

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

April 14, 2019 C

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself of your divinity to take on the form of a human person, humbling yourself even to death on the Cross. May this Cross be a sign for all generations of your triumph over evil, suffering, sin and death. Unite us with your passion that we may truly recognize you in our own suffering. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator: This is the holiest week of the entire liturgical year. The Triduum is the peak event of the week. Jesus' passion, suffering and death are the focus of all three readings.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 50:4-7

The mysterious servant spoken of in this reading is a faithful disciple who can speak a dynamic word to his people because he has a "well-trained ear" that listens to what God has to say to him. Unlike Israel, he is not rebellious and, with the help of God, he is able to bear his sufferings. It is easy to see why the early Christians saw in this suffering servant the figure of the suffering Christ.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 22

This is a psalm of lament that tells about the writer's affliction. It also speaks of trust in God in the midst of trial.

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

Writing from prison, Paul addresses people whose proud and independent ways often lead to bickering and disharmony among them. To this community, Paul offers, as a model of humility, the suffering figure of Christ. He *empties* himself of his divinity (i.e., the privilege of divinity) by becoming one with sinful humanity. He experiences total *humiliation* by dying a criminal's death. His obedience makes up for humanity's disobedience. Then God rewards his obedience by *exalting* him and restoring to him his glory. And now, Jesus is Lord of the universe. Paul encourages us and the Philippians to empty ourselves of all that is not of God so that we may be filled with God and his love.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: 22:14-23:56

Each group decides what to do at this point. Did the group read the Gospel before meeting or did the group decide to read the Passion story *one* time during the meeting?

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

**A participant reads the Gospel again,
then all pause to reflect.**

THE PASSION ACCORDING TO LUKE (22:14-23:56)

While Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have lots in common in their account of Jesus' passion, each evangelist has his own unique characteristics.

Following are some of the unique characteristics of Luke's Passion account:

- Luke repeatedly speaks of the *innocence* of Jesus, suffering unjustly for his beliefs and lifestyle (23:4, 14, 15, 22, 41, 47). Only in Luke's narrative does Pilate pronounce Jesus' innocence three times (24:4, 14-16, 22). Only Luke has Herod also declaring Jesus's

innocence (23:6). Luke emphasizes the innocence of Jesus in order to connect him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah whose innocent suffering was redemptive. The innocent martyrdom of Jesus would also have been an important motive for the early Christians who themselves were facing persecution and death for their belief in Jesus.

- Jesus is the Savior of *all* people, Jew and Gentile, outcast and sinner. We see this when Jesus reaches out to the high priest's servant and heals his ear (22:51) and also to the good thief on the cross who was a total outcast (23:39-43).

- Luke shows Jesus as one filled with God's mercy and forgiveness. We see this when Jesus forgives his executioners: "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*" (23:34) and again when he forgives the repentant criminal.

- The devil that departed from Jesus after the temptations now returns, "entering Judas" (22:3).

- Luke's Passion features women more than the other passion narratives. In his Passion narrative, Jesus comforts the weeping women of Jerusalem (23:27-32).

- Like the Old Testament prophets who suffered and died for righteousness, Jesus is presented by Luke as a model for the disciples who will also suffer and die because of their faith in him.

- In Luke's Passion, we often find Jesus in prayer and recommending prayer as the only sure defense against temptation and trouble (22:22, 32, 34, 40, 46).

- The disciples are presented in a more positive light. Unlike the other evangelists, Luke does not mention the disciples fleeing from Jesus.

- Jesus is presented as one with total trust in God. His final words are, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (23:46).

- Writing primarily for people with a Greek background, Luke presents Jesus as a heroic figure. The ideal of the Greek hero confronting death is embodied by Socrates who, though innocent, is condemned to death. Though he could have avoided death by renouncing his teaching, he chooses not to. Up to the very moment of his death, he is shown teaching his disciples. He faces execution with courage and serenity, willingly taking the cup, drinking the poison, lying down and dying peacefully.

- Finally, Luke stresses *discipleship* as following the way of the Master who freely takes up his Cross (9:23, 14:27), just as Simon the Cyrenean did.

Jesus died as he had lived—healing, reconciling, forgiving, reaching out to the outcast, and trusting totally in his Father.

AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON THE VARIOUS SCENES IN LUKE'S PASSION

21:14-20: Last Supper, Institution of the Eucharist, Passover Meal

It is the night before Jesus will sacrifice himself for humanity, the night before his body will be broken and his blood poured out. On this holy evening, now called Holy Thursday, Jesus dramatizes during the Passover Meal what will happen the next day, the offering of himself as the new Paschal Lamb. During the meal, Jesus interrupts the ritual to offer himself to his disciples in the form of bread and wine. This signifies the making of the New Covenant between God and humanity. The Old Covenant was sealed with the sprinkling of a lamb (Ex. 24:5-8); the New Covenant is sealed with the Blood of the One John calls the Lamb of God. The Old Covenant was based on the law and keeping it; the New Covenant is based on faith in Christ which empowers us to keep his law of love.

22:21-38: Unseemly Behavior at Eucharist

Don't we sometimes wonder today how people can say and do bad things and yet partake of the Eucharist? Well, it's not surprising to know that such behavior which is very contrary to the spirit of the Eucharist, has existed since its institution. In verses 21-38, we hear of Judas partaking of the Eucharist even as he plots to betray Jesus. We hear the other Apostles engaging in a conversation as to who is going to be 'top dog' in Jesus' new Kingdom. We hear how Peter will deny the Master and we hear talk about wielding swords. Bottom line: one can sit at the table with Jesus and yet betray him in some big or small way. Needless to say, we should always seek to present ourselves at Eucharist with clear hearts. In verses 35-37, Jesus seeks to prepare his Apostles for the rough days ahead.

