

Palm (Passion) Sunday - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Passion week ends our celebration of Lent. Our Lenten preparations have been focused on improving our response to God's call so that we, His children, will be ready to come home and live for all eternity. Jesus, our eldest brother, has showed us how to live His life so that we can gain eternal life. Our readings today show us how Jesus freely became the eternal perfect sacrifice – the one sacrifice which could open the gates of heaven so that we could have our sins forgiven and forgotten. This sacrifice instituted the New Covenant with God; the covenant in which we are no longer God's slaves, but His children. As with all covenants, this covenant is sealed with a meal, a meal in which all parties partake and which is offered to God. The offering to God is described in Revelation 5:6 by John: *"Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain."* The meal in which we partake is the Holy Eucharist promised by Jesus at Capernaum *"Unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink His blood you have no life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day."* (John 6:53-53). This meal was provided for us by Jesus at the Last Supper.

Procession Gospel - Mark 11:1-10

This is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus had visited Jerusalem various times before, but He never did so in this way. Previously He had not wanted to be recognized as the Messiah; He avoided the enthusiasm of the crowd; but now He accepts their acclaim and even implies that it is justified, by entering the city in the style of a peaceful king. Jesus' public ministry is about to come to a close: He has completed His mission; He has preached and worked miracles; He has revealed Himself as God the Father wished He should; and now in this triumphal entry into Jerusalem He shows that He is the Messiah.

11:1 When they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage

Bethphage means “House of Unripe Figs”. The fig tree is a symbol of Israel and of Jerusalem. The next day, on re-entering the city, Jesus curses a barren fig tree – symbol of what Jerusalem and all Israel have become.

and Bethany at the Mount of Olives,

Popular belief seems to have associated the Mount of Olives with the coming of an Anointed One; it was the hill of oil, of anointing.

he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them,

The preparations for entry into the city bear a strong similarity to the preparations for the last supper as we will hear in the Passion narrative. There is an emphasis on Jesus’ foreknowledge of events.

“Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it, you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat.

This is a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9.

Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone should say to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ reply, ‘The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once.’”

The animal will be returned as soon as Jesus has completed His entrance into Jerusalem.

⁴ So they went off and found a colt tethered at a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. ⁵ Some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” ⁶ They answered them just as Jesus had told them to, and they permitted them to do it.

This gives the impression of a fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction based on supernatural knowledge. Everything is going according to plan.

7 So they brought the colt to Jesus and put their cloaks over it. And he sat on it.

The scene seems to be a deliberate re-enactment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. This was the only type of Messianic claim Jesus would publicly profess – the claim to be the Messiah who was one of the lowly. He comes on a donkey because He is a man of peace – a warrior-king would have ridden a mighty war horse.

8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road,

An imitation of the red-carpet treatment accorded royalty in the ancient world; specifically, it recalls the royal acclamation given to Jehu when he was anointed king of Israel (2 Kings 9:13).

and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.

An allusion to Psalm 118:27 which describes the festive procession on the feast of tabernacles. Psalm 118 is one of the psalms sung as part of the Passover liturgy.

9 Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: “Hosanna!

Hosanna is a Greek transliteration of *hosa-na* (save, please). This was originally a plea for help in distress. Through its connection with the Feast of Tabernacles, Psalm 118 came to be an expression of Messianic hope (Psalm 118:25 reads “Hosanna, Lord”) with Hosanna being a liturgical cry of homage to God or to the Messiah as He enters Jerusalem in triumph.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

A reflection of Psalm 118:26. One who comes as the ambassador comes “in the name” of whom he represents comes with the full authority of that person. In this case, they recognize that Jesus comes with the full authority of God. The phrase “Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord” comes from Psalm 118:26 and is a jubilant and appreciative greeting to someone entrusted with a mission from God.

¹⁰ Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come!

Although this sounds like they are proclaiming Jesus to be the Davidic king, in actuality it is only a prayer that Jesus' coming may signal the proximate restoration of the Davidic kingdom.

Hosanna in the highest!"

Hosanna to God. This serves to stress the religious nature of this event and relegates any political motives to the background.

