

Palm (Passion) Sunday - A

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. The 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 - Matthew 21:1-11

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 peace-loving 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.

¹ When they drew near Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives,

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

Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tethered, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them here to me.

This is a striking variation from the accounts of Mark and John where only a donkey is mentioned. The reason for this variation will be explored in a few verses.

³ And if anyone should say anything to you, reply, 'The master has need of them.' Then he will send them at once."

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

⁴ This happened so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled: ⁵ "Say to daughter Zion,

Isaiah 62:11 in the Septuagint form is quoted here.

'Behold, your king comes to you, meek and riding on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

The remainder of this quotation is from Zechariah 9:9 in the Septuagint form except he omits a phrase in Zechariah which alludes to the victory of the king. The text of Zechariah includes the king among the "lowly".

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had ordered them. ⁷ They brought the ass and the colt and laid their cloaks over them, and he sat upon them.

The scene seems to be a deliberate re-enactment of the prophecy. 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 charger. The mention of the ass and the colt in Zechariah is nothing but poetic parallelism, the use of two words to indicate a single animal; but Matthew has taken the verse with rigorous literalism; therefore he not only has the disciples take two animals but actually has Jesus riding both of them. The Church fathers have read a deeper meaning into this episode. They see the ass as symbolizing Judaism, for long subject to the yoke of the Law, and the foal, on which no one has ridden, as symbolizing the Gentiles. Jesus leads both Jews and Gentiles in to the Church, the new Jerusalem.

⁸ The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road,

An imitation of the red-carpet treatment accorded royalty in the ancient world.

while others cut branches from the trees and strewed them on the road.

The branches were also intended to soften the road. No palm trees grow in Jerusalem and the synoptic gospels don't mention palm branches. The only mention of palm branches is in John's gospel.

⁹ The crowds preceding him and those following kept crying out and saying: "Hosanna to the Son of David;

A Messianic title.

blessed is he who comes

Another Messianic title (see Malachi 3:1).

in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest."

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 And when he entered Jerusalem the whole city was shaken and asked, "Who is this?" ¹¹ And the crowds replied, "This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee."

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

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;

The word in the Hebrew for “disgraced” has the same root as “buffet” in the preceding verse and provides strong contrast.

I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

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.

The Responsorial Psalm 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.

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 Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Christ, who existed from before the creation of the world, did not exploit His divinity for selfish gain. In Jewish tradition being like God meant immunity to death (Wisdom 2:23).

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

In emptying Himself He 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;

What is translated here as “human likeness” can mean “identical copy” or “mere resemblance”. Identical copy is most likely it brings out the contrast of the fully divine becoming fully human as well.

and found human in appearance,

By being “human in appearance, He came in human form.

⁸ he humbled himself,

The selfless attitude of Christ, shown in His original disposition to take on the slavelike, 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.

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, God greatly exalted him

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. 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

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

every knee should bend,

Isaiah 45:23. This hymn transfers to Christ the homage given to God alone.

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

See Isaiah 45:23.

that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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).

Gospel - Matthew 26:14-27:66

Jesus' passion is reported in all three synoptic gospels: our reading today, Mark 14:1-15:47, and Luke 22:14-23:56. It is also reported in John 13:1-19:42. We will look to these other accounts from time to time to add clarity to the narrative.

^{26:14} Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests

The name "Judas" is derived from Judah and "Iscariot" is believed to be derived from the Judean village name *Kerioth*, which is assumed to be Judas' home. Some derive the name "Iscariot" from the Greek *sidarios* which means "dagger-man" or "assassin". Judas' name is always listed last when the apostles are named in Scripture.

¹⁵ and said, "What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?"

The gospels are unanimous in showing that Judas initiates the treachery.

They paid him thirty pieces of silver, ¹⁶ and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over.

