating all the themes of the paschal mystery that will be teased out over those holy days. It imagines Jesus' itinerary as an inverted parabola, starting on high from the divine realm, descending to the depth of the cross, and ascending again to glory. For Paul, as for the hymn, the cross is at the heart of the whole movement. It's the key to the mystery.

The reading as it stands gives no clue to the community issues that prompt Paul to cite this hymn. It is self-contained enough to stand on its own merits. Readers preparing to proclaim this confession of faith will quickly see what a work of literary art it is. The wealth of meaning condensed in its short lines calls for a delivery that is thoughtful and dignified but joyful. The NRSV is in inclusive language.

**Gospel**

Along with the commemoration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the distinguishing feature of today's liturgy is the solemn proclamation of the passion. As with the entrance rite, there are choices to be made. Should the longer or the shorter version be read? How should the gospel be proclaimed? With one voice or many? Should the assembly be one of those voices? Should the proclamation be interspersed with silence or music or chant? These decisions need to be made in the light of local pastoral circumstances. What will best enable the worshipping community to be fully engaged in the hearing of this essential story?

The three synoptic gospels are more in agreement about the events of Jesus' last hours than about the rest of his life, but each has its own particular emphases. Here are points made by scripture scholar Brendan Byrne in his introduction to Luke's passion account (*The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*. Sydney: St Paul's, 2000, 184-85):

- In common with the other evangelists, Luke wishes to show "that the suffering and death of the Messiah was something that 'had' to happen according to the plan of God announced in the Scriptures."
- He focusses "more simply and cleanly on the nature of the messiahship Jesus represents," not that imagined by either Jewish or Roman authorities, but one "of a different kind, a more transcendent vision of salvation."

punished and then let him go.' But they kept on shouting at the top of their voices, demanding that he should be crucified. And their shouts were growing louder.

Pilate then gave his verdict: their demand was to be granted. He released the man they asked for, who had been imprisoned for rioting and murder, and handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they pleased.

As they were leading him away they seized on a man, Simon from Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and made him shoulder the cross and carry it behind Jesus. Large numbers of people followed him, and of women too, who mourned and lamented for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep rather for yourselves and for your children. For the days will surely come when people will say, "Happy are those who are barren, the wombs that have never borne, the breasts that have never suckled!" Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!"; to the hills, "Cover us!" For if men use the green wood like this, what will happen when it is dry?' Now with him they were also leading out two other criminals to be executed.

When they reached the place called The Skull, they crucified him there and the two criminals also, one on the right, the other on the left. Jesus said, 'Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.' Then they cast lots to share out his clothing.

The people stayed there watching him. As for the leaders, they jeered at him. 'He saved others,' they said 'let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.' The soldiers mocked him too and when they approached to offer him vinegar they said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.' Above him there was an inscription: 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals hanging there abused him. 'Are you not the Christ?' he said. 'Save yourself and us as well.' But the other spoke up and rebuked him. 'Have you no fear of God at all?' he said. 'You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case we deserved it; we are paying for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus,' he said 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

'Indeed, I promise you,' he replied 'today you will be with me in paradise.'

It was now about the sixth hour and, with the sun eclipsed, a darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. The veil of the Temple was torn right down the middle; and when Jesus had cried out in a loud voice, he said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' With these words he breathed his last.

*(All kneel and pause a moment.)*

When the centurion saw what had taken place, he gave praise to God and said, 'This was a great and good man.' And when all the people who had gathered for the spectacle saw what had happened, they went home beating their breasts. All his friends stood at a distance; so also did the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, and they saw all this happen.

- "In the account of Jesus' passion no less than elsewhere in his total project (Luke-Acts), Luke strives to promote a sense of Christian identity that can live at peace within the hegemony of Rome."
- "The main antagonists of Jesus in the Lukan passion are the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people. . . [But] beneath the struggle a deeper context is engaged. The authorities are simply the tools of Satan."
- "Correspondingly, Jesus is open throughout his passion to the presence of the Father. . . From time to time the evangelist lifts the veil between the earthly and the heavenly realm to show Jesus in communion with the Father. In agreement with this, Luke stresses the freedom and control of Jesus."
- "What Luke brings out are certain aspects of the meaning of Jesus' death: that he died in the freedom of love, a human love enacting the divine love that drove his entire mission; that his death brought forgiveness; that attending it were all the qualities – healing, assurance, peace – that had been features of his ministry as a whole."

The attention given to the story of Jesus' suffering and death by all four evangelists confirms how central it was for the early Christian community and how vividly it was remembered. Its unique importance in grounding the community's faith in Jesus has been upheld ever since. Ministers of the word have both the responsibility and the opportunity to tell the story well. Familiar as it may be, it should be thoroughly rehearsed, even if it is read by a single voice, but especially if a number of voices are to be used. Every generation deserves to hear it proclaimed with faith, devotion, clarity and conviction. It is always their story.

## Concluding Prayer

### Prayer over the People (Palm Sunday)

Look, we pray, O Lord, on this your family,  
for whom our Lord Jesus Christ  
did not hesitate to be delivered into the hands of the wicked  
and submit to the agony of the Cross.  
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.  
**Amen.**

And may the blessing of almighty God,  
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
come down on us and remain with us for ever.  
**Amen.**

(From the Prayer over the People for Palm Sunday, Roman Missal p. 313.)