

HOLY WEEK

Holy Week is the week from Palm Sunday (celebrating the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem) through the Saturday before Easter. It is actually the conclusion of Lent, ending at noon on Easter Eve. Easter Sunday is not part of Holy Week, but is rather the beginning of a new season – Eastertide.

The celebration of Holy Week began in a unique way. Towards the end of the 4th century A.D., a European pilgrim named Egeria visited Jerusalem. Part of her visit included Holy Week. To her delight, she discovered that the church in Jerusalem had developed over the centuries a rich and complex Holy Week liturgy, based not only on the actual days of the week that the various events occurred, but at the actual places where they occurred. This could obviously only occur in just this way in Jerusalem. But the reports of Egeria back to the European church moved the western churches to adapt the practice to local needs. As early as the 5th century in Spain, local versions of the Holy Week re-enactment liturgy were adopted; from there, they spread across the rest of the church in Europe. Rome was the last of the western churches to adopt the practice, doing so in the 12th century.

Palm Sunday

***Liturgy of the Palms:* Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11**

***Liturgy of the Passion:* Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Matthew 26:14-27:66; Philippians 2:5-11**

Liturgy of the Palms: Traditionally, the Sixth Sunday in Lent is a celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and thus the initiation of Holy Week that culminates in Jesus' death and burial. But it is also a Sunday for concentrating upon the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, particularly for those church traditions that do not observe either Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. Without that observance of Christ's suffering and death (normally called "the Passion"), that church would be awkwardly thrust from a celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry to an emphasis on his resurrection with no mention of his saving death. For churches with such a restricted calendar, the Sixth Sunday in Lent is also celebrated as Passion Sunday so that the actions of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are not forgotten. Consequently, on the Sixth Sunday in Lent, it has become traditional to refer to an emphasis upon the triumphal entry as "the Liturgy of the Palms" and an emphasis upon Christ's suffering and death as "the Liturgy of the Passion". Scriptures supporting both emphases have been designated for that Sunday. Consequently, we will exegete both sets of scripture. The set that immediately follows is the set for the Liturgy of the Palms.

Matthew 21:1-11 is the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, as presented by Matthew. But it is much more than simply that well-known story. Matthew's telling of the triumphal entry is only meant as preamble to a much larger story that is encapsulated throughout the entirety of the twenty-first chapter, but later acted out in chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven. Matthew's telling of the story of the triumphal entry cannot be fully appreciated unless it is seen through the lens of the remainder of the story as it continues throughout this book. The clue that the triumphal entry story is not just the first eleven verses of Matthew 21 but is the entire story is found in connecting statements strategically placed throughout the story. The

story begins “When they had come near Jerusalem” (21:1), followed by “When Jesus entered Jerusalem” (vs. 10), then straightaway “Then Jesus entered the temple” (vs. 12) followed by “He went outside the city” (vs. 17), then “In the morning, when he returned to the city” (vs. 18), and finally “When he entered the temple” (vs. 23). Only by the close of the chapter (vs. 46) does the “guided tour” end and the full story of the triumphal entry is completed. So let’s look at that full story.

Matthew 21 begins with the actual story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (21:1-11) and is immediately followed by the cleansing of the temple (21:12-17). Both stories are really two sides of one story, and are very political in nature. In the first, the act of riding into the city on a donkey with the crowds cheering Jesus and waving palm branches is a very intentional and clear political action. This is so because it is a direct fulfillment of Hebrew scripture regarding the coming of the Messiah (Zech. 9:9; Isa. 62:11) and is the action used by the Davidic kings for their coronations (cf. I Kings 1:33). The king-elect, riding into the city on a donkey, was the living symbolism that proclaimed by this act that this king would be a ruler of peace (shalom) and not of war. So it was missed on no Jew of the time that Jesus was publicly declaring himself the Messiah.

Jesus follows this public declaration of himself as Messiah with the cleansing of the Temple. In fact, the text tells us that he entered the city in the procession, went directly to the temple, cleansed it and then rebutted the arguments of the chief priests and scribes who resisted what he was doing. Matthew is the only author who crowds these stories upon one another. Although Mark has Jesus enter the temple at the end of his triumphal parade, he only has Jesus look around the temple as if he were sightseeing; it is the next day that he cleanses the temple. Luke has Jesus conclude his triumphal entry by weeping over Jerusalem, and John concludes a previous section with Jesus entering Jerusalem. The Johannine story that follows that account begins an entirely different section. It is only Matthew that attaches the cleansing of the temple and the debate with Israel’s religious leaders to the story of the triumphal entry.

In cleansing the temple of its commerce, Jesus angrily declares, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers” (21:13). Jesus’ anger and zeal for the purity of the temple picks up on themes from Isaiah (cf. 56:7) and Jeremiah (cf. 7:11) regarding the commitment of Israel as suffering servant for the temple’s sanctification (i.e., the world as it should be). But making money and increasing the system’s wealth and power is all that these priests, money-changers and merchants are interested in and therefore it has become “a den of robbers”.