Commentators see an allusion to Zechariah 11:12 "*I said to them, 'If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, let it go.' And they counted out my wages, thirty pieces of silver.*" However, in Matthew 26:7, Jesus has been anointed with a very expensive perfume which is identified in Mark 14:5 and John 12:5 as costing 300 pieces of silver. Judas is identified as a thief who has been stealing from the money bag. Here, he agrees to betray Jesus for a tithe (10%) of the worth of the perfume. Thirty pieces of silver is also 30 days' wages.

¹⁷ On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread,

The whole feast lasted a week and a day (14 through 21 Nisan). This is one of the three annual feasts for which all men were expected to come to the Temple. The city was jammed with people who rented space. The city's normal population of thirty thousand swelled to 130,000. Reservations were necessary.

the disciples approached Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the

Passover?" ¹⁸ He said, "Go into the city to a certain man

Mark identifies him as a man carrying a jug of water, an unusual event as women carried the water jugs.

and tell him, 'The teacher says, "My appointed time draws near; in your house I shall celebrate the Passover with my disciples."'" ¹⁹ The disciples then did as Jesus had ordered, and prepared the Passover. ²⁰ When it was evening, he reclined at table with the Twelve.

This makes it clear that no one else was present, contrary to the usual family setting of the Passover meal. Jesus' family for this meal are those who will be instrumental in building His Body, the Church.

²¹ And while they were eating, he said, "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² Deeply distressed at this, they began to say to him one after another, "Surely it is not I, Lord?" ²³ He said in reply, "He who has dipped his hand into the dish with me is the one who will betray me.

Jesus knows exactly who the traitor is.

²⁴ The Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, 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."

The condemnation of Judas' act is the most severe in all the gospels; the death of Jesus is inevitable (as Scripture says in Psalm 41:10 and Isaiah 53:7) but it is not inevitable that one of His disciples should betray Him.

²⁵ Then Judas, his betrayer, said in reply, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?"

This verse is unique to Matthew and establishes a direct confrontation between the betrayer and the betrayed.

He answered, "You have said so." ²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took bread,

Unleavened bread is prescribed for the eight days of the Passover, to commemorate the first Passover; for in the flight from Egypt, there had been no time to make leavened bread. At the beginning of the Passover meal a large loaf of unleavened bread was broken and half, called the *Afikomen*, was taken away to be eaten at the conclusion of the meal. It is this *Afikomen* which Jesus is using here.

said the blessing, broke it,

The act of blessing and breaking is one word in Greek: *eucharisteo*.

and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body."

The body to be eaten as promised a year earlier after the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:53-58).

²⁷ Then he took a cup,

The liturgy of the Passover meal requires that four cups be drunk: the first cup, the cup of thanksgiving, is drunk at the beginning of the meal; the second cup, the cup of promise, is drunk after the blessing of the food; the third cup, the cup of thanksgiving, is drunk after the eating of the *Afikomen*; and the fourth cup, the cup of completion, is drunk at the conclusion of the Passover liturgy. The cup which Jesus is using here is the third cup, the cup of thanksgiving (see 1 Corinthians 10:16).

gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood

The blood to be drunk as promised a year earlier. (John 6:53-58).

of the covenant,

The only time in the Gospels that Jesus uses the word "covenant". A covenant is a family bond sealed in blood and a common meal. This is an allusion to Exodus 24:4-8 where Moses sprinkles part of the blood on the altar (representing God) and the remainder on the people, signifying the community (common-unity) of the two parties in the covenant.

which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.

Only Matthew has this phrase. Certain Jewish sacrifices atoned for sin and guilt. The atoning death of Jesus liberates man not only from ritual sin and guilt, but from sin simply, for which there was no atonement in the Israelite sacrificial system. Isaiah 53:10 says that the suffering servant is offered as a sin sacrifice.

²⁹ I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father."

We are made new at the resurrection, not the wine. Jesus has said that He will not drink the fourth cup of the Passover meal. He has interrupted the most sacred liturgy in which a Jewish family could participate. He will drink with the apostles at the messianic banquet in heaven.