When Jesus speaks about taking up swords, he is speaking figuratively to alert his Apostles to the seriousness of the struggle ahead. They take him literally and produce two swords. In the difficult times ahead, swords will be of no use—but prayer will, as we shall see in the next scene.

22:39-53: Agony in the Garden and Arrest of Jesus

The main emphasis in Luke's Gethsemane scene is Jesus' *prayer*. Repeatedly, Luke presents Jesus as a man of prayer and as a teacher of prayer. Now his prayer to his Father sustains him in the face of a Satanic attack in his hour of severe darkness. In contrast, the three disciples fall asleep. But we should note the struggle is not easy. Jesus prays that the upcoming cup of suffering will pass, but only if it is God's will. The consuming passion of Jesus' life is doing the will of his Father.

Then the betrayer, soldiers, chief priests (the clergy) and temple guards come to get Jesus. Their arrival at night symbolizes the darkness of their actions. Jesus rejects violence as a way to stop what is about to happen. He heals the servant's ear.

22:24-62: Peter's threefold denial of Jesus

In verse 31, Jesus tells Peter that Satan will attack him. This happens in the courtyard. Peter shows a mixture of courage and cowardice. It takes courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard. He is the only disciple there, but then he loses courage when two women and a man accuse him of being an associate of Jesus. After his third denial, Peter encounters Christ who looks upon him with mercy. Peter is so aware that he has sinned against the Lord, that he weeps bitter tears of repentance.

22:66-23:25: Jesus' Trial and Death Sentence

Jesus is brought before the Jewish authorities, Herod and Pilate. Various accusations are made. One important thing to note in these verses is Luke's emphasis on the *innocence* of Jesus. Pilate pronounces Jesus innocent three times, but his fear of the people prevents him from setting him free. The people cry out for the blood of Jesus. They say he is dangerous, but ironically they choose to set Barabbas free even though he is an insurrectionist and a murderer. In all this, Satan has his hour of triumph. In emphasizing Jesus' innocence, Luke is telling his audience several decades later that they too, though innocent, may also be interrogated, persecuted, jailed and executed. During such times of trial, prayer will be their strength.

23:26-49: Journey to Calvary, the Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

We note the following in these verses:

- Simon carrying the Cross "*behind*" Jesus comes to be seen as the symbol of true discipleship—one walking behind the Master, sharing his sufferings.

- When Jesus encounters the weeping women, he tells them that they should be weeping for their city and their children who will have to suffer through the destruction of Jerusalem.

- The taunting and mockery of Jesus by those at the foot of the Cross and by one of the criminals crucified with Jesus, is sometimes seen as the "last temptation" of Jesus, namely, to come down from the Cross by using his divine power for his own self-preservation. "*He saved others, let him save himself*" (v.35). "*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself*" (v.37).

- Darkness covering the earth symbolizes the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, between the forces of good and evil.

- The curtain of the temple torn in two means that the way to God through Jesus' work of redemption is now available to all.

- Jesus' innocence is noted by the repentant thief (vv 40-42) and the centurion (v.47), and the crowd beating their breasts (v.48).

- Jesus expresses forgiveness for his executioners (v.34) and for the repentant criminal (v.3).

- Jesus' obedience and total surrender to God's will: "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (v.46). Scripture scholar, Charles Talbert, writes: "*In his horizontal relations with others, Jesus' innocence is accepted. In his vertical relationship with the Father, Jesus' obedience is highlighted.*" Jesus dies quietly, full of trust, a model for Christian martyrs to follow (Acts 7:59).

23:50-56: Burial of Jesus

We note two things:

- Joseph of Arimathea, though a member of the Sanhedrin, is an upright man like Simeon who looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. He also believes in the *innocence* of Jesus.

- Luke wants all to know that Jesus' body was buried. (Our Creed states: "*He died and was buried.*") Jesus' death was real.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what word/words, incidents or images in the readings caught your attention? Did they comfort or challenge you or touch you in some other way?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. Judas is a tragic figure in the Passion story. What do you think went wrong for him? How can we be like Judas?

3. *“Whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care lest he fall”* (final verse of second reading, third Sunday of Lent). It seems Peter feels he is standing secure when he said in an earlier encounter with Jesus: *“Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be.”* In the Passion story, Peter denies Jesus three times. Do you ever have a sense that even though you think your faith in Jesus is very strong, it may in another way be very fragile?

4. Which of the 14 Stations of the Cross speaks to you most?

5. Our daily call is to *speak* and *act* like disciples of Jesus. What is today’s Gospel asking of us disciples?

JOURNALING: *Having listened to God’s Word and to others’ reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what God is saying to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Turn to the person next to you and name one way you can put into practice the message(s) of the readings. Suggestions: Spend some time reflecting on where the *Stations of the Cross* are happening in your community or global world. Participate in your parish’s Holy Week services.

SHARED PRAYER ON THE READINGS

FACILITATOR: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion:

✠ *Jesus, help me this week to spend some time sitting at your feet pondering your great suffering on my behalf.*

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for those carrying a big cross at this time. Pray that many will participate in the celebration of the Triduum. Pray for the elect who will be baptized and the candidates who will be received into full communion with our Church during the Easter Vigil.

FACILITATOR: Let us now conclude with prayers of thanksgiving, petition and intercession. What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we wish to pray?

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Passionate God, your unconditional love and concern for us is made clear in the birth, death, and Resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help me walk the way of the Cross with him this week. Teach me to pray with renewed sincerity and depth, “Thy will be done.”