Alternate Procession Gospel - John 12:12-16

This is Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus had visited Jerusalem various times before, but He never did so in this way. Previously He had not wanted to be recognized as the Messiah; He avoided the enthusiasm of the crowd; but now He accepts their acclaim and even implies that it is justified, by entering the city in the style of a pacific king. Jesus' public ministry is about to come to a close: He has completed His mission; He has preached and worked miracles; He has revealed Himself as God the Father wished He should; and now in this triumphal entry into Jerusalem He shows that He is the Messiah.

¹² On the next day, when the great crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem,

Word has spread about Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44).

¹³ they took palm branches

No palm trees grow in Jerusalem and the synoptic gospels don't mention palm branches. This could be a loose usage denoting wide branches.

and went out to meet him, and cried out: "Hosanna!

Hosanna is a Greek transliteration of *hosa-na* (save, please). This was originally a plea for help in distress. Through its connection with the Feast of

Tabernacles, Psalm 118 came to be an expression of Messianic hope (Psalm 118:25 reads “Hosanna, Lord”) with Hosanna being a liturgical cry of homage to God or to the Messiah as He enters Jerusalem in triumph.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, (even) the king of Israel.”¹⁴ Jesus found an ass and sat upon it, as is written:¹⁵ “Fear no more, O daughter Zion; see, your king comes, seated upon an ass’s colt.”

This is a reference to Zechariah 9:9. To forestall any misunderstanding of His mission, Jesus fulfills Zechariah’s prophecy – He is no ordinary king, He is the Messiah. He comes on a donkey because He is a man of peace – a warrior king would have ridden a mighty war horse.

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand this at first, but when Jesus had been glorified they remembered that these things were written about him and that they had done this for him.

The disciples do not understand the significance of Jesus’ action until after the giving of the Holy Spirit, when the full meaning of Jesus’ life and words were revealed to the Church.

1st Reading - Isaiah 50:4-7

Our first reading is from the third suffering servant song of the prophet Isaiah. This song tells how the Messiah will be treated when He comes.

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue,

A disciple’s tongue

That I might know how to speak to the weary

Speak to the Israelites.

a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear;

The servant must first be a disciple, prayerfully receiving God’s word, before

he can presume to teach others. The suffering people are deaf to the saving Word of God that is being spoken (or fulfilled) through their suffering. Within the Israelite community there are saintly men who obediently listen to God's word and yearn to speak it to others (these are called the prophets). Jesus said: "*The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The father who dwells in me is doing his works*" (John 14:10).

⁵ And I have not rebelled, have not turned back. ⁶ I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.

Like the prophets before him, the servant is ignored and even maltreated.

⁷ The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced;

This word in the Hebrew has the same root as "buffet" in the preceding verse and provides strong contrast.

I have set my face like flint,

A phrase which is frequent in prophetic preaching to denote steadfastness. It is all the more effective here in describing a face covered with spittle.

knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

The Responsorial Psalm for this Mass is one of the seven last words of Jesus on the cross and shows that He was praying the Psalms during His crucifixion and not despairing. It is recommended that one read Psalm 22 be read in its entirety in order to garner the full impact of what Jesus is praying.

2nd Reading - Philippians 2:6-11

Our second reading has been called "The Christ Hymn" because of the distinctive qualities of this passage. It has a rhythmic character and a use of parallelism which have led to the view that Paul is quoting a hymn composed independently of Philippians (possibly originally in Aramaic). The hymn has a basic twofold structure: verses 6-8 describe Christ's abasement; while verses 9-11, His exaltation.

⁶ [Christ Jesus] Who, though he was in the form of God,

Christ enjoyed a godlike way of being. In Jewish tradition being like God meant immunity to death (Wisdom 2:23).

did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Held on to and exploited for selfish gain.

⁷ Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

Rendered Himself powerless – exactly as a slave is powerless. He did not empty Himself of divinity, but of the status of glory to which He had a right and which would be restored at His exaltation.

coming in human likeness;

The word here can mean “identical copy” or “mere resemblance”. Identical copy is most likely, bringing out the contrast of fully divine becoming fully human as well.

and found human in appearance,

In human form.

⁸ he humbled himself,

The selfless attitude of Christ, shown in His original disposition to take on the slavely, mortal human condition, continues throughout His human history.

becoming obedient to death,

Throughout His whole life, Christ lived out perfectly the demands of human existence before God. Death was not simply the terminal point of His obedience; it was the inevitable consequence of being both fully human and totally obedient in a world alienated from God. It was the curse brought upon all mankind when Adam broke his covenant with God (Genesis 2:17).

even death on a cross.