³⁰ Then, after singing a hymn,

The Great Hallel (Psalms 114 through 118) are sung at this point in the Passover liturgy.

they went out

They didn't finish the Passover liturgy; the cup of completion (fourth cup) has not been drunk.

to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem began here. The elevation is as high, if not higher, than the Temple in Jerusalem. Considering Jesus has spent the preceding nights in Bethany, there is nothing unusual or remarkable in the journey to the Mount of Olives, Jesus and His band have traversed this path nightly thus making it easy for Judas to be able to tell the priests where Jesus might be apprehended without a scene.

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, "This night all of you will have your faith in me shaken, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed';

Quotes Zechariah 13:7.

³² but after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee."

Both Matthew and Mark, as opposed to Luke and John, record apparitions to the disciples located only in Galilee. This prediction is fulfilled in Matthew 28:16-20.

³³ Peter said to him in reply, "Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be."

Peter, usually the spokesman for the group, here speaks for himself. Peter's excessive self-confidence will be followed by a fall more grievous than the others; the rest will be offended but Peter will deny Jesus three times this very night.

³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times."

Three is the number of completion in Hebrew numerology, it will be a complete denial.

³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you." And all the disciples spoke likewise.

Not only Peter, but the other disciples join in affirming their loyalty.

³⁶ Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane,

The name Gethsemane means "oil press", where olive oil was made on the Mount of Olives.

and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ He took along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee,

He takes with Him the inner circle; the three who were present for the raising of Jarius' daughter and at the transfiguration.

and began to feel sorrow and distress.

After the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the devil had departed from Him until an opportune time (Luke 4:13). Now, with the passion, he attacks again, using the flesh's natural repugnance to suffering.

³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me."

It is almost as if He didn't want them to be distressed by His agony. They are to keep Him company and prepare themselves by prayer for the temptations which will follow.

³⁹ He advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer,

Saint Luke (22:41) tells us He went about a stone's throw away. Because there was a full moon (the occasion of Passover is determined by the occurrence of the full moon), the Apostles may have been able to see Jesus; they may also have heard some of His words of prayer.

saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me;

The fourth cup of the Passover meal, the cup of completion.

yet, not as I will, but as you will."

Jesus submits His will in obedience to the divine will.

⁴⁰ When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "So you could not keep watch with me for one hour?"

Peter the individual is being addressed. This will not be the last time His apostles disappoint Him.

⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

The spirit and the flesh correspond to the two tendencies of rabbinic psychology, good and evil.

⁴² Withdrawing a second time, he prayed again, "My Father, if it is not possible that this cup pass without my drinking it, your will be done!"

This prayer is a variation of the previous one.

⁴³ Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open.

The apostles continue to disappoint Him.

⁴⁴ He left them and withdrew again and prayed a third time, saying the same thing again.

Three is the number of completion in Hebrew numerology.

⁴⁵ Then he returned to his disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand when the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up, let us go. Look, my betrayer is at hand."

Jesus is disappointed a third time. The disciples are too weary to stay awake. Men retired and arose early in the ancient world (there was no electricity, so they worked by natural light). There is a gentle irony in the permission to sleep that Jesus grants – it is now unimportant whether they remain awake or not. There is also a certain incoherence in the permission to sleep followed immediately with the command to arise. This incoherence may reflect the confused memories of the disciples, who doze in a manner that makes them half-aware of what is going on, and who are suddenly aroused to the greatest catastrophe in their experience. Jesus Himself is the one who sees the approaching party. The Passover falls during the full moon, and the party may have carried torches. The effect of Jesus' prayer is that He can now face His enemies. As with the temptation (Matthew 4:1-11), this whole scene can be seen as a commentary on the command to love God with all one's heart, soul, and strength.

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a large crowd, with swords and clubs,

This makes Judas appear to be the leader – this is unlikely. Judas knew where they should look for Jesus; at least the neighborhood. He acted as a guide.

who had come from the chief priests and the elders of the people.

The scribes are not mentioned as part of the crowd but will appear at the trial. The Pharisees are not mentioned at all in this reading although the scribes were mostly Pharisees. The chief priests were Sadducees.

