

Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday)

Principal Service readings

Liturgy of the Palms

Mark 11.1-11 *or* John 12.12-16 Jesus enters Jerusalem to hosannas
Psalm 118.1-2,19-24 [*or* 19-24] open the gates of saving justice

Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50.4-9a God helps his suffering servant
Psalm 31.9-16 [*or* 31.9-18] Take pity on me, Lord
Philippians 2.5-11 Be like Jesus in humility and obedience
Mark 14.1--15.47 *or* Mark 15.1-39 [40-47] The Passion

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The Passion

¹As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. ²Pilate asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' He answered him, 'You say so.' ³Then the chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.' ⁵But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁶Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. ⁷Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. ⁸So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. ⁹Then he answered them, 'Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ¹⁰For he realised that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹²Pilate spoke to them again, 'Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?' ¹³They shouted back, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁴Pilate asked

them, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Crucify him!' ¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

¹⁶Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters); and they called together the whole cohort. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began saluting him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ¹⁹They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

²¹They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²²Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). ²³And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

²⁵It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The inscription of the charge against him read, 'The King of the Jews.' ²⁷And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. ²⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰save yourself, and come down from the cross!' ³¹In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³²Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

³³When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' ³⁵When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah.' ³⁶And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, 'Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.' ³⁷Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Mark 15.1-39 NRSV¹

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Cross show not only the suffering but the Psychology of Christ. Above all, they show, in detail, his way of transforming suffering by love. He shows us, step by step, how that plan of love can be carried out by men, women, and children today, both alone in the loneliness of their individual lives and together in communion with one another.

Caryll Houselander, 1901–1954

Related topics

For further study:

Cross; paschal mystery; redemptive suffering; soteriology

Closing Prayer

O God of eternal glory,
you anointed Jesus your servant
to bear our sins,
to encourage the weary,
to raise up and restore the fallen.

Keep before our eyes
the splendour of the paschal mystery of Christ,
and, by our sharing in the passion and resurrection,
seal our lives with the victorious sign
of his obedience and exaltation.

We ask this through Christ, our liberator from sin,
who lives with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
holy and mighty God for ever and ever.

*Opening prayers, Passion Sunday*⁴

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⁴ *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

Comments and Questions

As Jesus is brought before the Roman governor, Pilate, the focus shifts from the religious to the political sphere. Mark shows us the Jewish authorities manipulating Pilate into condemning Jesus, but in himself Pilate never finds Jesus at fault. Pilate asks him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ Jesus’ answer, ‘You say so,’ is deemed not an answer at all (15.4), and Jesus remains silent (15.4).

Pilate then offers to release a prisoner to the crowd, as it is festival time. The Jewish authorities, having had no success convincing Pilate of Jesus’ guilt, have more success with the crowd, who they whip up to ask for the death of Jesus (15.13). Pilate’s question, ‘What evil has he done?’ underlines the injustice of the treatment of Jesus (15.14). Although not condemning Jesus himself, Pilate weakly accedes to the crowds’ demands and hands Jesus over to be crucified, in order to avoid unpopularity (15.15).

Jesus, thus doesn’t receive any support from the Roman governor, or from the religious authorities, his disciples have deserted him, and Peter has denied him. He is then exposed to the ridicule and taunts of the Roman soldiers, who dress him up in purple and put a crown of thorns on his head. They also spit on him (15.19). It is not enough for him to die, he has to be mocked and derided as well.

Mark provides the shortest account, among the gospel writers, of the crucifixion, but he makes every detail count. On the way to the place of execution, the Roman soldiers enlist the help of an onlooker, Simon of Cyrene. His children are also mentioned (15.21), which indicates that they are known to the church at the time Mark is writing.

In his description of the act of crucifixion, Mark highlights the details of the offering of wine mixed with myrrh, and the division of the clothing – a sign of the influence of passages from the Psalms, 69.21,² 22.18,³ that will be brought out more fully by later evangelists.

² ‘for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink’, Psalm 69.21b.

³ ‘they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.’ Psalm 22.18.

Mark makes of a pattern of threes, as he has used effectively in Gethsemane and at the denial by Peter. He spells out a chronological pattern of the third, sixth and ninth hours. Between the third and sixth hours, three groups mock the crucified. First, there is a reference to destroying and rebuilding the temple, that is thrown at Jesus as a blasphemy (15.29) by passersby who wag their heads and challenge him to save himself (15.30). Here Mark is echoing Psalm 22.7-8:

⁷ All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ⁸ 'Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver— let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'

Psalm 22.7-8 NRSV

Matthew will strengthen this citation. Second, the chief priests and scribes take up another motif from his trial, mocking the idea that Jesus is 'the Messiah, the King of Israel' (15.32). Third, even the criminals executed with him deride him (15.32).

During the second three-hour period, from the sixth to ninth hours, the whole land is plunged into darkness (15.33). Mark may be recalling the warning of Amos 8.9, that the sun would go down at midday and the light would be darkened on the earth by day.

Finally, at the ninth hour, Jesus cries out with aloud voice the only words that Mark reports, the opening words of Psalm 22: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It is paradoxical that the cry is expressed in Aramaic, which carries the tone of intimacy of Jesus' family language, and yet, now, for the first time, Jesus speaks to the Lord as 'God' and not as 'Father'. This cry produces a response of someone offering Jesus some sour wine to drink (15.36), while others wait to see if Elijah will come and save him (15.37). No Elijah comes to save him. John the Baptist had come in the Elijah role, not to save Jesus but to die a martyr's death (9.12-13), prefiguring Jesus' own death.

The 'darkness at noon' scenario evokes the words of the prophet Joel:

¹⁰The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.

¹⁶The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem,

and the heavens and the earth shake. But the Lord is a refuge for his people, a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Joel 2.10; 3.16 NRSV

As Jesus lets out a loud cry the curtain of the temple is torn in two (15.38). Scholars debate whether the veil was the one that separated the outer court from the sanctuary, or the inner veil that led to the Holy of Holies. The fact that this isn't indicated shows that Mark's readers, and perhaps even Mark himself didn't have the specialised knowledge to understand the difference between the two. More importantly, though, there is a debate about the significance of the tearing. Is it to show God's disapproval as he abandons the temple? Or is it to show the opening up of access to a once-closed sacred space to the Gentiles? The tearing of the temple veil is the incipient fulfilment of the words of Jesus at his trial: 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands'.

With the veil torn down, the temple to which the outsiders will come is not built with hands. The first outsider, the centurion, comes immediately. Seeing that Jesus is already dead, he exclaims: 'Truly, this man was Son of God' (15.39). For the first time in the gospel a human being has recognised Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

Quotations

1

Whenever anything disagreeable or displeasing happens to you, remember Christ crucified and be silent.

St John of the Cross, 1542–1591

2

Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith but they are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the passion of Christ.

C. S. Lewis, 1898–1963

3

The Passion of Christ was an experience which included in itself every experience except sin, of every member of the human race. If one may say this with reverence, the fourteen incidents of the Stations of the