Crucifixion, the form of execution reserved for slaves and those who had totally forfeited all civil rights, marked the extremity of human abasement.

⁹ Because of this,

The self-denying act of Christ is matched by the active response of God. His obedience is rewarded, not in the sense that it forced God's hand but that God in His fidelity moved to vindicate (justify) the one who had placed himself so totally at the divine disposition.

God greatly exalted him

Beyond the exaltation of all the just, Christ is given the unique status of lordship over the universe. Notice that in this hymn there is no mention of the resurrection.

and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

Explicit mention of the name is held back until the end of the hymn, but the name is *Kyrios* (Lord) which came to be substituted for YHWH in Christian copies of the Septuagint Old Testament. If God has bestowed the name on him, Jesus bears it without cost to strict monotheism – there is only one God.

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,

Mention of Jesus now connotes the title and authority of universal Lord.

of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

The three levels of the universe according to ancient thought.

¹¹ and every tongue confess

Isaiah 45:23.

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

The climax of the hymn is the early Christian confession of faith (see 1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9). He who in selfless obedience took on the powerlessness of a slave now through divine commission and investiture holds universal lordship (see 1 Corinthians 3:21-23; Romans 14:9).

to the glory of God the Father.

Gospel -Mark 14:1-15:47 (The Passion)

The Gospel of Mark has been described as a passion narrative with a long introduction. This observation throws into relief how important the final part of the Gospel is to the whole. Jesus knows beforehand what awaits Him. Throughout, He behaves as the Suffering Servant and shows Himself to be the King of the Jews despite the mocking and blindness of His opponents. The disciples, however, reach the bottom of their descent in Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial.

14:1 The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to take place in two days' time.

The spring agricultural festival of Unleavened Bread had been combined with the celebration of their escape from bondage in Egypt. The Passover meal marked the beginning on the 15th of Nisan. The Feast of Unleavened Bread extended from Nisan 15 to Nisan 21.

So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death.

These two groups have been plotting since Jesus' triumphal entry into the city and His cleansing of the temple.

² They said, "Not during the festival, for fear that there may be a riot among the people."

The Passover was the most important of the three feasts whose observance was incumbent upon every male Jew over the age of twelve (Exodus 23:14-17). Since there were large crowds in Jerusalem and His public execution might start a riot. They are going to have to hurry up or wait until

after the feast.

³ When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper,

This must refer to an affliction from which Simon has already been cured; otherwise he would have been “unclean.”

a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard.

Derived from the oil of *Nardostachys Jatamanski*, a rare plant native to India

She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head.

Luke 7:38 and John 12:3 have the woman anointing His feet. Anointing of the head is an acknowledgment of His messianic dignity (2 Kings 9:6).

⁴ There were some who were indignant. “Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil? ⁵ It could have been sold for more than three hundred days’ wages and the money given to the poor.” They were infuriated with her.

Three hundred days’ wages is 300 denarii, 300 silver pieces.

⁶ Jesus said, “Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me.

Her anointing of Him has marked Him as the Messiah; she alone, in contrast to the chief priests and scribes, and even Judas, has correctly perceived His identity.

⁷ The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me.

Jesus isn’t dismissing poverty as a fact of life, but He does contrast its inevitable continuance to His own fleeting presence among men.

⁸ She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for

burial.

Jesus' body was not anointed in the normal way before burial.

⁹ Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

We are hearing it now, some two thousand years later.

¹⁰ Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests to hand him over to them. ¹¹ When they heard him they were pleased and promised to pay him money.

Judas' willingness to betray Jesus may have caused them to move their schedule up. Matthew 26:15 says that they agreed to give him thirty pieces of silver – ten percent (a tithe) of the value of the perfumed oil.

Then he looked for an opportunity to hand him over. ¹² On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb,

The sacrifice took place on the 14th of Nisan before the first day began at sunset.

his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" ¹³ He sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him.

What makes this unique? Men didn't carry water in jars – that was woman's work – men carried it in skins.

¹⁴ Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"' ¹⁵ Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there." ¹⁶ The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

The fact that no amazement is expressed by the disciples causes some commentators to believe that everything had been prearranged (like dialing ahead for reservations at 1-800-PASSOVER). It is much more likely that divine intervention is involved.

17 When it was evening,

The beginning of 15 Nisan – the Passover meal was to be eaten between sundown and midnight.

he came with the Twelve.