⁴⁸ His betrayer had arranged a sign with them, saying, "The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him." ⁴⁹ Immediately he went over to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and he kissed him.

A kiss is a normal form of greeting in the orient. Jesus was not that well known to the arresting party and had to be identified.

⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then stepping forward they laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ And behold, one of those who accompanied Jesus put his hand to his sword, drew it, and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear.

This disciple is named only in John (18:10) as Peter. John also names the slave (Malchus).

⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?"

This condemns the use of arms as a futile solution, not an immoral one. If Jesus wished or needed help, it was available in far greater strength than the disciples could furnish.

⁵⁴ But then how would the scriptures be fulfilled which say that it must come to pass in this way?" ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to seize me? Day after day I sat teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶ But all this has come to pass that the writings of the prophets may be fulfilled."

Jesus again demonstrates that He is giving Himself up of His own free will. He knows why this is happening and He wants to make it quite clear that in the last analysis it is not force which puts Him to death but His own love and His desire to fulfill His Father's will.

Then all the disciples left him and fled.

The disciples had been ready to defend Jesus by force – when He Himself rejects the defense, they don't know what to do. For the rest of the Passion narrative, they are not eyewitnesses. The events have been reconstructed by them from the large numbers of other eyewitnesses.

⁵⁷ Those who had arrested Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.

John (18:13) says that Jesus was first brought to Annas (a former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas).

⁵⁸ Peter was following him at a distance as far as the high priest's courtyard, and going inside he sat down with the servants to see the outcome.

The houses of the well-to-do Jews had a front lobby (or porter's office). Going through the lobby one came to a courtyard (patio) and by crossing the courtyard one could enter the rooms proper. Peter goes through the lobby but stays in the courtyard.

⁵⁹ The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward.

The ruling council was composed of 71 members including the presiding officer, the high priest. It was composed of the elders of the chief families and clans, the former high priests, and the scribes. Apparently, the testimony of the witnesses did not agree.

Finally two came forward ⁶¹ who stated, "This man said, 'I can destroy the temple of God and within three days rebuild it.'"

Deuteronomy 17:6 requires two witnesses in order to condemn a person to death. The testimony of these two witnesses is the same and therefore fulfills the requirement. John 2:19-21 says: "*Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise*

it up.' The Jews said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and you will raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking about the temple of his body."

⁶² The high priest rose and addressed him, "Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I order you to tell us under oath before the living God

The swearing of the oath makes this a covenant ritual. The invocation of the "living God" would damn the soul forever if he lied. It would break the second commandment. With every covenant there are blessings for faithfulness and curses for disobedience.

whether you are the Messiah,

This title stresses the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

the Son of God."

The high priest meant no more by this title than it signified in the Old Testament – the specially chosen one, the Davidic king. In the eyes of the Sanhedrin, that Jesus should claim such a privilege insulted God; for this humiliated, rejected man to presume to reveal and mediate the Lord's glory to Israel was the supreme irreverence to God.

⁶⁴ Jesus said to him in reply, "You have said so. But I tell you: From now on you will see 'the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power' and 'coming on the clouds of heaven.'"

This sort of gives a half-affirmative answer. Mark 14:62 gives a simple "I am". Jesus then points to his future exaltation drawing from Daniel 7:13 and Psalm 110:1.

⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes

This was a sign of distress that was so frequently used that the robes had special seams that would tear easily and thus could be easily repaired.

and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need have we of witnesses? You have now heard the blasphemy; ⁶⁶ what is your opinion?" They said in reply, "He deserves to die!"

Leviticus 24:16 says that blasphemy was punishable by death.

⁶⁷ Then they spat in his face and struck him, while some slapped him, ⁶⁸ saying, "Prophecy for us, Messiah: who is it that struck you?"

By omitting the blindfold and the servants of Mark 14:67, Matthew creates some confusion. The Sanhedrin members themselves appear to slap Jesus. Their question asks Him to identify unknown (rather than unseen) mockers.

