

## PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION, CYCLE C

**Open with a prayer:** *Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself to take on the form of a human person, humbling yourself even to death on the cross. May this cross be a sign for all generations of your triumph over evil, suffering, sin and death. Unite us with your passion that we might truly recognize you in our own suffering, Amen.*

**Sharing of life:** What are you most and least grateful for this week?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** This is the holiest week of the entire liturgical year and the Triduum is the peak event of the week. Jesus' passion, suffering and death are the focus of all three readings.

If you have not read the commentary on the reading, consider reading it after each reading.

### FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-7

The mysterious servant spoken of in this reading is a faithful disciple who can speak a dynamic word to his people because he has a "well-trained ear" that listens to what God has to say to him. Unlike Israel, he is not rebellious and, with the help of God, he is able to bear his sufferings. It is easy to see why the early Christians saw in this suffering servant the figure of the suffering Christ.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is a psalm of lament that speaks of the writer's affliction. It also speaks of trust in God in the midst of trial.

### SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses people with proud and independent ways, which often led to bickering and disharmony among them. To this community Paul offers, as a model of humility, the suffering figure of Christ. He *emptied* himself of this divinity (i.e., the privilege of divinity) by becoming one with sinful humanity. He experienced total *humiliation* by dying a criminal's death. His obedience made up for humanity's disobedience. Then God rewarded his obedience by *exalting* him and restoring to him his glory. And now, Jesus is Lord of the universe. Paul is encouraging the Philippians and us to empty ourselves of all that is not of God so that we might be filled with God and his love.

### THE PASSION ACCORDING TO LUKE 22:14-23:56

While Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have lots of material in common in their account of Jesus' passion, each evangelist has his own unique features. Some of the unique characteristics of *Luke's* Passion account are:

- Luke repeatedly speaks of the *innocence* of Jesus, suffering unjustly for his beliefs and lifestyle (23:4, 14, 15, 22, 41, 47). Luke emphasizes the innocence of Jesus in order to connect him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, whose innocent suffering was redemptive. The innocent martyrdom of Jesus would also have been an important motive for the early Christians who themselves were facing persecution and death for their belief in Jesus.
- Jesus is the savior of *all* people, Jew and Gentile, outcast and sinner. We see this when Jesus reaches out to the good thief who was a total outcast (23:39-43). He also reaches out to the servant and heals his ear (22:51).
- Luke's Passion shows Jesus as one filled with God's mercy and forgiveness. We see this when Jesus forgave his executioners: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" (23:34) and when he forgave the repentant criminal.
- The devil that departed from Jesus after the temptations returns now, "entering Judas" (22:3).
- Luke's Gospel features women more than all the rest. In Luke's Passion narrative, Jesus comforts the weeping women of Jerusalem (23:27-32).

- Like the Old Testament prophets who suffered and died for righteousness, Jesus is presented by Luke as a model for the disciples who will also suffer and die because of their faith in him.
- In Luke's Passion, we often find Jesus in prayer and recommending prayer as the only sure defense against temptation and trouble (Luke 22:22, 32, 34, 40, 46).
- In Luke's Passion, the disciples are presented in a more positive light. Unlike the other evangelists, he does not mention that the disciples fled from Jesus.
- Jesus is presented as one with total trust in God. His final words are, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (23:46).
- Writing primarily for people with a Greek background, Luke presented Jesus as a heroic figure. The ideal of the Greek hero confronting death was embodied by Socrates who, though innocent, was condemned to death; though he could have avoided death by renouncing his teaching, he chose not to; up to the very moment of his death he is shown teaching his disciples; he faces his execution (death by hemlock) with courage and serenity, willingly taking the cup, drinking the poison, lying down and dying peacefully.
- Finally, Luke stresses *discipleship* as following the way of the Master who freely takes up his cross (9:23, 14:27), just as Simon the Cyrenean did.

Jesus died as he had lived, healing, reconciling, forgiving, reaching out to the outcast and trusting totally in his Father.

## **AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON THE VARIOUS SCENES IN LUKE'S PASSION.**

### **21:14-20 - The Last Supper - The Institution of the Eucharist; The Passover Meal**

It is the night before Jesus will sacrifice himself for humanity, the night before his body will be broken and his blood poured out. On this holy evening, now called Holy Thursday, Jesus dramatized during the Passover Meal, what will happen the next day, the offering of himself as the new Paschal Lamb. During the meal, Jesus interrupts the ritual to offer himself to his disciples in the form of bread and wine. This signifies the making of the New Covenant between God and humanity. The old covenant was sealed with the sprinkling of a lamb (Ex. 24:5-8), the New Covenant is sealed with the blood of the one John called the Lamb of God. The old covenant was based on the law and keeping it, the new covenant is based on faith in Christ, which empowers us to keep his law of love.

### **22:21-38 Unseemingly Behavior at Eucharist**

We sometimes say today: "How can people say and do certain things and partake of the Eucharist?" Well, it may console us to know that behavior very contrary to the spirit of the Eucharist has been done since its institution. In verses 21-38, we hear about Judas partaking of Eucharist even as he plots to betray Jesus. We hear the other Apostles engage in a conversation about who is going to be 'top dog' in Jesus' new kingdom. We hear how Peter will deny the Master and we hear talk about using swords. Bottom line: one can sit at the table with Jesus and yet betray him in some big or small way. In verses 35-37, Jesus seeks to prepare his Apostles for the rough days ahead.

