

Thoughts in the Time of COVID-19 #10—April 5, 2020

My reflection today is the homily I gave on the Mass televised for broadcast today and offered for your consideration:

HOMILY FOR PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY: THE GLORY AND AGONY OF HOLY WEEK

[Texts: Matthew 21.1–11; Isaiah 50.4–7; [Psalm 22]; Philippians 2.6–11; Matthew 26.14–27.66]

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In the ritual today for today's Mass, it says that the reading of the Passion according to St. Matthew—the longest account of Our Lord's suffering, death and burial—may be followed by a brief homily or by silence.

Given the extraordinary circumstances of our lives these days, I thought it important to share with you a few thoughts and, since it is not possible for you who are watching these ceremonies to receive Holy Communion, later in the Mass I will read for and with you the expression of a desire for "spiritual communion."

The liturgical texts of Passion or Palm Sunday are incomparably rich; it is scarcely possible to do them justice. The Isaiah passage is one of four poems known as "Songs of the (Suffering) Servant." They tell of the humility of God's mysterious end-time servant; we Christians have identified this unique individual with Christ Jesus, Our Lord.

In the passage from the letter to the Philippians Paul, says that Jesus was humble and selfless, caring only about us rather than himself by his gesture of "emptying himself" of his divine stature "to the point of [enduring] death—even death on a cross." This was a hymn that the first disciples of Our Lord loved to sing.

We have two gospel passages read today: the Passion Narrative and the account of Jesus' dramatic entry into Jerusalem. Jesus entered Jerusalem humbly, seated on a lowly beast of burden and accepting the crowd's acclaim of him as messianic king. Fulfilling prophecies, Jesus rode into the Holy City humbly as a servant and not as a warrior on a stallion.

Jesus came to die and to bring salvation within a kingdom that would be universal in scope, beyond any limited visions that the crowds or Jesus' disciples might have had. Truly, he is Christ, our King!

St. Matthew's sequence of Jesus' last days and hours is much like what we find in Mark's gospel. But there are striking differences. For instance, only Matthew tells of Judas Iscariot's remorse over his role in handing Jesus over to the religious leaders and of an intervention made by Pilate's wife declaring Jesus' innocence.

In the "words of institution" Matthew like Mark reflects a Palestinian Jewish tradition concerning Jesus' self-offering in the Eucharist. He sees the Eucharist as the renewed expression of the covenant God made with Israel in Exodus 24.6–8: "the blood of the covenant poured out for many" and that this was "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26.28).

The breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup of wine, which Jesus declared to be his Body and Blood foretells the effect Jesus' death would have. His death brings about the forgiveness of the world's sins, the forgiveness of our sins, the forgiveness of my sins.

The Passion shows us Jesus praying twice, in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross.

On the Mount of Olives, we see two aspects of Jesus' prayer. First, that he asked, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." And secondly, that Jesus added, "Yet not what I want, but what you want."

In the second and third expressions of his prayer, Jesus said, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." So we learn, then, that it's important to make known to the heavenly Father our fears and our needs, but also to add a desire to accept the divine will for us and our loved ones. As we say in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done."

Jesus' prayer from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—which are the opening words of Psalm 22—has troubled some of his followers. No explanation can soften the realization that the human Jesus died with a cry of anguish and abandonment on his lips. Yet he did not despair. In his pain, Jesus uttered a lament to his Father, whom he addressed as "My God." Jesus' cry to God was one of trust. For it is likely that Jesus prayed Psalm 22 to its conclusion. This lament closes with a pledge that the psalmist, that Jesus and, yes, that we, will sing God's praises in the assembly after being rescued from the clutches of death: "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation, I will praise you." Jesus foretells his resurrection!

Finally, Matthew's account of Jesus' death features an earthquake, which anticipates another earthquake on the morning of Jesus' resurrection. This tells us that the resurrection does not cancel out Jesus' suffering and death. Rather, the gospel message is that God breaks into the human world to transform it, a theme of the Easter season that will begin very soon.

Dear friends, it seems at times that this experience of COVID-19 is like a long, extended Good Friday. Our whole world is suffering through a sort of Passion. Yes, when we offer these hardships with the mind and heart of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we share in his redemptive sacrifice. Indeed, in a sense we are these days carrying the Cross with Jesus.

Our Lenten journey of forty days this year has been unprecedented. Many people have written or called to tell me how much they miss being able to go to their parish church for Mass, how they long for the Eucharist and to see their friends. This Lent has been a time of suffering and privation for much of the world, as we see on the news every day, virtually all day long. At this point, we have only a few days left in Lent, but we are faced with an as yet undetermined time left in the country-wide effort to limit the spread of the Corona virus.

As the people of God left Egypt and wandered in the desert for forty years, they gradually came to realize they were on a journey towards a new beginning. They sometimes strayed from the path but they had a destination, a goal to reach—the earthly Promised Land of milk and honey pledged to them by God.

It is important for us to live with a goal in mind. We are heading to the eternal Promised Land! In faith, we can see ourselves invited to journey towards that goal with a spirit of hope. For we know that Lent will culminate in the mystery of Easter when we celebrate Christ rising from the dead, bringing life to us and freeing us from the burden of sin and death.

So too, we trust that we will come through this pandemic as well on the journey to a restored relationship with God. Each act of kindness reaching out to others, each offer to shop for an elderly neighbour, each rosary prayed and Mass watched online or on TV in a spirit of prayer is a concrete act of hope in God's saving and renewing power.

We may be on a long journey this Lent but we can engage in it as a time of reflection and renewal on our ultimate journey home to God. May we see in this time of suffering and difficulty a time to renew our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, to entrust our country and our world to our Blessed Mother Mary and to commit ourselves to being God's agents of mercy, faith and hope for the world.

God bless you.

✠ Terrence