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. One of the maids came over to him and said,

"You too were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied it in front of everyone, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about!" ⁷¹ As he went out to the gate, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus the Nazorean." ⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man!" ⁷³ A little later the bystanders came over and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; even your speech gives you away." ⁷⁴ At that he began to curse and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately a cock crowed.

In the Jewish moral theology of apostasy during persecution a private denial was less grave than a public one and an evasive denial was less grave than an explicit one. In Mark 14:66-71 this shows an escalation of Peter's sins: first a private, evasive denial; then a public, evasive denial; and finally a public, explicit denial. Matthew obscures this pattern with a public, evasive denial, a private, explicit denial; and then a public, explicit denial.

⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had spoken: "Before the cock crows you will deny me three times." He went out and began to weep bitterly.

Both Matthew and Luke note that Peter wept "bitterly". Peter neither concealed or excused his lapse. For such lapses there is no remedy but repentance.

^{27:1} When it was morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death.

Jewish custom forbade night trials on serious charges – such trials had no legal validity.

² They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

The governor (procurator) was the senior Roman official in Judea. Although he was subordinate to the Roman legate in Syria, he had the authority to condemn a criminal to death – which is why the Jewish leaders brought Jesus before Pilate: they were seeking a public sentence of death to counteract Jesus' reputation and erase His teaching from the people's minds.

³ Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, deeply regretted what he had done. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? Look to it yourself." ⁵ Flinging the money into the temple, he departed and went off and hanged himself. ⁶ The chief priests gathered up the money, but said, "It is not lawful to deposit this in the temple treasury, for it is the price of blood."

There is no known prohibition that disallowed putting such money in the Temple treasury. Acts 1:18 gives a different account *"He bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out."*

⁷ After consultation, they used it to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. ⁸ That is why that field even today is called the Field of Blood. ⁹ Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value

of a man with a price on his head, a price set by some of the Israelites,¹⁰ and they paid it out for the potter's field just as the Lord had commanded me."

This quotation is from Zechariah 11:12-13. The attribution to Jeremiah is thought to be because he was a man of sorrows, a prophet of judgement and condemnation.

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and he questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

This is a Roman trial. Where the chief priest had asked "are you the Messiah" the Gentile magistrate asks "are you the king"; a question not asked in the night hearing.

Jesus said, "You say so."

You have answered your own question.

¹² And when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they are testifying against you?" ¹⁴ But he did not answer him one word, so that the governor was greatly amazed. ¹⁵ Now on the occasion of the feast the governor was accustomed to release to the crowd one prisoner whom they wished.

This custom is not attested outside the gospels.

¹⁶ And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called (Jesus) Barabbas.

Some early manuscripts read "Jesus Barabbas". Barabbas means "son of the father", thus there is a contrast between Jesus, son of the father, and Jesus, The Son of The Father.

¹⁷ So when they had assembled, Pilate said to them, "Which one do you want me to release to you, (Jesus) Barabbas, or Jesus called Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he knew that it was out of envy that they had handed him over.

Matthew makes an aside about the unworthy motive of the Jewish authorities.

¹⁹ While he was still seated on the bench, his wife sent him a message, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I suffered much in a dream today because of him."

Dreams in Matthew furnish divine guidance. This story of Pilate's wife is thought by some to be legend.

²⁰ The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus.

We are back now to the basic group who had sent the arresting party – now they incite the crowd.

²¹ The governor said to them in reply, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They answered, "Barabbas!" ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus called Messiah?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ But he said, "Why? What evil has he done?"

This is an indirect statement of Jesus' innocence.

They only shouted the louder, "Let him be crucified!" ²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was not succeeding at all, but that a riot was breaking out instead, he took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves."

This gesture is not Roman, but is an Old Testament practice (Deuteronomy 21:6-9). By both gesture and word Pilate declares his innocence before God, although he acquiesces to the demands of the crowd.

²⁵ And the whole people said in reply,

This includes the priests, the elders, and the crowd – all Israel is represented.

"His blood be upon us and upon our children."

See [2 Samuel 1:16](#), [Jeremiah 26:15](#).

²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them, but after he had Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified.

