

FIRST READING – B PASSION [PALM] SUNDAY

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

The servant of the Lord said:

“The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens –
wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.

I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”



PAUSE for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING – B PASSION [PALM] SUNDAY

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

Therefore God highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:



The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark is printed separately.

SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

The Procession with Palms: Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, while doubtless the major theme of this Sunday in popular estimation, is both historically and liturgically merely a subsidiary theme, serving only as a prelude to the passion. Any homily dealing with the entry into Jerusalem should make this clear.

As usual in the exegesis of the Gospels, we have to distinguish between three levels of meaning in this pericope: the *historical* level, that is, what actually happened in the life of the earthly Jesus and what he intended by it; the *tradition*, or the way the episode was shaped and interpreted in the early communities; and the *redaction*, or the use to which the evangelists put the tradition.

1. *The historical level.* Jesus went up to Jerusalem to deliver his final eschatological challenge to Israel at the very heart of its corporate and religious life. His entry into Jerusalem to cleanse the temple was a symbolic expression of this eschatological challenge.

The final salvation and judgment of God were breaking through. Israel must decide. If it accepts its salvation, all well and good; if not, then (as the cleansing of the temple indicates) the present order of things will be replaced by God's new, eschatological order.

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, he expresses this challenge by riding on a colt (a horse or an ass? Linguistically, "horse" would be possible and more expressive of the challenge, but asses were—and are—more common in Palestine).

Two features suggest that the entry may have taken place at the feast of Tabernacles (or at the Dedication) rather than at Passover: the palms and the singing of Ps 118:25. "Blessed is he who comes" in that case would not originally have had a messianic significance but was merely a welcome to the pilgrims indiscriminately.

2. *The level of tradition.* Jesus' triumphal entry was messianically "overexposed" (Bornkamm). His work undoubtedly evoked messianic hopes and fears, and therefore he may even have been greeted at the entry as the prospective Messiah in a politically Davidic sense. But it is hardly likely that he intended to create this impression overtly.

The Church, however, reinterprets the story in the light of Easter faith. It makes Jesus act as sovereign "Lord" (v. 3), directing the whole proceeding. The miraculous discovery of the ass suggests to the earliest Palestinian community the supernatural foresight of the prophet-man of God, and in the Hellenistic Church that of the "divine man."

It is probable that the community further added to the original Hallel psalm the words of verse 10a as an expression of its faith. The term "our father David" would be unusual in Judaism, and the whole phrase looks like a liturgical acclamation of the early community.

At the level of tradition, then, the entry is an overt expression of Jesus' messiahship conceived in terms of the Davidic Messiah, the eschatological prophet, the *Kyrios* (Lord), and the divine man.

3. *The redaction.* Mark in turn attaches the story to his passion narrative. The effect is to say that the messianic images (son of David, eschatological prophet and man of God, Lord and divine man) are predicable of Jesus only because, and precisely because, he is the crucified One.

Moreover, the divine-man motif—namely, miraculous foresight displayed in the discovery of the

ass—now serves to bring home to the reader that Jesus, as the Son of man who is to suffer, knows beforehand the whole saving plan of God and sets the whole plan in motion by his own initiative.

We take John's version of the story to be, not a fuller redactional modification of Mark or of the other Synoptists, but an independent version derived ultimately from the same tradition used by Mark, though at a very early stage of its development. It lacks the miraculous discovery of the ass, showing that this motif had come into the pre-Markan tradition somewhat later.

In John, furthermore, Jesus finds the ass *after* the acclamation of the crowd. It is difficult to decide whether this is the earliest tradition (which would make Jesus' decision to ride on an animal a response to the crowd's acclamation) or a later theological reinterpretation (Jesus wishing to correct expectation of the Davidic Messiah with a suffering-servant concept).

