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The celebration of Palm Sunday summarizes the drama we will memorialize for the next seven days. The week we call holy invites us to enter into the heart of our faith with our heads and hearts and feet. We will listen to the stories, feel the mix of emotions, and walk the stations that recall the final week of Jesus' life on earth. One way we might approach this week is through the vantage point of the three crowds Luke describes. Their diverse responses to Jesus have been repeated through the ages and probably in our own lives.

Pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem (known as the Holy City) for the feast of Passover were the majority of the first crowd. They were a diverse group: some more pious than others, some experts in the traditions, and others who had barely heard the stories. Then Jesus, the popular prophet appeared among them, not on pilgrim's feet, but riding a foal and thus fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah: "Behold: your king is coming to you, a just savior is he, Humble, and riding on a donkey" (9:9).

As soon as somebody caught on to the symbolism, the excitement spread like wildfire, and suddenly there was a triumphant procession with wildly enthusiastic singing and escalating expressions of homage. The multitude, already in a holiday mood, began to chant a song that echoed the hymn angels sang at Jesus' birth. But

this crowd's commitment was about as deep as the individual footprints they left. Although Jesus told the Pharisees that even the stones would join in the blessings, the excitement would fade as soon as the winds of danger blew onto the scene.

The second crowd, the ones who gathered during Jesus' trial, included the assembly of the religious leaders and an amorphous group called "the people." Some of them may have witnessed Jesus' arrest in the garden. Pilate assembled this group and told them that he had found Jesus innocent of any capital crime, saying he deserved nothing worse than a flogging. But this throng, stoked up to shout and scream, raucously denounced Jesus and demanded that Pilate release a convicted criminal in his place. Pilate thus handed Jesus over to them.

The third crowd, mentioned only by Luke, followed behind the condemned Jesus. Luke explains that this crowd included many women who wept and performed rituals of mourning as they lamented Jesus' fate. Responding to them, the only group to whom he spoke during the time of his passion, Jesus told them to weep instead for their people and the time to come when only the barren would give thanks, and they only because they had no children to suffer what was happening.

The people in the first group seemed to consider Jesus a superstar. Like many who can quote much of the Bible and still assiduously avoid its potential to implicate them, they sang their hosannas and marched with exuberance. But when night came, and the star fell, their enthusiasm waned more quickly than the moonlight. Whether or not they eventually joined either of the next two crowds, they quickly quieted their proclamations of faith and retreated into silence about the king who had come in the name of the Lord.

The second crowd might be characterized as complicit bystanders and vociferous collaborators. If they only watched the show at Jesus' arrest, they turned into co-agitators with their hierarchy when facing Pilate. Following the leaders, they demanded the release of a criminal ironically called Barabbas (son of the father). Like Peter who denied Jesus, they repeated their demand three times over. With a primal and inviolable commitment to their own well-being, their affiliations sailed the winds of change as they sang the tune most suited to their purpose.

The third group, distinguished by the presence of weeping women, was the only one to register any sort of protest or grief over what was happening to Jesus. Luke makes it a point to mention three times that these women followed Jesus. They followed

him on the road at a distance from the cross and when his body was placed in the tomb. They could do little, but he knew they were there. Sometimes presence is the only, and most important, thing someone has to offer.

If we wonder with which crowd we might be identified, we should look at where we find ourselves today. How do we publicly express our "Hosannas" when we are not in a crowd of happy, singing Christians? How often do we end up as complicit bystanders because we avoid speaking an unpopular opinion? Are we willing to appear as weak as the women who could do no more than walk and weep but allowed their presence to speak a potent message of solidarity?

### **ISAIAH 50:4-7**

This, the third of Isaiah's Songs of the Servant of God, helped the early Christians understand how their tradition prepared them to comprehend God's work in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was very likely in the back of Luke's mind as he wrote his narrative of Christ's passion. Jesus himself surely meditated on this song in relation to his own life and the fate he anticipated and accepted. This song helps us contemplate Jesus in the heart of his tradition and in relationship to the Father.

The servant begins with the recognition that God has given him a gift for preaching. Far from leading him to rhetorical fame, his gift is to be used for the sake of the downtrodden. Unlike prophets and seers who record great visions, the servant simply listens to God each morning, aware that it is God who opens his ear. The servant expresses his own initiative in the simple act of listening, of not rebelling, not turning back. His gift of self is unlimited.

We then encounter the well-known reality that God's servants encounter opposition. Whether attributed to the evil spirits, to God's human enemies, or to "the world," the more God's servants proclaim God's will, the more they will be persecuted by those for whom God's plan is inconvenient. What makes this servant stand out is that, unlike many who pray against their enemies, he undergoes mistreatment and insult without pleading for vindication or vengeance.