Prisoners were flogged to weaken them so as to shorten their agony on the cross.

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus inside the praetorium

The praetorium was the official residence of a praetor, or his military headquarters, where he had his guard and held court. The procurators of Judea in the time of Christ had their praetorium at Caesarea, in the palace of Herod (Acts 23:35). But in Jerusalem they might reside in any one of several buildings: Herod's castle, the Hasmonean Palace, located between the Herodian Palace and the Temple [the Hasmonians ruled Jerusalem and parts of Judea from the Maccabean wars (c. 135 B.C.) until the conquest of the Romans in 63 B.C.], or the fortress called Antonia, named after Mark Antony, where the garrison of Jerusalem was stationed. Christian tradition, traceable to the fourth century, makes Antonia the praetorium where Christ was. Only Saint Luke has Jesus appearing before both Pilate and Herod.

and gathered the whole cohort around him.

At full strength the cohort numbered 600 men. It seems improbable that the entire force was gathered here; "the whole" is believed to infer a large representative grouping.

²⁸ They stripped off his clothes and threw a scarlet military cloak about him.

Mark and John call it a purple robe, purple being the color of royalty and of the Roman aristocracy. The cloak of the Roman soldier was scarlet.

²⁹ Weaving a crown out of thorns, they placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand.

The reed simulates a scepter.

And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

The crude sport of the soldiers expresses their contempt not only for the alleged king, but also for the people whose king this was purported to be. Jesus is acclaimed king at the time when He fulfills His kingly duty, which is to save His people by His own death. It is only in the passion narratives and the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke that the theme of kingship appears in the synoptic gospels.

³⁰ They spat upon him and took the reed and kept striking him on the head. ³¹ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him off to crucify him. ³² As they were going out, they met a Cyrenian named Simon; this man they pressed into service to carry his cross. ³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull),

Aramaic: *gulgulta*, Greek: *kranion*. The name "Calvary" comes into English from the Rheims New Testament translation of the Latin *calvariae*. Hebrew (and Christian) legend has it that Adam's skull was buried there (hence the depiction of a skull beneath the cross in some crucifixion paintings). The second Adam is sacrificed over the remains of the first. The *Legends of Jerusalem* by Zev Vilnay says "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 (the place where 2 Chronicles 3:1 tells us Solomon built the Temple). 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. It is told that when Abraham and Isaac reached Mount Moriah, the Holy One, blessed be He, pointed out the altar to Abraham and said: 'There is the altar! Upon this altar did Adam, Cain, and Abel place their offerings! Upon this altar did Noah and his sons place their offerings!' 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." (pg 70). "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." (pg 213).

³⁴ they gave Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall. But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink.

Matthew 26:29 says "*I will not drink this fruit of the vine*". His time is not here quite yet. See also Psalm 69:21 (69:22 in NAB).

³⁵ After they had crucified him, they divided his garments by casting lots;

See Psalm 22:16-18 (22:17-19 in NAB).

³⁶ then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷ And they placed over his head the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.

Affixed to the cross of a criminal was a sign indicating his charge. Both Matthew and John mention Jesus' name. In Mark and Luke it is simply "The king of the Jews". This title would be read differently by Jews and Romans. Jews would see it as a claim to be the Messiah while Romans would see it as a token of rebellion against the emperor. It is from John's gospel that we get I.N.R.I. (The first letters of "Jesus the Nazorean King of the Jews" in Latin). A portion of this sign can be seen today in Rome in the "Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem". Crucifixion was not a Roman punishment but an Oriental one adopted by the Romans. It was prohibited by Roman law to crucify Roman citizens. Normally crucifixion was used only for slaves, bandits, and rebels. The division of garments was a privilege of the squad of soldiers who handled the execution; the crucified were stripped entirely nude as a final humiliation.

³⁸ Two revolutionaries were crucified with him, one on his right and the other on his left. ³⁹ Those passing by reviled him,

See Psalm 109:25.

shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God, (and) come down from the cross!"

