

Palm (Passion) Sunday B

*O Lord, do not leave me alone,
my strength, make haste to help me! (Ps 21:20)*



Commemoration of the Lord's Entrance into Jerusalem

Gospel

Mark 11:1-10

When they were approaching Jerusalem, in sight of Bethphage and Bethany, close by the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go off to the village facing you, and as soon as you enter it you will find a tethered colt that no one has yet ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone says to you, 'What are you doing?' say, 'The Master needs it and will send it back here directly.' They went off and found a colt tethered near a door in the open street. As they untied it, some men standing there said, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They gave the answer Jesus had told them, and the men let them go. Then they took the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on its back, and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, others greenery which they had cut in the fields. And those who went in front and those who followed were all shouting, "Hosanna! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heavens!"

Alternative Gospel

John 12:12-16

The crowds who had come up for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took branches of palm and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessings on the King of Israel, who comes in the name of the Lord." Jesus found a young donkey and mounted it – as scripture says: Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, mounted on the colt of a donkey. At the time his disciples did not understand this, but later, after Jesus had been glorified, they remembered that this had been written about him and that this was in fact how they had received him.

The Mass

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-7

The Lord has given me a disciple's tongue. So that I may know how to reply to the wearied he provides me with speech. Each morning he wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple. The Lord has opened my ear.

For my part, I made no resistance, neither did I turn away. I offered my back to those who struck me, my cheeks to those who tore at my beard; I did not cover my face against insult and spittle. The Lord comes to my help, so that I am untouched by the insults. So, too, I set my face like flint; I know I shall not be shamed.

Second Reading

Philippians 2:6-11

His state was divine, yet Christ Jesus did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Gospel

The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark 14:1 – 15:47

It was two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by some trick and have him put to death. For they said, "It must not be during the festivities, or there will be a disturbance among the people."

Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper; he was at dinner when a woman came in with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the ointment on his head. Some who were there said to one another indignantly, "Why this waste of ointment? Ointment like this could have been sold for over three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor"; and they were angry with her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why are you upsetting her? What she has done for me is one of the good works. You have the poor with you always, and you can be kind to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. She has done what was in her power to do: she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. I tell you solemnly, wherever throughout all the world the Good News is proclaimed, what she has done will be told also, in remembrance of her."

Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, approached the chief priests with an offer to hand Jesus over to them. They were delighted to hear it, and promised to give him money; and he looked for a way of betraying him when the opportunity should occur.

On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was sacrificed, his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go into the city and you will meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him, and say to the owner of the house which he enters, 'The Master says: Where is my dining room in which I can eat the passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room furnished with couches, all prepared. Make the preparations for us there." The disciples set out and went to the city and found everything as he had told them, and prepared the Passover.

When evening came he arrived with the Twelve. And while they were at table eating, Jesus said, "I tell you solemnly, one of you is about to betray me, one of you eating with me." They were distressed and said to him, one after another, "Not I, surely?" He said to them, "It is one of the Twelve, one who is dipping into the same dish with me. Yes, the Son of Man is going to his fate, as the scriptures say he will, but alas for that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! Better for that man if he had never been born!"

And as they were eating he took some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them, and all drank from it, and he said to them, "This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many. I tell you solemnly, I shall not drink any more wine until the day I drink the new wine in the kingdom of God."

After psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all lose faith, for the scripture says: 'I shall strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered'. However after my resurrection I shall go before you to Galilee." Peter said, "Even if all lose faith, I will not." And Jesus said to him, "I tell you solemnly, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times." But he repeated still more earnestly, "If I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And they all said the same.

They came to a small estate called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Stay here while I pray." Then he took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and keep awake." And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by. He said, "Abba (Father)! Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it." He came back and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Had you not the strength to keep awake one hour? You should be awake, and praying not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came back and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy; and they could find no answer for him. He came back a third time and said to them, "You can sleep on now and take your rest. It is all over. The hour has come. Now the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up! Let us go! My betrayer is close at hand already."

Even while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, came up with a number of men armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the traitor had arranged a signal with them. He had said, "The one I kiss, he is the man. Take him in charge, and see he is well guarded when you lead him away." So when the traitor came, he went straight up to Jesus and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The others seized him and took him in charge. Then one of the bystanders drew his sword and struck out at the high priest's servant and cut off his ear.

Then Jesus spoke. "Am I a brigand that you had to set out to capture me with swords and clubs? I was among you teaching in the Temple day after day and you never laid a hand on me. But this is to fulfil the scriptures." And they all deserted him and ran away. A young man who followed him had nothing on but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the cloth in their hands and ran away naked.

