

Passion (Palm) Sunday, Year A

GOSPEL

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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?' Pilate 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.

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 puts 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 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.

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.'

(Matthew 27:11-54)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The words of Jesus from the cross in this text are in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.
- The name Barabbas literally means son (*bar*) of the father (*abba*). Here the crowd chooses the false son while condemning the true Son.
- This Sunday is also known as 'Palm Sunday' and commemorates Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Celebrations similar to those carried out in churches today were being held in Jerusalem as early as the fourth century.
- The narratives of the passion of Jesus—the arrest, trial, crucifixion and death—are the earliest strands of what came to be written down as the gospels.
- Since the fourth century, the site now marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been revered as the site of Calvary.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This long reading from the passion of Jesus is presented by Matthew as a series of alternating scenes in which the disciples fail while Jesus commits himself both to them and to the Father. The betrayal by Judas, the disciples fleeing at his arrest and Peter's denial all highlight sinful humanity and imperfect faith. But it is this very state that Jesus has come to redeem. The moment of his death is when this redemption is achieved. At that moment, the veil in the temple, which hangs in front of the holy of holies, where God dwells, is torn asunder. God is no longer separated from humankind. God's indwelling has burst the confines of the temple and permeates the entire world. Heaven and earth are no longer separate from each other. In the salvific death of the God-man, heaven and earth are united again. Ironically, it is the Gentile centurion who proclaims the divinity of Jesus: 'In truth this was a son of God.'

- In what ways do you feel the indwelling of God in your life?
- In what ways do you feel liberated and redeemed by Christ?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How will knowing of the cross of Christ help you to carry your own crosses in the future?
- What emotions stir in you as you read or listen to the passion of the Lord?
- Reflect for a short time on the moments of success and triumph as well as the moments of failure and despair in your life. Share your thoughts in pairs.
- Like Simon of Cyrene in today's gospel, help someone carry their cross this week.
- Use today's gospel acclamation as your prayer this week:
Christ became obedient for us even to death, dying on the cross.
Therefore God raised him on high and gave him a name above all other names.

SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

One of the great devotions associated with this period of the church year is the Stations of the Cross (sometimes called the 'Way of the Cross'). There are traditionally fourteen stations associated with the arrest, trial and death of Jesus. To travel and meditate on these events is a centuries-old practice, with some evidence of similar devotion going back as far as the fifth century. It is a practice that was promoted by the Franciscans, who were given custody of the holy places in the Holy Land in the

fourteenth century.

- You could view a video of pilgrims following the traditional Way of the Cross in Jerusalem.
- You could examine the Stations of the Cross in your church or use a contemporary Stations of the Cross that draws parallels between current issues and the passion of Christ.
- Reflect on your feelings as you listened to the passion being read.

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

There are two central images in this week's liturgy: the palms signify the glory and triumph of Jesus, as well as reminding us of his entry into Jerusalem before his death, and the cross represents Christ's love for the world and the sacrifice he made so that salvation would be available to all people.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- In what ways does your community celebrate the events of the passion? Are there roles that the elect could take in the ceremonies of Holy Week?
- Use a cross and some palms as a focus for prayer. Allow some quiet time for meditation on the events of the passion, perhaps singing or listening to 'Jesus, remember me' (GA 308). Pray for each other, especially those who are approaching baptism. Conclude with the prayer of exorcism in the *RCIA* at §94F.

NOTES