

PALM SUNDAY

YEAR A



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
wakens — wakens 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 Christ, 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

FIRST READING

Isaiah 50:4–7

PSALM

Psalm 22:7–8, 16–19, 22–23

SECOND READING

Philippians 2:6–11

GOSPEL

Matthew 27:11–54

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

Gospel: Matthew 27:11–54

Now Jesus stood before the
governor; and the governor
asked him, “Are you the King
of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You
say so.” But when he was
accused by the chief priests
and elders, he did not answer.
Then Pilate said to him, “Do
you not hear how many
accusations they make
against you?” But he gave
him no answer, not even to a
single charge, so that the
governor was greatly amazed.

Now at the festival the
governor was accustomed to
release a prisoner for the
crowd, anyone whom they
wanted. At that time they
had a notorious prisoner,
called Jesus Barabbas. So
after they had gathered,
Pilate said to them, “Whom
do you want me to release
for you, Jesus Barabbas or
Jesus who is called the
Messiah?” For he realized
that it was out of jealousy
that they had handed him
over. While he was sitting
on the judgment seat, his
wife sent word to him, “
Have nothing to do with
that innocent man, for
today I have suffered a
great deal because of a
dream about him.” Now
the chief priests

Scripture quotations from

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and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with

gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two,

from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Hearing the Word

"Partaking in Jesus' Suffering"

The last Sunday of Lent, also called Palm Sunday, concludes the journey through Lent with a profound message that interprets the suffering and death of Jesus.

The first reading contains one of the "servant songs" found in Isaiah. These four poems present a mysterious figure of God's servant who has no name, but is sent on a mission to God's people, Israel. Today's song in the third one in the sequence and contains the words of the servant himself. In it, this God's servant declared his firm resolve to continue with his God-given mission despite adversity and persecution. His confidence and unwavering commitment are expressed through the triple appeal to "Lord God" who has sent the servant on this mission and helps the servant to carry it out.

Because of his faithfulness to God, the servant experiences affliction and humiliation. Yet, he faces these courageously, "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". What enabled the

servant to accept such humiliation and pain without running away or rebelling against God? It was the conviction that his mission is important, and confidence that God would act to save him, as he states, "the Lord GOD helps me; ... I know that I shall not be put to shame". Those words of Isaiah's suffering servant found their reflection in the life of Jesus, particularly in his passion.

Christians in the Philippian community had problems with pride and selfishness. To address these, Paul wrote to them with instruction on humility and selflessness, insisting that the followers of Jesus must focus on others rather than themselves, they must be "other-centered." To motivate his Christians Paul provided them with the most convincing example of other-centeredness – Jesus Christ himself. To do so, Paul employed a beautiful Christological hymn drawn from the liturgy of the early Church. This hymn describes Jesus who, while being in the form of God, chose to "empty himself" taking on the form of a servant. This act made Jesus one with the people, completely human (cf. Heb 2:17). The hymn then describes the crucial moment of Jesus' mission on earth, namely, accepting death on the cross". Going to the cross was Jesus' act of supreme obedience, obedience understood as fulfilling his part in God's plan of salvation for the whole of humanity. Jesus put his human life entirely at God's disposal, with the aim of bringing salvation to the people. Philipians are to follow his example and emulate their Lord by giving their lives in service to others, rather than pursuing their self-interests and ambitions.

The extensive passion narrative details how Jesus' obedience to God and focus on others led him to death on the cross. This story features a whole range of characters and shows their diverse reactions to Jesus and the events unfolding. Some of them are sympathetic to Jesus, such as Pilate's wife pleading with her husband for Jesus' release. Others, such as chief priests and the elders, are extremely hostile, repeatedly calling for Jesus' death to the point of persuading the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus. The crowd is passive and allows itself to be manipulated by the leaders. Pilate is undecided and hesitant, too weak to defend justice and too selfish to follow his conscience. The soldiers are cruel executioners taking pleasure in the humiliating torture of an innocent man. Simon of Cyrene is reluctantly helpful, while the passers-by and the crucified bandits taunt Jesus. Women disciples grieve while the apostles desert their Master and run away long before the crucifixion even began. These characters represent a full range of human responses to the death of Jesus.

