



Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, Cycle B

Sunday, March 28, 2021

Gospel at the Procession with Palms

Mark 11:1-10 or John 12:12-16

Jesus enters Jerusalem as the crowds shout, “Hosanna!”

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-7

The Lord’s servant will stand firm, even when persecuted.

Responsorial Psalm

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

A cry for help to the Lord in the face of evildoers

Second Reading

Philippians 2:6-11

Christ was obedient even to death, but God has exalted him.

Gospel Reading

Mark 14:1–15:47 (shorter form: *Mark 15:1-39*)

Jesus is sentenced to death and crucified. The centurion who witnessed his death declared, “This man was the Son of God.”

Background on the Gospel Reading

This Sunday, called Palm or Passion Sunday, is the first day of Holy Week. Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday are called the *Triduum*—three days that are the highlight of the Church year. There are two Gospels proclaimed at today’s Mass. The first Gospel, proclaimed before the procession with palms, tells of Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem. Riding on a borrowed colt, Jesus was hailed by the crowds as they blessed God and shouted “Hosanna!” This event is reported in each of the four Gospels.

At the Liturgy of the Word on Palm Sunday, the events of Jesus' passion are proclaimed in their entirety. In Lectionary Cycle B, we read the passion of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Mark. We will hear these events proclaimed again when we celebrate the Triduum later in the week. On Good Friday, we will read the passion of Jesus from the Gospel of John.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' passion and death are presented as the consequence of the tension between the Jewish authorities and Jesus that had been building throughout his public ministry. This tension reached its breaking point when Jesus drove the merchants and moneychangers from the Temple. After this event, the chief priests and scribes began seeking a way to put Jesus to death, and yet, this is only the surface explanation for his death.

When Jesus was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin—the council of Jewish priests, scribes, and elders—he was charged with blasphemy, citing his threat to the Temple. When he was brought before Pilate, however, the religious authorities presented his crime as a political one, charging that Jesus claimed to be king of the Jews. In continuity with a theme of Mark's Gospel, the messianic claim of Jesus is widely misunderstood.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' disciples are rarely models of faith and do little to invoke confidence in their capacity to continue his ministry after his death. They fare no better in Mark's narrative of Jesus' passion and death. At the Last Supper, the disciples insisted that none among them would betray Jesus. When Jesus predicted that their faith would be shaken in the events ahead, Peter and the other disciples protested vehemently. Yet in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus returned three times to find them sleeping. Jesus prayed in agony over his impending fate while his disciples slumbered through the night. Just as Jesus predicted, Peter denied Jesus, and the disciples were absent during Jesus' passion and death. Only the women who had been followers of Jesus in Galilee are said to have been present at the Crucifixion, but they remained at a distance.

Throughout this Gospel, Mark challenges the reader to consider the claim with which the Gospel begins: Jesus is the Son of God. When we read Mark's account of the passion, we begin to comprehend the deeper theological statement being made about Jesus' death. In Mark's telling of the passion narrative, Jesus understood his death to have been preordained, and he accepted this death in obedience to God's will. Jewish Scripture is quoted only once, but there are several references to the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Jesus understood his anointing in Bethany as an anticipation of his burial, and he announced that this story would be told together with the Gospel throughout the world. Jesus predicted his betrayal by Judas as well as Peter's denial. At his arrest, Jesus acknowledged that the preordained time had arrived. Jesus was both confident and silent before his accusers. After he was sentenced to death, Jesus did not speak again until his final cry from the cross. The bystanders misunderstood and believed that he was calling for Elijah. The Roman centurion, however, affirmed what Mark has presented throughout this Gospel: Jesus is the Son of God. Nowhere was this revealed more fully than in his death on the cross.

During Holy Week, we prayerfully remember the events of Jesus' passion and death. As we meditate on the cross, we ask again and anew what it means to make the statement of faith that Jesus, in his obedient suffering and dying, revealed himself to us as God's Son.