They led Jesus off to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes assembled there. Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the high priest's palace, and was sitting with the attendants warming himself at the fire.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus on which they might pass the death-sentence. But they could not find any. Several, indeed, brought false evidence against him, but their evidence was conflicting. Some stood up and submitted this false evidence against him, "We heard him say, 'I am going to destroy this Temple made by human hands, and in three days build another, not made by human hands.'" But even on this point their evidence was conflicting. The high priest then stood up before the whole assembly and put this question to Jesus, "Have you no answer to that? What is this evidence these men are bringing against you?" But he was silent and made no answer at all. The high priest put a second question to him, "Are you the Christ the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." The high priest tore his robes, and said, "What need of witnesses have we now? You heard the blasphemy. What is your finding?" And they all gave their verdict: he deserved to die. Some of them started spitting at him and, blindfolding him, began hitting him with their fists and shouting, "Play the prophet!" And the attendants rained blows on him.

While Peter was down below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's servant-girls came up. She saw Peter warming himself there, stared at him and said, "You too were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." But he denied it, saying, "I do not know, I do not understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. The servant-girl saw him and again started telling the bystanders, "This fellow is one of them." But again he denied it. A little later the bystanders themselves said to Peter, "You are one of them for sure! Why, you are a Galilean." But he started calling curses on himself and swearing, "I do not know the man you speak of." At that moment the cock crew for the second time, and Peter recalled what Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times." And he burst into tears. First thing in the morning, the chief priests together with the elders and scribes, in short the whole Sanhedrin, had their plan ready. They had Jesus bound and took him away and handed him over to Pilate.

Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "It is you who say it." And the chief priests brought many accusations against him. Pilate questioned him again, "Have you no reply at all? See how many accusations they are bringing against you!" But, to Pilate's amazement, Jesus made no further reply.

At festival time Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone they asked for. Now a man called Barabbas was then in prison with the rioters who had committed murder during the uprising. When the crowd went up and began to ask Pilate the customary favour, Pilate answered them, "Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?" For he realised it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over. The chief priests, however, had incited the crowd to demand that he should release Barabbas for them instead. Then Pilate spoke again. "But in that case, what am I to do with the man you call king of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Why? What harm has he done?" But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" So Pilate, anxious to placate the crowd, released Barabbas for them and, having ordered Jesus to be scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

The soldiers led him away to the inner part of the palace, that is, the Praetorium, and called the whole cohort together. They dressed him up in purple, twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on him. And they began saluting him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" They struck his head with a reed and spat on him; and they went down on their knees to do him homage. And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the purple and dressed him in his own clothes. They led him out to crucify him. They enlisted a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull.

They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he refused it. Then they crucified him, and shared out his clothing, casting lots to decide what each should get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The inscription giving the charge against him read: "The King of the Jews". And they crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left.

The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads and said, "Aha! So you would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days! Then save yourself: come down from the cross!" The chief priests and the scribes mocked him among themselves in the same way. They said "He saved others, he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the king of Israel, come down from the cross now, for us to see it and believe." Even those who were crucified with him taunted him.

When the sixth hour came there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" This means "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" When some of those who stood by heard this, they said, "Listen, he is calling on Elijah." Someone ran and soaked a sponge in vinegar and, putting it on a reed, gave it him to drink saying, "Wait and see if Elijah will come to take him down." But Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

And the veil of the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The centurion, who was standing in front of him, had seen how he had died, and he said, "In truth this man was a son of God." There were some women watching from a distance. Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary who was the mother of James the younger and Joset, and Salome. These used to follow him and look after him when he was in Galilee. And there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with him.

It was now evening, and since it was Preparation Day (that is the vigil of the sabbath), there came Joseph of Arimathaea, a prominent member of the Council, who himself lived in the hope of seeing the kingdom of God, and he boldly went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate, astonished that he should have died so soon, summoned the centurion and enquired if he was already dead. Having been assured of this by the centurion, he granted the corpse to Joseph who bought a shroud, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the shroud and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joset were watching and took note of where he was laid.

Meditation

With the children of the Hebrews the Church participates today in the triumph of Christ. He enters the holy city, Jerusalem, to pass from this world to his Father.

The passion narratives which are read on this Sunday form without a doubt the primitive heart of our gospels. There are many concerns which converge around these simple but dramatic stories. They influence the manner of recounting the passion. In the care taken to show that Christianity had nothing to do with a criminal or rebellious movement, the evangelists highlight both the plot which results in the death of Jesus and the innocence of the Saviour crucified for sinners. They also demonstrate to Israel how this death fulfilled the scriptures, accomplished in the central event of the passion and in the details of its unfolding. The historical insertion of the crucifixion into the celebration of the Jewish Passover is decisive for Christians. Jesus replaced the immolation of the paschal lamb with the sacrifice of a new covenant. In addition to these apologetic and theological concerns, the evangelists proposed Jesus as a model of humility, of prayer, of endurance, of suffering. In these virtues which perfected the humanity of Jesus, the Church had much to learn.

The passion narratives are not reduced to a mere recitation of episodes. Marked by the personality of each evangelist, they present an undivided history in which the assaults of evil, carried to their heights in Jesus' passion, are rendered powerless by God.