

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
PASSION SUNDAY
March 24, 2024**

SCRIPTURES READINGS:

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| Isaiah 50:4-7 | The Servant of the Lord is open to God’s word. |
| Philippians 2:6-11 | Jesus emptied, humbled himself in obedience. |
| Mark 14:1-15:47 | The Passion and death of Jesus Christ |

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Mark:

The Passion Story is always deeply moving for the Christian community. We always see ourselves in the events leading to Calvary. Popular piety has taught Christians that they, too, were in the crowd that shouted for Jesus’ crucifixion. That was not Mark’s intent. For Mark, disciples are always invited to identify with Jesus, not with the mobs. All too often, though, in Mark’s Gospel, the crowd, the Gentiles, the outcasts, the “little ones,” are the ones who hear the message of Jesus while the disciples misunderstand!

In the Passion according to Mark, the Church needs to see itself as ideally conformed to the example of Jesus. The Church needs to be faithful to the end. The Church needs to be obedient to God. The Church needs to surrender itself into God’s hands. The community of faith must strive to reproduce in its life the saving works of the Master.

We are not “the crowd.” Our suffering and dying have value for the glory of God because of our identification with Jesus Christ. The Church for which Mark wrote surely needed that message of affirmation. It was enduring much suffering, utter rejection, and even death in martyrdom.

Christ, the teacher and miracle worker, will reveal his true identity only in death on a cross of shame. “This man was truly the Son of God,” says the centurion as Jesus entered into his death. In the humiliation, rejection, and execution of Jesus, God reveals himself as loving us beyond all human measure.

Our response should not be particularly one of pity for Jesus. Rather, the Christian responds in awe to the unrelenting love that God has for his people. He would see his beloved Son in death so that all could be saved.

In Mark, we do not hear who cut the servant’s ear, nor are we told that Jesus heals it. There are two trials in this account. One takes place before the Jewish leaders and the other before Pontius Pilate, the Roman official. The charge is blasphemy in the Jewish trial. The charge is political sedition or revolt in the Roman trial. Even if it was proved that Jesus claimed to be Messiah, that was not a capital offense. So, Pilate had to be brought in.

Isaiah:

The Third Song from the Suffering Servant in Isaiah calls out to the Lord in his suffering. It is not easy being God's mouthpiece when the people refuse to hear God's message. They want to follow their own devices. Isaiah himself had to suffer much in the rejection that he endured. It is a message of faithfulness. God is faithful. The Servant is faithful.

We are not sure whether Isaiah meant that Israel was the suffering servant, or was it Isaiah himself? The Lord is always faithful to promises. The Servant pledges his faithfulness. "I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame." The Christian community has been consistent in applying these passages to Jesus. His passion and death represent the event of giving his back to be beaten, his beard to be plucked.

Philippians:

Every Sunday at Evening Prayer I in the *Liturgy of the Hours*, the Church prays the great Christ-Hymn from Philippians. Paul exhorts the Christian community to have the same mind as Christ. The Church is called to humility and service. Such was the role of Christ. These were his characteristics. The Church of Christ can be no different. Paul goes on to incorporate a hymn that was probably already in wide circulation among Christian worshippers. The hymn affirms that Christ, whose condition was divine, did not consider being like God something to be exploited for selfish gain!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What have been your predominant feelings over the years as you have heard the Passion story proclaimed on Palm Sunday? Have you felt sorry for Jesus? Have you felt guilty for contributing through sin to his suffering? Have you seen yourself in Jesus' place or side-by-side with Jesus as he goes on trial, is beaten, forced to carry the cross, and finally crucified?
2. Have you ever looked at your future dying as an act of final surrender and total obedience to God? Do you believe that Jesus will be there to accompany you at the last breath? Do you believe that Mary will stand at the foot of your "cross" as you depart from this life? Do you find consolation and strength in this?
3. Jesus wanted his friends to pray with him as he came close to his Passion. Do you want your friends and family to join you when you pray? What strength do you find in being with others when you pray? Do you enjoy the Sunday liturgy in your parish church more than you enjoy praying by yourself in your room? Why?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Set up a small shrine in your home for Holy Week. It could have a cross or crucifix at the center. You might include a palm branch from Palm Sunday. A couple candles could be lit when you pray in front of your personal shrine. Some holy water would remind you of the resurrection and of new life to come at Easter.

PRAYING TOGETHER

**My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
By your Cross and Resurrection
bring me to eternal life with you, Lord Jesus.**

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

St. Paul says that “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). We are in the habit of saying that we have been *redeemed by* Christ. The root meaning of *redemption* suggests that a *price was paid* for our salvation. We were “bought at a great price.” The notion that something enormously valuable had to *be given* so that we might be saved lies behind all this language.

Sin was and is a fact in human existence. Sin stands as a barrier between God and us. Such was the great chasm between heaven and earth after the sin of Adam. It could not be bridged by any human endeavor. Not even the multiple sacrifices of the Jewish era could effectively reconcile sinful humanity with the eternal holy God. Christ, who was both God and man, brought about the reconciliation in his very humanity and divinity, and by his perfect obedience to the Father in his death on the cross.

Christians have formulated a rather complex set of beliefs concerning the effect of the death and resurrection of Christ on our salvation. One of the “fundamentals” for Fundamentalist Protestants consists in what they call “substitutionary atonement” for sin; that is, the belief that Christ’s death was accepted by God as a *substitute* for our death, which was due to us because of sin.

In the Catholic tradition, salvation is more direct and forceful. We do not use the language of substitution. Through faith and baptism, we have been *grafted* on to the Vine which is Christ. The life of holiness by which he lived has been imparted to us, and we have been made holy. We have been *inserted* into the body of the Church which is the body of Christ. As members of his body, we live by the divine energy that made his earthly body live. By the death and resurrection of Christ, we have been saved from eternal damnation. The merits of Christ are communicated to those who believe through faith and the sacraments of the Church. In baptism, we die to sin and are raised to new life in Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we enter into Christ’s sacrifice where his body and blood are “given for our salvation.”

The reality of Jesus’ human nature makes his death on the cross a true sacrifice offered willingly on our behalf. We enter into that sacrifice by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the word of holy Scripture and in the celebration of the sacraments. Our salvation flows from the cross of Christ like water flowing from the side of the crucified Lord.

See: The Catechism of the Catholic Church: # 599-623

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