John has the crowd come out of the city to meet Jesus. Only John mentions that the branches were of palm. If the entry occurred at the feast of Tabernacles or the Dedication, this could be historical. The second half of the crowd's acclamation ("even the King of Israel") is worded differently, supporting our view that this second part is a later expansion.

John, like Matthew (though in a different form, so that John is not using Matthew) but unlike Mark and Luke, has the citation of Zech 9:9, thus indicating that the proof text came into the tradition later. Compare also John's explicit statement (v. 16) that the disciples did not realize the applicability of the text from Zechariah until after the resurrection.

At the level of John's redaction, the following points suggest themselves.

This was not Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem. Hence, the crowd comes out to meet him because of his previous words and works at Jerusalem, especially the raising of Lazarus (v. 18).

The entry in John introduces the episode of the Greeks at the feast (John 12:20-22). This makes Jesus the King of Israel, not in a narrow, nationalistic sense, but in a universalistic sense (see, in John, the title on the cross in three languages).

It is in this sense that we must understand the revelation of Jesus as the resurrection and the life in the raising of Lazarus. He is that for all people.

John alone tells us that the true meaning of the entry did not dawn upon the community until after the resurrection, thus conforming to our contention that there was a development and reinterpretation of the incident in the post-Easter community.

Finally, we must note that both Mark and John, by placing the story before the passion narrative, emphasize what the liturgy itself emphasizes, namely, that the entry is not an isolated episode but is introductory to, and subordinate to, the passion.

Reading I: Isaiah 50:4-7

This is the third servant song of Second Isaiah. The situation presupposed is that Israel in exile is rejecting the prophet's message. The people are "weary" (of his constant predictions of deliverance despite the continuation of the exile?).

But the prophet is undeterred. God has given him the word and he must deliver it, even at the cost of personal suffering. And he is confident that God will eventually prove him right.

In exactly the same way, Jesus' passion was the outcome of his obedient delivery of the message of the kingdom despite his people's rejection, and his constant reliance that God would prove him right.

The passion and death of Christ are not isolated events but of a piece with his whole ministry.

The early Church was right in seeing that the servant songs came to rest in the passion and death of its Lord.

Responsorial Psalm: 22:7-8, 16-17a, 18-19, 22-23ab

Modern New Testament scholars are widely agreed that this a hymn composed prior to Paul's time. It is often called *Carmen Christi*, from Pliny's description of Christian worship. There is much dispute about its proper division into stanzas, but the following reconstruction has much to commend it.

I

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a servant,

II

being born in the likeness of men,
and being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death
[even death on a cross: *added by Paul*].

III

Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name
which is above every name,

IV

that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow [in heaven and on earth
and under the earth: *may be a later
though pre-Pauline, addition*]
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
[to the glory of God the Father: *perhaps
added by Paul*].

The first stanza will refer to the pre-incarnate existence of the Christ: he was of equal status with the Father (see the Old Testament speculations about the divine wisdom). This status he voluntarily surrendered and became subject to human bondage to the powers of evil ("the form of a servant": some refer this to the suffering servant, but at this point the hymn refers to what is common between Christ and all human beings, not to what distinguishes him from them). The last line of the second stanza refers to what is unique: he "became obedient unto death" (Paul emphasizes that that was the scandal—the death on the cross).

The third stanza marks the turning point of the Redeemer's way—his exaltation—while the last stanza speaks of his ultimate triumph over the whole created universe.

The *Carmen Christi* sets the death of Christ in its total context. It is at once the nadir of the divine condescension begun in the incarnation and the ground of Christ's exaltation and final triumph.

Reading II: Philippians 2:6-11

Like the story about Nicodemus that we read last week, a traditional incident is used today as a springboard for a Johannine discourse. We are not told what happened to the Greeks—whether they really got to see Jesus or not. Doubtless in the earlier tradition the story came to a natural conclusion.

The Johannine discourse, with its two great pronouncements, develops the theme of the cross: (a) a grain of wheat must die if it is to bring forth fruit; (b) only by being lifted up will Christ draw all to himself.