Not just the disciples, but specifically, the twelve apostles

18 And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” 19 They began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, “Surely it is not I?” 20 He said to them, “One of the Twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish.

Sharing of the Passover haroset sauce (a mixture of nuts and apples)

21 For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him,

Psalm 41:9 (41:10 in the New American Bible)

but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born.” 22 While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is my body.”

Just as the elder of the family during the Passover liturgy explained the “bread of affliction” (unleavened bread, *afikomen*), so Jesus explains the bread He is about to distribute. It is at this point that John 13:30 tells us that Judas left to betray Jesus. How many today leave Mass before the liturgy is completed?

23 Then he took a cup,

This would be the 3rd cup of the Passover liturgy, the cup of blessing (see 1

Corinthians 10:16).

gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant,

The only time that Jesus speaks of “covenant” is at the Last Supper. A covenant is a family bond which is sealed in blood and the sharing of a communal meal.

which will be shed for many.

The Semitic sense of “many” is a great number without restriction.

²⁵ Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

The Passover liturgy is incomplete. The complete Passover liturgy requires that four cups of wine (the fourth being the cup of completion) be drunk.

²⁶ Then, after singing a hymn,

After the third cup of the Passover liturgy, and before the fourth cup, the Great Hallel (Psalms 114 through 118) are sung. The apostles are leaving the upper room without completing the Passover liturgy they all had come to Jerusalem to celebrate. Can they all have forgotten the liturgy? Exodus 12:22 prescribed that no Israelite was to leave his house after the Passover meal until morning. Deuteronomy 16:7 applied this to the Jerusalem temple precincts.

they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The hill east of Jerusalem beyond the Kidron Valley

²⁷ Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed.’

He cites Zechariah 13:7, implying their defection and temporary disbelief in Him.

²⁸ But after I have been raised up,

By the Father

I shall go before you to Galilee.”

The risen Jesus will be the shepherd; re-gathering the scattered sheep at the place where they were first gathered, and leading them.

²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be.” ³⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.”

Peter’s denial will take place so quickly that the cock will not even have time to crow twice. Contrast this to the vehemence of Peter’s denial.

³¹ But he vehemently replied, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all spoke similarly. ³² Then they came to a place named Gethsemane,

Gethsemane means “oil press” in Aramaic.

and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” ³³ He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed.

Peter, James and John are the inner circle of disciples. They had seen Him raise the dead and be transfigured; now they are invited to witness His distress.

³⁴ Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death.

Jesus’ distress is so great that death would have been a welcome relief.

Remain here and keep watch.” ³⁵ He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; ³⁶ he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me,

The 4th cup of the Passover liturgy, the cup of completion. He knows that when He drinks it, He will complete His sacrifice.

but not what I will but what you will.”

Even in His deepest distress He surrenders His will to the Father.

³⁷ When he returned he found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Simon,

While asleep, he is disobedient and is addressed as “Simon” rather than “Peter.”

are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test.

The trial which all men face in the struggle between God and Satan. Judas, the agent of Satan, is soon to arrive and the struggle will begin. The disciples, especially Peter, are urged to ready themselves for it.

The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹ Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. ⁴⁰ Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open and did not know what to answer him. ⁴¹ He returned a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. ⁴² Get up, let us go. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

The time of preparation is over, the trial is beginning.

⁴³ Then, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs who had come from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders.

The chief priests, scribes and elders constitute the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council.

⁴⁴ His betrayer had arranged a signal with them, saying, “The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him and lead him away securely.”

An embrace and a kiss are a common form of greeting (see Proverbs 27:6).

⁴⁵ He came and immediately went over to him and said, “Rabbi.” And he kissed him. ⁴⁶ At this they laid hands on him and arrested him. ⁴⁷ One of

the bystanders

John 18:10 identifies this bystander as Peter.

drew his sword, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his ear. ⁴⁸ Jesus said to them in reply, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs, to seize me? ⁴⁹ Day after day I was with you teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me;

Jesus identifies the crowd as having come from the Temple.

but that the scriptures may be fulfilled."

Isaiah 53:7 and our first reading for today.

⁵⁰ And they all left him and fled. ⁵¹ Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body.

Some commentators have tried to identify the young man as John the apostle, James, or John-Mark, but the identification is unimportant. What is interesting though is the linen cloth. Linen was an expensive fabric used for priestly garments and burial cloths.

