FIRST READING – A PASSION 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 – A PASSION 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 Gospel is the Proclamation of the Passion
from the Gospel of Matthew
Matthew 26:14 – 27:66

SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

At the Procession with Palms: Matthew 21:1-11

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is a subsidiary motif in today's liturgy, and if the homilist deals with it at all, it should be treated as a curtain-raiser to the passion story. For the Passion has always been, in fact if not in popular estimation, the major theme of this day.

In Year A we read Matthew's version of the entry into Jerusalem. It has three special features. First, unlike Mark and Luke, though like John, it explicitly cites the prophecy of Zechariah (Mt 21:5).

Such fulfillment quotations are characteristic of Matthew. Sometimes the citations are applied rather mechanically, as in the present case. Matthew seems to imply that Jesus was seated upon both the donkey and the foal (Mt 21:7)!

Actually, in Zechariah "donkey" and "colt, the foal of a donkey" are synonymous parallelism, saying the same thing twice but in different words, which is a characteristic of Hebrew poetry.

Behind Matthew's fulfillment quotations, some of them almost trivial, rests the genuine insight of Christian faith that the events of Jesus' earthly life were the execution of God's saving purpose, fulfilling the promises contained in the Old Testament history of his mighty acts toward Israel.

The second notable feature about Matthew's version of the entry into Jerusalem is his change in the cry of the crowd. Mark (Mk 11:10) wrote, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" Matthew has made it explicitly christological: "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mt 21:9).

This reflects the way the tradition developed: Jesus preached the kingdom of God, and the early Church preached Jesus as the Christ. Yet the one really implies the other.

Jesus did not announce the coming of the kingdom as an abstract idea detached from his own person or as something purely future, even if imminent. Rather, he announced it as the inbreaking of the saving power of God in his own presence, his own words and works.

The Hosanna and the Benedictus, placed in this position in Matthew's narrative and read on this Sunday, tell us that the event of the Cross is the culmination of the inbreaking of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ.

The Cross is not a meaningless or tragic episode attached to the end of an otherwise glorious life; it is the culmination of the movement of God toward humankind, which is the whole history of Jesus.

The third feature is the response of the crowd after Jesus had entered the city: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." To call Jesus a prophet may seem to us a minimizing Christology, but to the earliest Church this was not so.

Jesus was not merely one of the long line of Old Testament prophets. Nor does it mean that he came as a social reformer. He was the last emissary 's final and decisive word to God's people.

Some modern New Testament scholars think that the entry story would have been more appropriate for the feast of Tabernacles (see Jn 7:2). Indeed, historically speaking, it may well have occurred on that occasion.

Jesus visited Jerusalem to lay down his last challenge to his people at the heart of their religious center.

By bringing the entry into close relation to the Passion, however, Mark and the evangelists who follow him make it clear what the meaning of the Cross is: God's final coming in judgment and salvation.

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

Psalm 22 is the passion psalm par excellence. It was probably the first Old Testament passage to be adopted in the "passion apologetic" (the term of B. Lindars) of the early community.

After Easter the early Christians had to reconcile, both for their own faith and for their hoped-for converts from Judaism, their conviction that Jesus was indeed the expected de-

liverer with the scandalous events of his passion. They found their earliest answer in Psalm 22.

This psalm can serve thus because it describes the sufferings of the righteous in language that astoundingly anticipates the events of the passion, not so much through mechanical prediction as through the psalmist's profound insight into the nature of innocent suffering.

But more, it goes on to speak of the vindication of the righteous one (note Ps 22:22-23, the fourth stanza in the arrangement of the psalm as used in today's liturgy).

[Psalm 22 has especially colored the way Mark and Matthew tell the passion story (less so Luke). The question inevitably arises whether some of the details of the narration have been taken from the psalm rather than from historical memory.

This may have happened in some of the peripheral details, for example the division of the garments, but the main facts of the passion stand because of their scandalous nature.

It was this scandalous nature that sent the early Christians to their Old Testaments, not their reading of the Old Testament that led them to gratuitously invent fresh scandalous events.]

Reading II: Philippians 2:6-11

Modern New Testament scholars are widely agreed that this hymn was 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 reconstrucion has much to commend it.

I

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,

II

being born in human likeness.
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 gave him the name
that is above every name,

IV

so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend
[in heaven and on earth and under the earth:
may be a later, though pre-Pauline, addition]
and every tongue should 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 third 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 a 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.

Gospel: Matthew 26:14-27:66

In each year's commentary we seek to bring out the overall characteristics of the Passion accounts in the Gospels. Matthew's account brings out the royalty of Christ, but it is a paradoxical royalty, manifesting itself precisely in humiliation.

The royal note is struck by the triumphal entry and is strongly underlined in the trial scene between Pilate and Jesus (Mt 27:11-26), in the scene of the mocking by the Roman soldiers (Mt 27:27-31), in the title on the cross (Mt 27:37), and in the mockery by the bystanders (Mt 27:42).

On the other hand, the humiliation of Jesus is most emphasized by the cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

Of all the words attributed to Jesus on the cross in all four Gospels, this has the highest claim to authenticity. It is preserved in the oldest tradition (Mark-Matthew).

It was offensive to the later evangelists, who substituted more harmless words for it (Luke-John). It lent itself to later heretical rewriting (Gospel of Peter, which has "My

power, my power ...," expressive of that writing's Docetic christology, according to which the Christ [or divinity] left the man Jesus before his death).

Mark's Gospel gives the cry in Aramaic.

The cry certainly expresses the meaning of the Cross more profoundly than anything else in the passion narrative.

Unlike the other Old Testament citations, which were designed to relieve the events of the Passion of their scandalous character, the cry from the cross actually enhances the scandal.

It states what Paul in a more theological vein expressed when he said that "he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

When Jesus ate with the riffraff, he crossed over from God's side and put himself on the side of sinners in order that he might seek and save them. On the cross he carries this action to its lowest point.

The human being as a sinner is under what the Bible calls the "wrath" of God, that is to say, alienation from God, the sense of God's absence that springs not only from finitude but from willful rebellion.

The word from the cross gives Jesus' death its theological meaning. His death is not just the ordinary dying of any person, a biological event—it is Jesus, not against God but for God, enduring the most bitter consequences of sin. Only by this identification does Jesus liberate from sin and death, both understood, as here, in their theological sense.

The cry is not only one of the words from the cross—it is the word of the cross, the interpretive word that gives the cross its whole meaning as redemptive event.

Other peculiar features of Matthew's passion account are of less moment. They include Jesus' words one of the disciples at the arrest (Mt 26:52-53); the suicide of Judas (Mt 27:3-10); a slight but very moving expansion of the crowd's mockery (Mt 27:43; Bach's treatment of the phrase "for he said, 'I am God's Son'" is one of the most impressive parts of the Matthäuspassion); the opening of the graves of the saints at the death of Jesus and their appearance after the resurrection, an event that is made to serve as one of the contributory factors in the centurion's confession (Mt 27:54).

Some of these additions are pious and devotional, some legendary and symbolic, some apologetic. Otherwise, Matthew follows his Marcan source very closely.

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