Further, it can be argued that this act of violence on Jesus’ part begat the violence that claimed his life – and was intentionally calculated by him to have that effect! As long as Jesus simply confronted the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes, they would be infuriated at him but they would not – in fact, could not – seek his execution. When he committed this act of violence, Jesus had intentionally escalated the confrontation to a new level both in action and in locale (because this was sacred space) and he committed such violence against a far more powerful and formidable enemy – the Jewish priesthood! With this combination, Jesus sealed his fate (which, likely, is exactly what he intended).

The story of the cleansing of the temple is followed by the story of the cursing of the fig tree (21:18-22). The disciples marvel at this clear reversal of nature and ask how its withering occurred so rapidly. Jesus' answer is emblematic:

“Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to this fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, “Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,” it will be done. Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive” (21:21-22).

Obviously, Jesus is seeking to stress the importance of faith as essential for God's work to be accomplished. To do so, he picks two radical and clearly-impossible actions. With faith, you can reverse nature and wither a budding fig-tree. With faith, you can move mountains and cast them into the sea. Of course, he doesn't mean this literally, as indicated in his last statement. He is simply affirming, in the strongest possible language, that faith is essential to bringing about kingdom transformation. Jesus' battle with the organized and powerful religious, political and economic systems of Israel and of Rome is about to begin. It has been foreshadowed in Jesus' triumphal entry. It has been radically escalated by Jesus' cleansing of the temple that has taken the battle into the very citadel of the powers of domination. He is about to make fools of Israel's priests, Pharisees and Sadducees, exposing them for the manipulative, power-grabbing forces of domination that they are. And the struggle between Jesus and the “Powers That Be” will only continue to escalate until they crucify him. It is faith – and only faith that God is at work through this confrontation and will bring about God's good for Israel and for the world that can enable Jesus to carry on such revolutionary action. And that is the kind of faith that Jesus' disciples must embrace, if they are to carry on that revolution and bring about the transformation of all humanity into the kingdom of God! That is what Jesus is calling the disciples to through this acted-out parable of the withering of the fig tree!

But Jesus isn't finished yet! The next stories tell of Jesus' direct confrontation of “the chief priests and the elders of the people” – that is, the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy. It consists of three stories – Jesus' handling of the questioning of his authority, the parable of the two sons, and the parable of the wicked tenants of a vineyard.

The questioning of Jesus' authority is the first story (21:23-27). The clerical aristocracy challenges Jesus by asking “By what authority are you doing these things?” Like so much of their interactions with Jesus, they are laying a trap for him because if he says “My authority comes from God”, they will accuse him of heresy and have him stoned. And if he answers, “By no authority but my own”, he can lose credibility with the crowd.

Instead, as he usually did, Jesus outmaneuvered them. “I will also ask you one question,” he responds. “If you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.” They agree, figuring that between them, they can answer any question Jesus puts, and thus force him into a self-intimidating answer to their questions. But they are not prepared for the question that Jesus asks!

“Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin”? The priests and elders immediately discern the trap that Jesus has set for them. If they answer his question, “John's ministry (and the sign of his ministry, his baptisms) were of God”, Jesus would challenge them

as to why they hadn't believed but instead opposed him. If they answered, "Of men", it would reveal to the crowds the truth about them – that they didn't really believe in God at a personal level but only used religion as a way of controlling and dominating the people. Their answer would reveal them for what they really were – and such a revelation would cause them to lose all credibility in the eyes of the people and, consequently, would end their domination. Their response would reveal them for what they really were. They couldn't chance that. So they took the only alternative open to them – "We do not know!" And Jesus justly replied, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things!" Jesus had won!

This is more than a story about how Jesus outwitted the chief priests and elders. It is also a story about the capacity of the people to shape and dominate the powers, if they chose to do so. Jesus had nothing but his own wisdom and the people on his side. And with the skillful use of the former and (in essence) the threat of the withdrawal of popular support, Jesus brings defeat to the clerical aristocracy. So it is a story about how to use power for the common good!

It is also a story about the uncovering of the real agenda of the religious establishment. It was not to seek truth. It was not to seek God. And it was not about the building of the Shalom Community with its concomitant redistribution of wealth and power. It was about the subtle exercise of dominating power in order to destroy Jesus' credibility. It was about the maintaining of the status quo with the clerical aristocracy in political and economic control. And thus it is all about the threat of these selfish and self-serving systems being exposed to the masses. That is what makes this story such a powerful story – because it both reveals the world as it truly is, and how God's people can astutely exercise power for the good of that world. Therefore, it is a most powerful story!

The second story of Matthew's trilogy of Jesus' confrontation of the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy is the parable of the two sons (21:28-32). In this story, Jesus tells a story of two sons – one who refuses to do what his father asked him to do but then later does it, the second who agrees to do it but never does. "Which of the two did the will of the father?" Jesus asked. "The first," the priests and elders responded. Then Jesus voiced the intent of this story.

"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him" (21:31b-32).

