

Passion Sunday

Year C



FIRST READING
Isaiah 50:4-7

PSALM
Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

SECOND READING
Philippians 2:6-11

GOSPEL
Luke 23:1-49

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PRAYER

Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me,
they shake their heads;
“Commit your cause to the LORD;
let him deliver—
let him rescue the one
in whom he delights!”
For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
I will tell of your name
to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation
I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him,
all you offspring of Israel!

READING THE WORD

First Reading Isaiah 50:4-7

The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he awakens—
awakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those
who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that
I shall not be put to shame.

Second Reading Philippians 2:6-11

Jesus, though he was
in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient
to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth
and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Gospel Luke 23:1-49

Then the assembly rose as a body
and brought Jesus before Pilate.
They began to accuse him, saying,
“We found this man perverting our
nation, forbidding us to pay taxes
to the emperor, and saying that
he himself is the Messiah, a king.”
Then Pilate asked him, “Are you
the king of the Jews?” He answered,
“You say so.” Then Pilate said to the
chief priests and the crowds, “I find
no basis for an accusation against
this man.” But they were insistent
and said, “He stirs up the people by
teaching throughout all Judea, from
Galilee where he began even to this
place.”
When Pilate heard this, he asked
whether the man was a Galilean.
And when he learned that he was
under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent
him off to Herod, who was himself
in Jerusalem at that time. When
Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad,
for he had been wanting to see him
for a long time, because he had

heard about him and was hoping
to see him perform some sign. He
questioned him at some length,
but Jesus gave him no answer. The
chief priests and the scribes stood
by, vehemently accusing him. Even
Herod with his soldiers treated him
with contempt and mocked him;
then he put an elegant robe on him,
and sent him back to Pilate. That
same day Herod and Pilate became
friends with each other; before this
they had been enemies.
Pilate then called together the chief
priests, the leaders, and the peo-
ple, and said to them, “You brought
me this man as one who was per-
verting the people; and here I have
examined him in your presence
and have not found this man guilty
of any of your charges against him.
Neither has Herod, for he sent him
back to us. Indeed, he has done
nothing to deserve death. I will
therefore have him flogged and re-
lease him.” Then they all shouted
out together, “Away with this fellow!
Release Barabbas for us!” This was
a man who had been put in prison
for an insurrection that had taken
place in the city, and for murder. Pi-
late, wanting to release Jesus, ad-
dressed them again; but they kept
shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!” A
third time he said to them, “Why,
what evil has he done? I have found
in him no ground for the sentence
of death; I will therefore have him
flogged and then release him.” But
they kept urgently demanding with
loud shouts that he should be cru-
cified; and their voices prevailed.
So Pilate gave his verdict that their
demand should be granted. He re-
leased the man they asked for, the
one who had been put in prison for
insurrection and murder, and he
handed Jesus over as they wished.
As they led him away, they seized
a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was
coming from the country, and they
laid the cross on him, and made
him carry it behind Jesus. A great

number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent." And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

HEARING THE WORD

"Costly Obedience"

The readings of Passion Sunday are very rich in meaning and significance, since they narrate and interpret Jesus' death. One of the significant themes appearing in these readings is the theme of costly obedience which bears extraordinary fruit.

The first reading contains the third song of the servant found in the book of Isaiah. Unlike the last, fourth, song, where we find an image of the suffering servant, the third song portrays the servant as a rejected prophet. The description of the servant matches that of the prophet. He listens daily to the Lord's instructions which gives him "an instructed tongue", which is a better translation of the original Hebrew than "the tongue of the teacher." Using the Lord's instruction, this servant-prophet is to "sustain the weary with a word". This matches God's command to Isaiah that he is to "comfort" God's people (Isa 40:1). Finally, like a true prophet this servant has his ears opened by God in order to hear and then transmit God's word, the mission which he faithfully accepts.

