

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION, CYCLE A

Open with a prayer: *Almighty, ever-living God, you have given the human race Jesus Christ our Saviour as a model of humility. He fulfilled your will by becoming man and giving his life on the cross. Help us to bear witness to you by following his example of suffering and make us worthy to share in his resurrection. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.*

Sharing of life: The Lenten season is nearly over. How did it go for you? What went well or fairly well? What, if anything, didn't go so well?

Facilitator reads focus statement: The readings for Passion Sunday revolve around the two meanings of the word "passion." Paul's letter to the Philippians illustrates how these meanings intertwine. Christ felt such passion (love) for humanity that he took on our human condition and endured the most extreme passion (suffering) we can imagine as the servant of God.

If you have not read the commentary on the three readings prior to your meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50: 4-7

This reading is the third of four "*suffering servant songs*" found in the book of Isaiah. As the early Christians read these passages, they saw in them images of Jesus, the suffering servant of God.

In Isaiah's mind, the *servant* spoken about may have been an individual or the nation of Israel. The *servant* is entrusted with a special mission on behalf of God's people. The *servant* is, first of all, portrayed as a disciple, a listener to God's word. Morning after morning, the Lord "opens" the ear of the *servant* that he might hear God's word. Unlike the Israelites in the desert, the *servant* is not rebellious, nor does he turn back. Because of his faithfulness to God, the *servant* undergoes all kinds of humiliations and sufferings. (Looking at the servant as Israel, the sufferings might point to her time in exile.) In the midst of his sufferings, the *servant* displays great trust in God. "*The Lord is my help, therefore, I will not be disgraced.*" The phrase "*set my face like flint*" refers to the *servant's* determination to be faithful to God.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is the moving psalm that Jesus prayed on the cross. It is a combination of *lament* in a time of great suffering and *thanksgiving* for God's deliverance. The imagery used is very powerful and vivid. The opening verses describe the suffering and division that the psalmist endures from onlookers. Among other things, they mock him for placing his trust in God. But the mockery and brutality of the onlookers cannot undermine the devotion of the psalmist who remains steadfast in his trust of God. The psalm ends on a positive note with the psalmist proclaiming, in the midst of the assembly, God's goodness.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2: 6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addressed the community of Philippi, a people with proud and independent ways, which often led to bickering and disharmony amongst them. Paul admonishes the community to set aside their bickering ways and to live in harmony. He holds up before them as a model the "attitude of Christ," who "emptied himself" and became like a "slave" (or like the servant in the first reading). Because Christ "emptied" himself and because of his humility, God "raised" him up and "exalted" him. Like the servant in the first reading, God came to the help of Jesus, the servant, *par excellence* and gave him the name "Lord," a name given only to God in the Old Testament.

GOSPEL: The Passion according to Matthew

Scripture scholars point out that each of the four accounts of the Passion of Christ have their own unique characteristics. We will look at three of the unique characteristics of Matthew's Gospel.

* **Fulfillment of the Scriptures** Matthew's gospel was written primarily for a Jewish audience who had embraced Christianity. Matthew goes to great pains to show that the events spoken about in his gospel, including his passion narrative, happened not because of some outside forces, but to fulfill what was foretold in their Hebrew scriptures to fulfill God's plan.

The passion story begins with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas for 30 pieces of silver. This event is alluded to in Zechariah 11:12-13. When Jesus was arrested, Matthew says: "*all this happened to fulfill the prophecies in scripture.*"(26:56) immediately after this statement, Matthew tells us: "*all the disciples left him and fled*" (v. 57), thus fulfilling Jesus' earlier prediction (26:31) as well as the prophecy of Zechariah "*I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered*" (13:7). During his trial, Jesus behavior and the mistreatment heaped upon him recalled the experiences of the Suffering Servant Songs in Isaiah, (see today's first reading). On the cross, Jesus prayed with the words of Psalm 22-today's psalm.

* **Identity of Jesus.** The recognition of Jesus' true identity plays an important role in Matthew's gospel and passion narrative.

At the last supper, the disciples refer to him as "Lord" (26:22). Recognition of Jesus also comes from his opponents. This irony should not be overlooked. In their scorn, Jesus' mockers acknowledge him as the Christ (26:28), Pilate calls him "King of the Jews", as do the soldiers (27:11, 29). His taunters speak of him as the "Son of God" (27:40, 43).

* **Obedient and Faithful Son of God.** In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the faithful Israelite who enjoys a unique relationship with his Father. Judas is mentioned more as a means of *contrast*: he is the "dark side of discipleship." In Matthew's Passion, Jesus is strong, peaceful and faithful despite all the infidelity, hatred, violence and cowardice around him. He especially shows himself to be a faithful friend to his Apostles. He forgives them for their weaknesses and failures. Most of all, he remains faithful to his Father. The seeming despair cry: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" should not be interpreted as Jesus feeling abandoned by God. The cry, which is taken from Psalm 22, is a lament psalm, which "lays bare the tortured body and spirit of the believer who complains to God and cries out for relief, but *never* has any doubt that he will be saved and vindicated."

Matthew contrasts Jesus' faithfulness to the unfaithfulness of his Apostles and his own people who betray him, reject him, beat him jeer at him, deny him, fall asleep on him and abandon him in his greatest hour of need. Of course, all do not fail him. Simon helps him to carry his cross and the women are faithful, even if "at a distance." Jesus is presented as the *suffering servant*, obedient unto death, even death on a cross (second reading).

On this Passion Sunday, the emphasis is on the *Cross* of Christ, this is lifted high. For our sake, Jesus "empties" himself. To be filled with God, we must first do the work of self-emptying: empty ourselves of the false self, which is proud, jealous, greedy, rude, unforgiving, dishonest, self-sufficient, etc.

FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Which part of the passion struck you most deeply this year? Why?
2. What verse speaks to you most in the first reading? What, if anything, in the servant's experience speaks to you most?
3. Fidelity to Jesus and his word is a daily challenge. What helps you to remain faithful? What distracts you or makes it hard?
4. How does listening to the Passion of Jesus help you deal with the big disasters that occur in our world, e.g. terrorist acts, hurricanes, Tsunami disasters etc?
5. What does Holy Week mean to you?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Name one way you can act on God's word in today's readings. Suggestions: Be patient with the sufferings in your life. Join them to the sufferings of Christ and offer them up for some cause in the world. Pray for people carrying a heavy cross at this time. Pray that morning after morning, the Lord may open the ears of your heart to hear God's word.

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Especially pray for all who are suffering in body, mind, and spirit and for their caregivers. Pray that many people will participate in our Holy Week services. ©

MEDITATION

All disciples come to this same dark night when our faith in the Lord is shaken. There may be earthquakes and explicit denials, troubling dreams and profitable betrayals. Or we may simply fall asleep when our presence is needful, or run away when called upon to risk a stand. We may join with the crowds and call for Barabbas over Jesus, even shout for the blood of the innocent. We may be the ones who jeer and mock, or simply the ones who say nothing in the face of injustice.

The night when our faith is shaken is the bleakest night our soul can know. But the disciples survive it to become the apostles, turning the shame of desertion into the courage of martyrdom. The only one who is not transformed is the one who condemned himself for his failure, fearing God's justice and forgetting God's mercy.