

PALM SUNDAY – 2021

Isaiah 50:4-7

Phil 2:5-11

Mk 15:1-39

St Mark's gospel interprets the story Jesus through the theology of the Book of Isaiah and his passion narrative is no exception. The Church has identified Jesus with Isaiah's Suffering Servant and our first reading is one of the Servant Songs. The Servant listens to God as all God's disciples should. He is obedient to him and does not resist those who mock or inflict suffering on him because of his faithfulness. The Servant believes that God will not allow him to be overcome by his persecutors.

St Paul presents a similar picture of Jesus in his epistle to the Philippians where he describes Jesus as humbly accepting death on the cross so that every person should acknowledge him as Lord of all. St Mark's account of the passion of Jesus clarifies why the Church makes the link between Jesus and Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

After his arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus no longer initiates any action, rather he is the object of other people's action. By that I mean that in dignified silence he received what others did to him and transformed it into life giving salvation for us all. He said little, but when the High Priests asked him whether he was the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One, he said, "I am, and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mk 14:61-62). This response gives us the reason why Jesus was crucified. It wasn't for anything he had done, it was because of who he said he was. For the Jews that was the Messiah, for the Romans it was his kingship.

Once Pilate had pronounced judgement on Jesus, Mark's passion story reads like a parody of the triumphal entry into Rome by the Emperor or a victorious general returning from battle. The Praetorian Guard were assembled for these majestic occasions, Pilate assembled a whole cohort of soldiers – several hundred of them. They dressed Jesus in the purple of an emperor, made him a crown of thorns, beat him, spat on him and mockingly knelt before him, paying homage to him. The procession begins, not to Capitol Hill, but to the place of the head or skull. Jesus is paraded through the streets. None of his apostles are there and it is not Simon Peter who carries his cross, but an involuntary conscript, Simon from Cyrene. James and John who wanted to sit alongside Jesus at the heavenly banquet weren't there either. Those places belonged to two criminals who unlike James and John had never said they could share his baptism and drink his cup. Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh, the traditional drink offered to honour an emperor god at the end of a procession, and the title 'king of the Jews' was placed above his head.

The irony in all of this is that what the mockers said in ridicule *is* God's truth. Jesus is not only king of the Jews, but Lord of all. He didn't rebuild the Temple in three days, but in three days he transferred the worship of God from a sacred place to a sacred community – the Church. He didn't come down from the cross to save himself because if he had he could not have saved anyone else.

At his death the centurion said, “Truly this man was a son of God” (Mk 15:39). We will never know whether this was this another mocking gesture, but those who believe the good news of salvation offered to us through Jesus’ death do believe that he truly **is the** Son of God.

In our world there no longer seems to be any opinions. Opinions have become irrefutable truths that are personal absolutes replacing the absolute truth of God. There were many ‘truths’ held by people during Jesus’ life on earth as there still is. The most important question all Christians must answer individually is this, “Who do you say that I am.” Do we each have our own ‘truth’ about who Jesus is, or do we accept that when Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6), he was speaking God’s absolute truth. If we do we will be ridiculed and mocked, but like Jesus we must receive these insults and turn them into the love that brings salvation and new life to others.

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