The final part of the song makes a proclamation of hope that would put even Abraham to shame. While Abraham's act of hope was to trust that God would give him a multitude of descendants, this servant trusts that in the midst of every form of human disgrace and suffering, God is still his help. He is not saying, "God will undo it all," but rather, "In all of this, God is my help." Thus, he can set his face like flint

knowing that nothing happening to him is a cause for shame, but rather an integral part of his love affair with God. In that sense, the statement, "I shall not be put to shame," is a statement of faith. It does not mean I will never be embarrassed, but rather, my faith will not have been in vain. Like Thomas Merton who prayed, "I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death," the servant is proclaiming that his faith in God goes beyond his understanding. It only makes sense as love.

The last two verses could provide the backdrop for Luke's proclamation of Christ's passion. Knowing that Jesus was familiar with this song, we might imagine it as his key to interpreting everything that happened from the time of his prayer in the garden through the moment of his death — and in fact, through his entire life on earth.

### **PSALM 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24**

This psalm invites us to stand with Christ in the paradoxical juxtaposition of praying, both, "I shall not be put to shame," and, "My God, why have you abandoned me?" While we sing only a few verses, the entire psalm mirrors Christ's passion and is one of the psalms of lament that never asks for vengeance. It reflects the attitude we see in Jesus as he prays that his persecutors be forgiven for the ignorance underpinning their cruelty.

The refrain we sing is what Matthew and Mark quote as Jesus' last words from the cross. Luke softens the desperation of that cry by replacing it with Psalm 31:6, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." But Luke's psalm of choice, unlike Psalm 22, includes such petitions as "Put the wicked to shame; reduce them to silence in Sheol. Strike dumb their lying lips" (Psalm 31:18-19).

The first three psalm verses we sing are vivid reminders of Christ's suffering. We can barely imagine his feelings when scoffed at, mocked and ridiculed as portrayed in the first verse. The second verse speaks more directly of fear and physical suffering; The third, of the indignity of being stripped of absolutely everything except the ability to cry to God.

The final verse chosen for today's liturgy proclaims the hope of the devastated one who prays: No matter what seems to be the final word, "I will proclaim your name to my brethren." This declaration echoes Jesus' predictions of his passion, each of which ended with the promise of resurrection on "the third day." That is an act of

faith, not a calendar prediction. It echoes the faith proclaimed in the opening line of the psalm, the line we use as a refrain.

As we pray this, we are invited to contemplate the paradox of feeling abandoned and still calling out to "My God." Psalm 22 is the prayer of someone who continues to love and strive for faithfulness when understanding has been utterly lost. It is a prayer that we may hope we never have to pray.

### **PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11**

To pursue this other line of thinking, we can begin by noting that while our translation says, "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped," the word though is a translator's addition. The addition of the word though makes it sound as if Christ departed from the divine character by not clinging to godliness. A stricter translation says, "Christ Jesus, being in the form of God did not..." (King James Version). Without the word though, the sentence implies that "not grasping" reveals what God is like rather than being a departure from divinity.

Again, our translation says, "Rather, he emptied himself." "Rather" translates the Greek word *alla* which can mean "but" or "yea." If we take it in that latter sense, we again encounter the notion that Christ's self-emptying and the humility of his appearance actually reveal what divinity is truly like.

This approach to the hymn interprets Christ's kenosis, his self-emptying, as the core revelation of his incarnation and all that it implied. According to this, Jesus Christ — the best image we have of God — reveals that being like God is the opposite of grasping. God is self-emptying and humbling because that is what love is. As the hymn goes on, the phrase, "Because of this God greatly exalted him," reiterates what happened at Jesus' baptism and the transfiguration. God says, "Yes, this is my son, my own, the expression of who I am."

Following this logic, to call Jesus "Lord" is to say that the glory of the Father is self-giving love. The glory of the Father, as the Gospel of John points out, is revealed in the cross, in the love that won't stop loving. The glory of the Father is the opposite of grasping. The glory of the Father is the servant who washes feet as a sign of loving service.

### **LUKE 19:28-40 and 22:14—23:56**

Last week, we met a crowd infected with contagious fury and ready to stone a woman for adultery. This week's crowd is enthralled with the spectacle of Jesus' entry into the Holy City. This crowd's praise might be as mindless as the fury of the former. In fact, Luke's account of the Passion gives us a crowd for almost every emotion. We have this jubilant crowd who praised Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, the tumultuous crowd who joined the religious leaders three times in demanding Jesus' crucifixion, and a mournful crowd of women who lamented his fate as he walked the way of the cross.

Jesus responded differently to the three crowds. When the Pharisees told him to rebuke the crowds accompanying him into Jerusalem, he defended the people singing his praises by saying, "If they keep silent, the stones will cry out!" For those who had ears to hear, that reply echoed the song of the three martyrs, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who sang from their executioners' furnace: "Mountains and hills bless the Lord, praise and exalt him forever" (Daniel 3:75).

Jesus made no reply whatsoever to the crowds who called for his execution. The women were the only group to whom he spoke directly. In anticipation of his prayer for forgiveness for his persecutors, he told them not to weep for him, but for themselves and the fate of the people who remained closed to his message. By doing this, Jesus invited them to lament what he lamented, the tragedy incurred by the people who rejected him. He wanted the women in solidarity with him to lament with him rather than for him.