They seized him, ⁵² but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked. ⁵³ They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together.

The Sanhedrin meet.

⁵⁴ Peter followed him at a distance into the high priest's courtyard

Pretty brave, especially when you consider that he had just cut off the ear of the high priest's servant.

and was seated with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

In John's gospel (18:18) we are told that this is a charcoal fire. The only other charcoal fire mentioned in the Bible is also in John (21:9) where Peter three times affirms his love for Jesus and is told "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep,

feed my sheep.”

⁵⁵ The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none. ⁵⁶ Many gave false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.

Jewish court procedure did not have an official prosecuting attorney; witnesses were the prosecutors. Witnesses for the defense were heard first, then those for the prosecution. At least two witnesses had to agree in their testimony.

⁵⁷ Some took the stand and testified falsely against him, alleging, ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands.’” ⁵⁹ Even so their testimony did not agree.

The destruction of the Temple and the cult for which it stood must have been the object of Jesus’ comment at some time, there are too many gospel references, but the witnesses took His comments to literally mean that He will destroy it with His own hands.

⁶⁰ The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus, saying, “Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?” ⁶¹ But he was silent and answered nothing.

Since the witnesses don’t agree, the high priest takes over. Jesus’ silence may be the obvious answer to the lack of agreement, but see [Isaiah 53:7](#).

Again the high priest asked him and said to him, “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?”

Undoubtedly, the second part of the high priest’s question was intended to mean that only the anointed king of Israel could be called God’s son (Psalm 2:7).

⁶² Then Jesus answered, “I am;

A clear affirmative answer.

and ‘you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

Not necessarily a visible perception such as the parousia; circumstances and events will bring about this realization (but see Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13).

⁶³ At that the high priest tore his garments

A custom to express indignation and protest against sacrilege and blasphemy. A special kind of seam was used to preclude damage to the fabric.

and said, “What further need have we of witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard the blasphemy.

This is the charge against Jesus. It was not that Jesus had reviled the name of God, or pronounced the ineffable name (Yahweh), or openly claimed to be the Messiah. Blasphemy had a much wider meaning (Mark 2:7; John 5:18; 10:33); He has claimed that He will sit at God’s right hand and act as judge in His kingdom. They have all heard it and thus become the condemning witnesses.

What do you think?” They all condemned him as deserving to die.

According to Leviticus 24, the penalty should have been stoning.

⁶⁵ Some began to spit on him.

In fulfillment of our first reading (Isaiah 50:6)

They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, “Prophecy!” And the guards greeted him with blows. ⁶⁶ While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest’s maids came along. ⁶⁷ Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked intently at him and said, “You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” ⁶⁸ But he denied it

Denied it to one servant girl

saying, “I neither know nor understand what you are talking about.” So he went out into the outer court. (Then the cock crowed.) ⁶⁹ The maid

saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." ⁷⁰ Once again he denied it.

Denied it to the girl and some bystanders

A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more, "Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean." ⁷¹ He began to curse and to swear, "I do not know this man about whom you are talking."

Denied it to the bystanders. Note the progression – how a lie grows when repeated.

⁷² And immediately a cock crowed a second time. Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." He broke down and wept.

Recalls the prediction but also recalls Jesus' prayer for him ([Luke 22:31-32](#)).

^{15:1} As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.

The Sanhedrin had no authority to execute someone, that was reserved to the Roman government. Pontius Pilate was the prefect of Judea from A.D. 26 to 36. Pilate's headquarters were in Caesaria Maritima; he came to Jerusalem to oversee the Passover pilgrimage, lest trouble break out.

² Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus had admitted to the high priest that he was the Messiah. This was a title that would describe Israel's king, the question was not unreasonable.

He said to him in reply, "You say so."

Jesus' answer to Pilate is noncommittal – He doesn't deny the ultimate truth of the title, but He doesn't accept the political framework which Pilate applies to it.

³ The chief priests accused him of many things.

These men are trying to convince Pilate to have Jesus put to death.

⁴ Again Pilate questioned him, “Have you no answer? See how many things they accuse you of.” ⁵ Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

Jesus’ silence is contrasted to the many accusations (see [Isaiah 53:7](#); Psalm 38:13-15).

⁶ Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested.

The custom of the Roman governor releasing a prisoner to the people on a feast day is not attested elsewhere, except John 18:39.