Yet, the central point of the Matthean narrative is made by the Roman centurion who, upon seeing Jesus' death and accompanying signs, declared, "Truly this man was God's Son!" This statement, coming from a pagan soldier, shocks. He unknowingly expressed what Jesus' death was about. As God's faithful son, Jesus willingly chose the cross, and through his blood redeemed the human race, including pagans such as the centurion. In Jesus' nonviolent acceptance of suffering and

death, the centurion recognized God at work, and was the first to imply that Jesus' death had a profound meaning, that will only come to light in its aftermath, on the day of the resurrection.

The readings of this solemn day clearly show that Jesus' suffering and death was not about bad luck, misfortune or a judicial error. It was even not about the hostility of the Jewish leaders. Rather, his death on the cross was the supreme demonstration of Jesus' concern for the fallen world and his obedience to God without limit, even to accepting death. He was truly God's faithful suffering servant. His cross stands as a sign of his free and uncompromising adherence to God's plan for the sake of the salvation of all. Approaching his cross, believers are not called to see a sign of meaningless and futile suffering, but a reflection of suffering and death accepted willingly and given a reason and meaning. When Christians approach suffering as God's servants, they become joined to Jesus' passion. Their own suffering and deaths become purposeful and meaningful. Through enduring suffering and death with faith, a Christian participates in Christ's own death. Contemplating Jesus' passion, believers are invited to pray with the words of the Psalmist who, like Jesus, after cries of desperation and pain was still able to speak words of confidence and hope, "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you".

Listening to the Word of God

Undoubtedly, one of the iconic figures in recent African history is Nelson Mandela. He may

have had his own human flaws, but he is generally celebrated by many for his commitment to his vision of ending the racist apartheid system that brought untold suffering and pain to the multitudes. He paid an expensive price for the realization of this dream by spending twenty-seven years of his earthly life behind prison bars. It was a long, winding and rough road to freedom, but perseverance made it possible. His passion for this vision overflowed into his mission and brought about a change in South African Society. The profound words of the Roman centurion, "Truly this man was God's Son!" give focus to today's readings. In Jesus, we find a perfect example of a Son who was faithful to the Father even unto death. He embarked on a mission of love, and his passion and death were consequence of this mission. The commitment of Jesus to his mission as recounted in the Gospel resonates very well with the description of the mysterious figure in the Book of Isaiah and at the same time offers us a model of discipleship – partaking in the suffering of Christ.

There is a West African proverb which says, "a man in search of honey need not fear the sting of a bee." Indeed, nothing good comes on a silver platter. The tone of the liturgical readings for Palm Sunday throws light on our mission as followers of Christ. There are joyful moments in following Jesus – moments when our "hosanna" is loud and sweet. However, there comes a time when suffering glaringly stares at the face of every true disciple.

There is a version or rather distortion of Christianity known as the "Prosperity Gospel", favored

by those Christian who seek to bypass the message of Christ's suffering. Suffering has been made to appear incompatible with the Christian message, and a person who suffers in any way is often regarded as not having enough faith. This completely negates the meaning of the passion of Christ, because Christ's example teaches us that suffering is not a sign of lack of faith; rather faith makes suffering endurable.

We are called upon not to carry a wooden cross to Golgotha, but to persevere in our walk of faith with the Lord. For some, the cross can be found in a broken marriage or an experience of rejection. Others have to endure their passion in moments when an employer is unfair to them and they are not treated well. Still others experience the cross of disease or discrimination. Every one of us has to carry a cross some time in life. In all these experiences however, we stand assured as believers that someone has already walked that path. Jesus Christ's suffering was meaningful, and, because of him, we can make our cross meaningful when we unite ourselves, and our pain, with the one who died for us all those centuries ago.

Proverb

"A man in search of honey need not fear the sting of a bee."

Action

Self-examination

What is the most challenging suffering which I face at the moment? How do I deal with it?

When the going gets tough and trials come my way, am I able to hold on to my faith in God or do I easily lose trust in Him?

Response to God

I choose to unite my present sufferings with that of Christ and to offer them as reparation and atonement for the sins of the whole world.

Response to your World

This week I will seek to emulate Christ's example of self-giving service as instructed by Paul. I will find a way to do this effectively, and act accordingly.

Imitating Simon of Cyrene, how can we help those who are weighed down by the crosses they carry? For example, are there some practical ways by which we can assist those in the margins of society?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you overcame evil by the power of love.

Your faithfulness to the plan of the Father has brought salvation to the whole world.

Help us to see in every cross we carry a blessing in disguise and the path to eternal life. Amen