These taunts are reminiscent of the devil's temptations of Jesus in the desert (Matthew 4:3, 6). The nails didn't keep Jesus on the cross, only thing which kept Him there was His love for us.

⁴¹ Likewise the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him

The mockery of those who are executed has been a universal feature wherever public executions have been practiced. The taunts come from all Israel – the passers by, priests, scribes, and elders.

and said, ⁴² "He saved others; he cannot save himself. So he is the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

See the Responsorial Psalm [Psalm 22:7-8 (22:8-9 in NAB)].

⁴⁴ The revolutionaries who were crucified with him also kept abusing him in the same way. ⁴⁵ From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The opening words of Psalm 22. This is not a cry of abandonment by Jesus – He is praying and calling to the mind of the hearer all the prophecies of the Psalm which He is fulfilling.

⁴⁷ Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "This one is calling for Elijah."

The Aramaic *Eli Eli* sounds like Elijah. The bystanders who thought this must have been Jews.

⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran to get a sponge; he soaked it in wine, and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink.

Wine vinegar cut by water was a thirst-quenching drink. No doubt a share of the drink the soldiers carried with them. John 19:29-30 tells us that the reed was a hyssop stalk, the same plant used to sprinkle the lamb's blood on the doorpost (upright) and lintel (horizontal) at the first Passover (Exodus 12:22). Jesus' blood now coats the upright and horizontal of the cross.

⁴⁹ But the rest said, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to save him." ⁵⁰ But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit.

John 19:30 tells us that Jesus drank the sour wine and cried out "It is finished"; the words proclaimed after the fourth cup of the Passover meal was consumed. Jesus has completed His Passover sacrifice.

⁵¹ And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.

The curtain separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was accessible only by the high priest and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies is no longer forbidden – heaven has been opened. No man could tear the curtain in this direction, it is God's doing.

The earth quaked, rocks were split,

The earthquake in the poetry of the Old Testament is the tread of Yahweh's footsteps.

⁵² tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

The holy men who were buried in Jerusalem rise at the saving act of the Messiah: they recognize Him but Israel of the flesh does not.

⁵³ And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ The centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, "Truly, this was the Son of God!"

Romans reading this account later would be encouraged that "their guys" were the first to recognize Jesus' true identity.

⁵⁵ There were many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

These are the women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee. John (19:25) has them much closer and accompanied by John himself and the Blessed Virgin.

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who was himself a disciple of Jesus.

Mark and Luke identify Joseph as a member of the Sanhedrin. Matthew may have seen a problem in the discipleship of a member of the council that had voted the death of Jesus. Arimathea is about twenty miles northeast of Jerusalem. Joseph may not have attended the council meeting.

⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be handed over. ⁵⁹ Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it (in) clean linen ⁶⁰ and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed. ⁶¹ But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb.

It is not unimportant that the two Marys carefully note the location of the tomb. The areas surrounding the walls of Jerusalem had literally hundreds, if not thousands, of tombs. The resurrection apologetic demands that the spot where Jesus is buried should be known exactly. Likewise, it is also important that the tomb is new, not previously used.

⁶² The next day, the one following the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said,

The burial took place just before nightfall. Nightfall started the Sabbath. It is not clear if this visit violates the Sabbath prescriptions.

"Sir, we remember that this impostor while still alive said, 'After three days I will be raised up.'

It is remarkable that the priests and Pharisees show such an accurate knowledge of the prediction of a resurrection which the disciples seem to have forgotten completely.

⁶⁴ Give orders, then, that the grave be secured until the third day, lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, 'He has been raised from the dead.' This last imposture would be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "The guard is yours; go secure it as best you can." ⁶⁶ So they went and secured the tomb by fixing a seal to the stone and setting the guard.

It is also somewhat remarkable that Pilate so readily granted a guard for a purpose he could only have thought to be absurd. It is also most remarkable that this trivial detail is not

contained in any of the other gospels. What can be concluded from the story is that the Jews charged the disciples with the theft of Jesus' body and that the Jews and the disciples all agree that the body was missing from the tomb on the 3rd day.

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