⁷ A man called Barabbas was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion.

The Aramaic is *bar* (meaning “son”) *abba* (meaning “father”), making Barabbas the “Son of the father.” Some translations of Matthew 27:16 say that his name was Jesus Barabbas. He is a rebel and a murderer who the Romans should fear most.

⁸ The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed. ⁹ Pilate answered, “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” ¹⁰ For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over.

This account passes over the fact that a trial must have been completed and Jesus had been declared guilty. Pilate is presenting the crowd with a choice between two condemned prisoners: Jesus, son of the father, and Jesus, The Son of The Father.

¹¹ But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. ¹² Pilate again said to them in reply, “Then what (do you want) me to do with (the man you call) the king of the Jews?” ¹³ They shouted again, “Crucify him.”

Crucifixion as a mode of capital punishment is apparently Persian in origin. It had been adopted by the Romans for use on slaves and non-citizens. It was administered by Roman soldiers.

14 Pilate said to them, “Why? What evil has he done?”

Pilate is depicted as making a feeble effort – he has found Him guilty.

They only shouted the louder, “Crucify him.” 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd,

Pilate yields to the will of a cynical crowd that doesn’t respect him.

released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

Like crucifixion, the law prohibited scourging Roman citizens, but it was a common and legal punishment in Israel. Deuteronomy 25:1-3 limits the number of blows to forty. The Romans scourged as a prelude to execution.

16 The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium,

The praetorium is the official designation of the place where the Roman governor resided when he was in Jerusalem. It is commonly identified as the Fortress Antonia.

and assembled the whole cohort.

This term must be used rather loosely as this would be somewhere between two hundred and six hundred soldiers.

17 They clothed him in purple

Matthew 27:28 says it was a scarlet cloak, probably a military tunic. Here, it is royal purple; purple being a very expensive dye extracted from mussels and thus restricted to royalty and the rich who could afford it. Here, it is obviously meant to mock the King of the Jews.

and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him.

Again, part of the mockery. It could not have been woven into a wreath, but was more likely in the shape of a basket.

18 They began to salute him with, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

This is the charge of which Jesus has been convicted. It is also a parody of the imperial acclamation “Hail, Caesar, victor, imperator.”

19 and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. 20 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes,

Having mocked Him, He is stripped (a further humility) and dressed in His own garments.

and led him out to crucify him. 21 They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian,

A colony of Jews had been in Cyrene, North Africa ever since the fourth century B.C. Probably Simon was a Jew of the diaspora visiting Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. He seems to be a total stranger but later legend made him a bishop and martyr of the Church in Borsa (Arabia).

who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus,

These two individuals are otherwise unknown to us but because they are mentioned, they must have been known to the early Christians.

to carry his cross. 22 They brought him to the place of Golgotha (which is translated Place of the Skull).

A Greek transliteration of the Aramaic *gulgulta*; a word which means “skull.” The Latin word is *calvariae* from which the English “calvary” is derived. Hebrew legend has it as the burial place of Adam’s skull: “When Noah the righteous left the ark, after the waters of the flood had receded and the face of the earth was revealed, he came with his sons first to Mount Moriah. There they sacrificed a thank offering to the Lord, on the same spot where Adam had sacrificed and where Abraham, generations later, brought his offering. . . On a

nearby hill, Shem, the son of Noah, interred the skull of Adam, which he had taken with him into the ark and guarded during the flood. Since then the hill is called Golgotha – the Skull” (Zev Vilnay, *Legends of Jerusalem*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1973, page 70).

23 They gave him wine drugged with myrrh,

A narcotic to ease pain

but he did not take it.

He had said He would not drink wine again until He drinks it again in the reign of God (Mark 14:25).

24 Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take.

Those who were crucified were stripped totally naked, leaving them with no dignity at all. Roman custom permitted the soldiers to take the prisoner’s clothes as booty (see also Psalm 22:18). John 19:23 says one piece was seamless – the high priest wore a seamless tunic when he entered the Holy of Holies.

25 It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” 27 With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left.

Not necessarily thieves but social revolutionists like Barabbas and what Jesus is supposed by the Romans to be.

28 There is no verse 28 in most translations today other than the King James. This verse does not appear in most ancient manuscripts. It associates Jesus’ execution with Isaiah 53:12. The verse reads “And the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘And he was counted among the wicked.’” It was probably introduced from Luke 22:37.

