

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Palm Sunday

Year A

2 April 2023



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 4th 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 Matthew 27:11-54 (Short Form)

Jesus was brought before Pontius Pilate, the governor, and the governor put to him this question, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus replied, 'It is you who say it.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and the elders he refused to answer at all. Pilate then said to him, 'Do you not hear how many charges they have brought against you?' But to the governor's complete amazement, he offered no reply to any of the charges.

At festival time it was the governor's practice to release a prisoner for the people, anyone they chose. Now there was at that time a notorious prisoner whose name was Barabbas. So when the crowd gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Which do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' For Pilate knew it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

Now as he was seated in the chair of judgement, his wife sent him a message, 'Have nothing to do with that man; I have been upset all day by a dream I had about him.' The chief priests and the elders, however, had persuaded the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus. So when the governor spoke and asked them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' they said 'Barabbas'. 'But in that case,' Pilate said to them 'what am I to do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said, 'Let him be crucified!' 'Why?' he asked 'What harm has he done?' But they shouted all the louder, 'Let him be crucified!' Then Pilate saw that he was making no impression, that in fact a riot was imminent. So he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd and said, 'I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your concern.' And the people, to a man, shouted back, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' Then he released Barabbas for them. He ordered Jesus to be first scourged and then handed over to be crucified.

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 renders it 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 Mark's passion narrative (*A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel*. Sydney: St Paul's, 2008, 213-216):

- It is the most stark and unrelieved of the four gospels.
- From the start the whole gospel has been driving towards the passion story.
- The tension between Jesus being Messiah and Son of God, yet destined to suffer and die, "finds some measure of resolution in the centurion's confession following Jesus' death on the cross" (15:39).
- "Jesus' conflict with the demonic comes to a climax as, in the utter loneliness of his death, he plumbs human alienation from God to its depth". His closest friends fail to give him comfort and companionship. "Most poignant of all . . . is the sense of silence 'from heaven' that will culminate in his cry of abandonment just before he dies on the cross" (15:34).

The governor's soldiers took Jesus with them into the Praetorium and collected the whole cohort round him. Then they stripped him and made him wear a scarlet cloak, and having twisted some thorns into a crown they put this on his head and placed a reed in his right hand. To make fun of him they knelt to him saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' And they spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head with it. And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the cloak and dressed him in his own clothes and led him away to crucify him.

On their way out, they came across a man from Cyrene, Simon by name, and enlisted him to carry his cross. When they had reached a place called Golgotha, that is, the place of the skull, they gave him wine to drink mixed with gall, which he tasted but refused to drink. When they had finished crucifying him they shared out his clothing by casting lots, and then sat down and stayed there keeping guard over him.

Above his head was placed the charge against him: it read: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' At the same time two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads and said 'So you would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days! Then save yourself! If you are God's son, come down from the cross!' The chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him in the same way. 'He saved others,' they said 'he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He put his trust in God; now let God rescue him if he wants him. For he did say, "I am the son of God." Even the robbers who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way.

From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me!' When some of those who stood there heard this, they said, 'The man is calling on Elijah,' and one of them quickly ran to get a sponge which he dipped in vinegar and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink. 'Wait!' said the rest of them 'and see if Elijah will come to save him.' But Jesus again crying out in a loud voice, yielded up his spirit.

(All kneel and pause a moment.)

At that, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the earth quaked; the rocks were split; the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy men rose from the dead, and these, after his resurrection, came out of the tombs, entered the Holy City and appeared to a number of people. Meanwhile the centurion, together with the others guarding Jesus, had seen the earthquake and all that was taking place, and they were terrified and said, 'In truth this was a son of God.'

- But "there is a response 'from heaven' (the rending of the Temple curtain) that shows, as the centurion goes on to avow, that this 'truly was the Son of God' (15:39), and that in his dying the divine presence and power was striking the decisive blow in reclaiming humanity for the Kingdom".
- The gospel addresses the question as to how "Israel's Messiah, who was also God's beloved Son, was allowed to suffer and die" by showing that "it was God's express design that Israel's Messiah should accomplish his saving work through suffering and death" as the scriptures had foreshadowed.
- To assist the preaching of the gospel in the Greco-Roman world, it shifts the blame for Jesus' death away from the Roman authorities and back towards the Jewish, with tragic historic consequences for the descendants of those who were Jesus' own people.

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.)