These pronouncements are not unconnected with the Greeks' request. They cannot "see" Jesus—that is, experience messianic salvation—until after he has been crucified. Historically this was so.

The contacts of Jesus during his earthly ministry were almost exclusively confined to his own people (see [Romans 15:8](#)), and his contacts with Gentiles were strictly exceptional (the Greeks in this story, the Syro-Phoenician, a woman in Mark, and the centurion in Q—each time there is a reluctance on the part of Jesus to break the barrier). It was only later that Hellenistic Christians began preaching to Gentiles ([Acts 11](#)).

But there was also a theological reason why Jesus restricted his contacts to the Jews. It was only after the wall of partition had been broken down—that is, the Jewish law as a barrier between Jew and Gentile—that the Gentile mission could begin.

Thus, the grain of wheat has to die before it can bring forth fruit (win Gentile converts), and the Son of man has to be "lifted up" (Johannine language for the crucifixion-resurrection) before the Gentiles can be brought in.

The discourse is followed by a prayer of Jesus often called "the Johannine Gethsemane."

Gospel: Mark 14:1-15:47 (long form); 15:1-39 (short form)

The passion accounts are the only parts of the Gospel material that existed from the first in the form of continuous narratives. They were probably constructed as Christian Passover haggadahs, or cult narratives for liturgical recital. Each passion has its particular timbre and theological emphasis.

The suggestion has sometimes been made that Mark's narrative combines two earlier narratives of the crucifixion. Recently a similar suggestion has gone further and proposed that the two pre-Markan crucifixion stories that the evangelist combined in Mark 15:20b-41 express two different theologies of the passion. It will be helpful for our understanding of Mark to follow up this suggestion.

The first and earlier narrative, it is suggested, consisted of 15:20b, 22, 24, 27. It would read as follows: "And they led him away to crucify him. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha. And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left."

This crucifixion report, it is suggested, is very early. It is impregnated with echoes of Psalm 22 and Isa 53 (the parting of the garments and the numbering with the transgressors). This earlier crucifixion narrative represents the stage at which the passion story was formulated in apologetic terms. How could the righteous, innocent servant of God have suffered crucifixion, the type of execution reserved for the worst criminals? Answer: That is precisely the picture of the righteous servant of God in Psalm 22 and Isa 53.

The second and later tradition of the crucifixion has been found in Mark 15:25, 26, 29a, 32b, 33, 34a, 37, 38. This tradition would read as follows: “And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, ‘The King of the Jews.’ Those who passed by derided him. Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice [uttered a loud cry] and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

This narrative interprets Jesus’ death, not as that of an innocent, righteous suffering servant of God, but as an agonizing conflict between the powers of light and the powers of darkness. This is an apocalyptic interpretation. The loud cry of Jesus is an announcement of triumph of the power of light (and implicitly Jesus’ exaltation), and the rending of the temple curtain a symbolical expression of that victory.

We have here an interpretation of the death of Jesus that recalls the hymn in Phil 2:6-11. Jesus is the divine Redeemer who has emptied himself of his divine glory, and therefore it is concealed from the powers of darkness, who are his enemies. They therefore crucify the Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:8). His death leads to his exaltation and triumph over the powers.

Mark does not deny the validity of either interpretation but combines them, allowing the one to correct the other. Jesus’ death is not just that of the righteous, innocent suffering servant, for that could be misunderstood as a mere ethical example (see 1 Pet 2:21-25). His death would then have had no cosmic significance as the triumph over the powers of darkness.

On the other hand, the triumph over the powers of darkness could be misunderstood as mere mythology unless it was insisted that this triumph was wrought out in a real, flesh-and-blood history, in an act of obedience (see Paul’s interpolation of “even death on a cross” in Phil 2:8).

It is this combination of the ethical and the cosmic-eschatological that creates the unique tone of the Marcan passion.

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