However, this servant-prophet suffers rejection and violence, he is beaten and humiliated by those whom he addressed with God's message. This matches the experience of many other prophets who found themselves opposed and persecuted. The notable example here is Jeremiah who faced adversity almost throughout his entire

prophetic career (cf. Jer 11:18-22; 15:10-18; 20:1-10). Other prophets such as Elijah, Amos and Micah suffered in the same way (cf. 1 Kgs 19:1-2; Amos 7:10-13; Micah 2:6-11). Despite great difficulties which these and other prophets faced, they obediently delivered God's message without turning away from their mission on the account of opposition. Their costly obedience was very significant because it made God's message known and heard in the midst of, and above, the shouts of God's opponents. The chief source of these prophets' strength was their confidence in God's sustaining presence, which is also expressed by Isaiah's rejected servant-prophet in the concluding part of today's passage.

The second reading contains one of Paul's most significant and complete explanations of what Jesus did. Exhorting the Christians in Philippi to humility and mutual service, Paul gave them Jesus as an example to follow. Paul's presentation takes the form of a hymn. At its heart stands the statement that Jesus became obedient to the point of death on the cross. A common interpretation of this statement holds that Jesus was obedient to God who somehow required his son to die. This interpretation is inadequate, as the study of the entire hymn reveals.

Since fallen humanity was in the grip of sin and death, Jesus voluntarily put himself at the service of God's design to save his fallen children. But death can only be defeated by life. Therefore, Jesus had to subject himself to the pow-

er of death so that he could defeat death by emerging alive from its grip. Since as God he could not die, he had to become human, which is exactly what the first part of the hymn describes. Thus, Jesus, obedient to God's purpose of saving humanity from death, took on human form and submitted himself to death. He defeated death when God raised him from the dead. Emerging alive from the grave, the human Jesus broke the power of death. He then returned to his divine form as the Lord of all creation, which the last part of the hymn describes.

In this magnificent presentation Paul presents Jesus as God's true servant, who, obedient to God's will that all people be saved, made that salvation possible by defeating death. This was costly obedience since it took Jesus to the cross, but its effects are truly magnificent.

The long gospel reading contains Luke's description of Jesus' last hours. One of its striking features is the stark contrast between Pilate and Jesus. Pontius Pilate, a powerful Roman procurator with the authority to release or to condemn Jesus, finds himself torn between his role as a judge entrusted with the execution of justice, and the demands of the Jewish leaders which go against it. Whom is he going to obey, the law or the leaders? Pilate interrogated Jesus, and already, at this first hearing, recognizes his innocence. As he publicly declared his "not guilty" verdict, the Jewish leaders persisted in their accusations and demands. Pilate then attempted to escape his responsibility as a judge by sending Jesus for judgment to Herod. But Herod also

found Jesus innocent of any crime (cf. Luke 23:15). Pilate would declare Jesus innocent two more times, each time meeting with strong opposition from the leaders, and repeated demands for Jesus' death. Pilate's dilemma lay in the choice of whether to be just, obey the law and release this innocent man, or whether to yield to the Jewish leaders and condemn him. The procurator made his difficult but unjust choice, acceding to the Jewish leaders' demands and condemning Jesus to death. Pilate's was a costly but misguided obedience.

Jesus stands in complete contrast to Pilate. His passion is the culmination of his mission on earth. He was sent into the world as its saviour, a mission he will obediently carry to its conclusion on the cross. Thus, he courageously confirms to Pilate that he is the king of the Jews and makes no further attempts to defend or save himself. On the way to crucifixion he admonishes the weeping women not to mourn for him but to be concerned with their fate and the fate of their children. On the cross he prays for forgiveness for his executioners who know fully well what they are doing - that is crucifying Jesus - but do not know the significance of their acts. Finally, Jesus' final act on this earth is saving the repentant criminal crucified next to him. Jesus was true and obedient to his purpose as the saviour to the very last moment of his life.