29 Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save

yourself by coming down from the cross.”

The first group of mockers repeat the first charge raised about Him, the destruction of the Temple (see Mark 14:58).

³¹ Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. ³² Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.”

The second group of mockers repeat the second charge raised against Him, His Messiahship (see Mark 14:61).

Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him.

With this third group of mockers the mockery is complete: now the passers by, chief priests and scribes, and even other insurgents participate. In Luke 23:39-43, one of these insurgents acknowledges Jesus’ innocence and asks to be remembered when He comes into His kingdom.

³³ At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*” which is translated, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The translators had to quote the Aramaic so that readers could understand why the bystanders in the next verse would think that He was calling on Elijah, pronouncing the name with the accent on the first syllable. Both Matthew and Mark include this incident in the Passion narrative because rabbinical lore had it that the great prophet Elijah, who had not died but had been assumed into heaven (2 Kings 2:11), would come back to Earth before the coming of the Messiah. When John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to ask if He was the Messiah, Jesus answered by quoting the Scripture text upon which the rabbis based their belief in a precursor, even saying of John, “He is Elijah, the one who is to come” (Matthew 11:14). What we are hearing in this verse is Jesus praying Psalm 22:2 (our responsorial psalm for today). This psalm is not a psalm of lament or despair but a *todah* psalm, psalm of thanksgiving. By praying this psalm Jesus is applying it to Himself. The psalm is about the suffering of the upright individual who turns to God in the stress

of hostile opposition. Like the person in the psalm, Jesus has trusted in Yahweh and found in Him the source of His consolation and ultimate triumph.

³⁵ Some of the bystanders who heard it said, “Look, he is calling Elijah.”

Popular belief was that one of Elijah’s tasks would be to rescue the pious from their need (Sirach 48:1-11).

³⁶ One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine,

Most translations say “sour wine” or “vinegar.” Psalm 69:22 is fulfilled (They gave me vinegar to drink for my thirst).

put it on a reed,

John 19:29 says that it was a hyssop branch, the same stalk which was used to sprinkle the blood on the doorposts and lintel in the first Passover (Exodus 12:22).

and gave it to him to drink,

John 19:30 says He drank. This is the fourth cup of the Passover meal which was interrupted back in 14:25-26.

saying, “Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.” ³⁷ Jesus gave a loud cry

“It is finished” (John 19:30); the same words which consummated the Passover meal.

and breathed his last. ³⁸ The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.

The curtain separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Tearing from top to bottom could not be done by man, this is an indication of divine intervention. Heaven is no longer sealed off but is now open and God can be approached for forgiveness of sin.

³⁹ When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his

last he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

This echoes the opening words of John’s gospel. The first to recognize Him is a Gentile – a centurion of the hated Roman army. This answers the question posed by the High Priest (Mark 14:61). Only in John’s gospel do we read of the piercing of Jesus’ side and the flowing forth of water and blood (indicators of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist). “Christian lore relates that when Jesus was crucified on Mount Golgotha, a drop of His blood fell to the earth, touched the skull of Adam and revived in it a breath of life for a fleeting moment” (Zev Vilnay, *Legends of Jerusalem*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1973, page 213).

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome.

Mary Magdalene was so called because she was a resident of the Galilean town of Magdala. There are several Marys in the New Testament (some of whom may be known by several associations): Mary, mother of Jesus; Mary Magdalene; Mary, sister of Lazarus; Mary, mother of James and Joses; Mary, mother of Clopas; Mary, mother of John-Mark; Mary, a Christian of Rome greeted by Paul (Romans 16:6).

⁴¹ These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. ⁴² When it was already evening, since it was the day of preparation, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council,

Arimathea was some twenty to twenty-five miles from Jerusalem. Although he was a member of the Sanhedrin, it is not clear that he was present at Jesus’ trial. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 says “if a man is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight.”

who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was amazed that he was already dead. He summoned the centurion and asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ And when he learned of it from the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph.

Although stark, a literal translation of the Greek is “corpse.” There has been confirmation of the death so there is no question of coma or shock. In touching the corpse, Joseph rendered himself unclean.

⁴⁶ Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph watched where he was laid.

They must carefully observe so that when they return and find the tomb empty, there is no question of whether they returned to the proper place.

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>