As we watch the people who were part of the story of Jesus' passion, we might wonder what we should learn from them. The disciples at the supper mightily missed the point of Jesus' prayer over bread and wine. Just after he blessed their meal as a sacrament of his self-giving, they got involved in a jealous argument over status. That quarrel was simply the insiders' petty imitation of the religious leaders who wanted to do away with Jesus because they perceived him as a rival to their power and position.

Peter's greatest act of discipleship came not in his promises, but his tears. His contrite admission of failure was the opening to grace that Jesus had promised when he said, "I have prayed for you that ... once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers."

In Luke's Gospel, the only two who seemed to grasp and appreciate the meaning of the events of his passion were strangers. The first of them was one of Jesus' fellow victims, the dying criminal who believed that even in his dying, Jesus was indeed coming into his kingdom. The other was the centurion who, upon seeing how Jesus died, glorified God and said, "Surely this man was righteous." These declarations of faith, one presumably by a Jew adjudicated as a sinner, the other by a gentile, were a sign of Jesus' fulfillment of his mission. More than the disciples, more than even the women, these two lead us toward understanding the saving effects of Jesus death.

## **Planning: Palm Sunday**

By Lawrence Mick

This column will help prepare for the liturgy of Good Friday which many people do not understand. Some speak of it as "Good Friday Mass," but it is not a Mass. Though Communion is offered, it is not a Eucharist. It is truly a unique liturgy in our annual calendar.

The Good Friday liturgy has three parts, and each has a particular purpose and calls for careful preparation.

- The first part is the Liturgy of the Word. Beginning as simply as we ever begin, the proclamation of the readings is preceded by a silent prostration of the ministers (during which the assembly should kneel) and a short opening collect. Then, we hear some of the most powerful readings of the year: a "Suffering Servant" song from Isaiah; Hebrew's urging to approach the throne of grace with confidence because our high priest has suffered as we do; and John's account of the Passion. The readings and homily are followed by an extended prayers of the faithful, titled "The Solemn Intercessions." Each of the 10 petitions have two parts — an invitation to pray for a particular intention and a collect prayer, with a time of silence in between.
- The second part is the Adoration of the Cross, previously called the Veneration of the Cross. Two different methods for this are described in the Missal.
- The final part is holy Communion, using only bread consecrated at the Mass on Holy Thursday. It is a simplified communion rite, with no sign of peace or Lamb

of God. The liturgy concludes with a blessing but no dismissal formula.

Each of these parts deserves careful planning. Check with the presider to see if he is able to prostrate at the entrance or will just kneel. (As presiders age, some are unable to manage a full prostration.) Instruct the other ministers to follow his choice. Decide if the lectors for the first two readings will also help proclaim the Passion or if additional lectors should be assigned. Determine with the presider, deacon and cantor who will sing or proclaim the two-part intercessions; make sure they are practiced as well.

Decide which form of the entrance with the cross will be used. Plan the best way for the assembly to approach the cross and who will process with and hold the cross for them. Only one cross (not a crucifix) is to be used. It should be a wooden cross, since the acclamation starts with "Behold the wood of the cross." The musicians should prepare enough songs or verses to last through the procession to the cross.

Determine who will retrieve the consecrated bread from the altar of repose and who will take any remaining bread out of the church. As usual the communion song should last as long as the procession.

Careful preparation will lead to a prayerful and powerful liturgy for this unique day.

## **Prayers: Palm Sunday**

By Sue Robb\_

### **Introduction**

"Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." We know well the story of Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. While we proclaim these words with heartfelt sincerity, today, we must consider how we use our words and actions to crucify church and political leaders, others who are not like us, and even ourselves. Today, let us ask for the grace to enter into Holy Week with the desire to more intimately understand Jesus' humanity and his journey to the cross.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, forgive us when we lose sight of your great sacrifice: Lord, have mercy.



- Christ Jesus, awaken us to times we crucify others by our apathy: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, awaken us to times we crucify others by our apathy: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us turn our minds and hearts to the world's needs as we ask God to hear and answer our prayers.

**Minister** For an end to hatred, division, oppression, war, apathy and greed; for strength to those who promote peace and equality; and for courage to speak on behalf of those living on the margins of society, we pray:

- For freedom for all who are unjustly accused and sentenced for crimes they did not commit; for those awaiting trial; for an increase in reconciliation and restorative justice practices between victims and criminals, we pray:
- For our religious and civic leaders; for transparency and moral ethics that respond to the needs of the least served; for an end to unjust laws and practices that segregate, oppress and dominate, we pray:
- For all who are sick in mind, body and spirit; for the institutionalized; and for the abandoned who feel depressed, afraid, suicidal and alone, we pray:
- For all martyrs whose last breaths proclaim Christ's victory over death, we pray:
- For the crosses we carry in the silence of our hearts (pause), we pray:

**Presider** God of justice, you know our needs. As we enter this most Holy Week, open our hearts and give us the courage to take up our crosses and journey with Jesus, our brother and Savior. Amen.

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