Jesus died with dignity, having obediently served God's plan of salvation and having fulfilled his mission as the saviour. Pilate yielded to the Jewish leadership and failed in his task to uphold

justice. In the end, it was Jesus' costly obedience which bore the fruit of salvation for all humanity, starting with the repentant criminal.

The Passion Sunday begins the celebration of the Lord's passion, with the emphasis on the crucial role that the obedience of God's servants plays for the salvation of all. The prophets, God's servants in the Old Testament, were the key in communicating God's word and will to the Israelites, and suffered for it. But their costly obedience was essential in keeping at least a part of the people faithful to their God and their heritage. Jesus was God's obedient servant and Son, who was totally faithful in carrying out his work as the saviour. It was this costly obedience that led him to the cross. However, his obedience bore an extraordinary fruit of saving the world. Like the prophets, and Jesus, believers are called to costly obedience which must be sustained by the prayer, like the one uttered by the Psalmist, "but you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!"

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

The most difficult part of obedience to God is when someone is doing everything right and yet everything is going wrong. It often shakes the theology on which we have built our spiritual lives and converts even the unlettered into philosophers. These are times when many questions are raised in our minds, but the answers are caged in a thick cloud of uncertainty. As we nurse the pain inflicted by the rough edges of reality,

we are inclined to ponder whether it pays to remain steadfast in faith, and to love God and neighbour. In such situations, the survival instinct ignites, and our minds begin to explore possible escape routes. In a bid to be relieved of momentary suffering, the temptation to disobey God whispers to our restless hearts. This is where faith in God is tested. However, those who pass this test discover that faith is not just a flickering light but a floodlight that dispels the gloom of night.

The lives of the prophets as well as that of Jesus teach us that obedience to God is not a matter of eating a piece of cake decorated with icing. On the contrary, obedience comes with a lot of sacrifices and pain. In the person of Jesus we have a vivid example of how costly obedience to God can be. We are told that he was "obedient unto death, even death on a cross." The story of his public ministry, however, did not end on the cross. It ended in triumph over death and resurrection. There is an Akan proverb which says, "An obedient dog sleeps close to his master's chest." When we treasure obedience, we remain forever in the presence of God.

When we experience challenges in our marriage, it does not mean we are in the wrong arms. When we experience trials in our priestly or religious life, it does not necessarily mean we made a mistake in our discernment. When we have studied so hard and yet our grades fall short of our expectations, it does not mean God has abandoned us. Obedience to God entails trust at every

step of the journey.

The chorus of the song, "Trust and Obey", attributed to John H. Sammis (1846-1919) is apt for every occasion on our journey of faith: "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

When you have swum so hard and yet you find yourself being washed away by the tidal waves of the sea, you can trust the Lord of the storms and abandon yourself to his will. Evil can never overcome those who obediently yield to the will of God.

In every vocation, there is a cross. The cross must be carried to Golgotha and the ultimate sacrifice must be made. Mysteriously, the cross that weighs us down is often the ladder that lifts us up. We ought not to go looking for crosses but if providence brings one our way, let us embrace it with love. And when the weight of obedience brings us down on our knees, may we rise and stand tall on the wings of prayer.

PROVERB

*"An obedient dog
sleeps close
to his master's
chest."*

ACTION

Self-examination:

Did I ever have an unpleasant experience that threatened my faith in God? What was it?

In which area of my faith life do I encounter greatest difficulties to obey the Lord's teaching?

Response to God:

In a moment of prayer and deep silence I ask, "What is God telling me here and now in whatever situation I have found myself?"

Response to your World:

I will resolve to follow at least one specific demand of my faith which I find most challenging.

In our group we share about our struggles with obedience to the demands of Christian life and reflect on the way to support one another in order to meet them.

PRAYER

*Holy Triune God,
at the foot of the cross,
I lay aside
my personal action plan
and submit
to your plan of action.
Deepen my faith in you
and guide me
on the road to Calvary.
Grant this
through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*