When Jesus speaks about taking up swords, he is speaking figuratively to alert them to the seriousness of the struggle ahead. They take him literally and produce two swords. In the difficult times ahead, swords will be of no use, but prayer will, as we shall see in the next scene.

### **22:39-53 The Agony in the Garden and the Arrest of Jesus**

The main emphasis in Luke's Gethsemane scene is Jesus' *prayer*. Repeatedly, Luke presents Jesus as a man of prayer and as a teacher of prayer. Now his prayer to his Father sustains him in the face of a Satanic attack in his hour of severe darkness. In contrast, the Twelve fall asleep. But we should note the struggle was not easy. Jesus prayed that the upcoming cup of suffering would pass, but not if it would mean not following God's will.

Then the betrayer, soldiers, the chief priests (the clergy) and the temple guards come to get Jesus. Their arrival at night symbolized the darkness of their actions. Jesus rejects violence as a way to stop what is about to happen. He heals the servant's ear.

### **22:24-62 Peter's Threefold Denial of Jesus**

In verse 31, Jesus told Peter that Satan would attack him. It now happens in the courtyard. Peter shows a mixture of courage and cowardice. It took courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard. He is the only disciple there, but then he lost courage when the two women and a man accused him of being an associate of Jesus. After his third denial, Peter encounters Christ who looks upon him with mercy. Peter is immediately remorseful and "weeps bitterly".

### **22:66 - 23:25, The Trial of Jesus and the Sentence of Death**

Jesus is brought before the Jewish authorities, Herod and Pilate. Various accusations are made. One important thing to note in these verses is Luke's emphasis on the *innocence* of Jesus. Pilate pronounces Jesus innocent three times, but his fear of the people blocks him from setting Jesus free. The people cry out for the blood of Jesus. They say he is dangerous, but ironically they choose to set Barabbas free even though he is an insurrectionist and a murderer. In all this, Satan has his hour of triumph. In emphasizing Jesus' innocence, Luke is telling his audience several decades later that they too, though innocent may also be interrogated, persecuted, jailed and executed. During such times of trial, prayer against the temptation to lapse will be their strength.

### **23:26-49, The Journey to Calvary and the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus**

We note the following in these verses.

- Simon carrying the cross "*behind*" Jesus came to be seen as the symbol of true discipleship - one walking behind the Master, sharing his sufferings.
- When Jesus encounters the weeping women, he tells them they should be weeping for their city and their children who will have to suffer through the destruction of Jerusalem.
- The taunting and mockery of Jesus by those at the foot of the cross and by one of the criminals crucified with Jesus, is sometimes seen as the "last temptation" of Jesus, namely, to come down from the cross, the temptation to use his divine power for his own self-preservation. "*He saved others, let him save himself*" (v. 35) "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.*" (v. 37)
- Darkness covering the earth symbolizes the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, between the forces of good and evil.
- The curtain of the temple torn in two means that the way of access to God through Jesus' work of redemption is now available to all.
- The innocence of Jesus - the repented thief notes Jesus' innocence (v. 40-42), the centurion also speaks of Jesus' innocence (v. 47) and the crowd beats their breasts (v. 48).
- Jesus' expression of forgiveness for his executioners (v. 34) and for the repented criminal (v. 43).
- Jesus' obedience and total surrender to God's will; "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" (v. 46). Scripture scholar, Charles Talbert writes: "In his horizontal relations with others, Jesus' *innocence* is accepted. In his vertical relationship with the Father, Jesus' *obedience* is highlighted". Jesus dies quietly full of trust; a model for Christian martyrs to follow (Act. 7:59).

### **23:50-56 The Burial of Jesus**

We note two things:

- Joseph of Arimathea, though a member of the Sanhedrin, was an upright man like Simeon who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. He also believed in the *innocence* of Jesus.
- Luke wants all to know that Jesus' body was buried. (Our Creed states: "he died and was buried".) Jesus' death was real.

### **FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse or incident in today's readings speaks to you most?
2. Judas is a tragic figure in the Passion story. What do you think went wrong for him? How can we be like Judas?
3. "Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care lest he fall" (final verse of second reading, third Sunday of Lent). It seems Peter felt he was standing secure when he says in today's gospel: "Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be". The next day, Peter denied Jesus three times. Do you ever have a sense that even though you may think that your faith in Jesus is very strong, it may be in another way be very fragile?
4. Which of the fourteen Stations of the Cross speak to you most?

### **RESPONDING TO THE WORD**

Name one way you can respond to Luke's Passion. Suggestions: Spend sometime reflecting on where the *Stations of the Cross* are happening in you community or global world. Participate in your parish's Holy Week services.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Especially pray for all who are carrying a big cross at this time. Pray that many will participate in the celebration of the Triduum. Pray for the elect who will be baptized and the candidates who will be received into Full Communion with our church during the Easter Vigil.©