The tax collectors and prostitutes originally said "no" to God, but when God revealed Himself in a new and powerful way through John (and, implied, through Jesus), they were both needy and receptive enough to perceive what God was doing and respond. So they eventually did say "yes". On the other hand, Jesus is saying, "you priests and elders have said "yes" to God all along, but in reality were motivated by your lust for power and wealth and your need to control and dominate. So when God came more clearly and more powerfully to you through John and through me (Jesus), you couldn't be open to this new revelation. You had too much at stake in your commitment to domination. And so it has become clear to all that your "yes" was really a "no" all along".

Therefore, the result of your refusal to be receptive to God's work in your midst is that these supposedly evil and scorned people – the tax collectors and prostitutes – will enter God's kingdom ahead of you. And that is because you have chosen to shut yourselves out! It is a most profound and damning statement!

Matthew then completes this collection of stories that concludes Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem through a story that wraps up the whole message presented in each of the previous stories. This concluding and summarizing story is the parable of the wicked tenants (21:33-46).

Jesus tells of tenants of a vineyard who are responsible for it as leased property. They are not owners but managers of the vineyard, responsible for it being profitable to the true owner. But instead of perceiving themselves as tenant-managers, they act as if they were the owners. They refuse to pay the owner the profit or rent due to him for the use of this land. What will the owner do to get these tenant-managers to use this property as the law requires?

The owner sends servants to the tenant-managers, assigned with the task of collecting the rent that is due him. Instead, they meet with consistent and total refusal on the part of the tenants to pay. In fact, those tenants escalate the struggle by beating and stoning them and then even kill one of the servants. So the owner sends another delegation who receives the same harsh treatment from the tenants. Finally, the owner sends his son, saying "They will respect my son!"

Well, they don't! Instead, the tenants seize and kill the son, thinking that by doing so they will get the owner to abandon the vineyard and they will inherit it. But that is not how the owner chooses to act. Rather, the owner comes himself to the vineyard, ends the lease, takes the vineyard from the tenants and punishes them severely.

The meaning of the parable is transparent – and the chief priests and scribes knew it! The vineyard is Israel, God is the owner, and the tenants are the religious-political-economic leaders of Israel. Instead of caring for the nation, these elite saw it as their own possession, and beat and killed any prophet who came from God to call them to accountability. Finally, God sent his Son, but they killed him. "Therefore," Jesus concludes, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom". The lesson, not lost on the religious establishment, caused them to "want to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowds, because the people regarded him as a prophet" (21:46). But, despite the religious elite's reaction, the truth which Jesus spoke was not ignored. That elite will be brutally punished for their insubordination of the true owner – God. The kingdom will be taken from them – as it was in 70 AD with Titus' conquering of Israel and in 134 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed and the nation scattered. The "vineyard" will go to the people – to the peasants – who will build the Jubilee kingdom with Christ as its liberator!

So Matthew witnesses to the passion and resurrection narratives in chapter 21. It now remains for that witness to be acted out in Jesus' trial, scourging, crucifixion and resurrection. But here, the story has been told!

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 is a song of victory, built around the opening and closing refrain, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever” (vss. 1, 29). It is, as well, the psalm (or at least portions of it) that are used in all four gospel accounts of Jesus’ triumphal procession into Jerusalem (Psalm 118:25-27 as referenced in Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:38, John 12:13) to claim his “crown”.

Psalm 118 was originally intended to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles. The high priest calls the people to worship with the cry, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever”. The term “steadfast love” is a translation of the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which means God’s unconditional, “grace-filled” love that is totally loyal to us and which then expects of us comparable “loyal love”. But whether we respond with such loyalty, God will remain committed to us because God has promised so to be toward us.

The psalm then describes a magnificent procession of king, priests and people (vss. 19-25) to the Temple. Once arriving at the temple court, the high priest then moves to the altar (vss. 26-28) to place upon it a cluster of branches (Lev. 23:40). The liturgy then ends with the entire people praising God through the words that were their call to worship and now becomes their benediction: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever”.

The overarching theme in the psalm, stated in many different ways throughout that hymn, is captured best in verse 14: “The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation”. Therefore, “with the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me” (vs. 6)?

Portions of this psalm are among the best-known in the Psalter. They are meant to march in order, with one inevitably following the other. Here are the three proclamations: (1) “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; (2) this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. (3) This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (vss. 22-24).

This Psalm reminds us that acting out his *chesedh* love, God takes that which is rejected or despised, “things (and people) who are not” and makes them “things (and people) who are.” God takes the rejected and marginalized ones and builds an entire shalom kingdom upon them. This reality is something that engenders our praise, so that each day becomes new potential where God’s great reversal can once again burst forth into human society!

Liturgy of the Passion:

Isaiah 50:4-9a is the third of the four “Servant Songs” in Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). In this song, the speaker fills the role of the servant, and the audience is Israel – and especially those Jews who have fallen away from God.

In this song, the servant’s words reveal him as the prophet who speaks truth to the Israelites, confronting them in their lethargy and depression in the midst of Babylonian exile. He speaks the word of the Lord to them (vss. 4-5), calling them to become as a nation and as people those

whom God created them to be. The servant describes himself as the one chosen by God to receive God's word and then to reveal it to the exiles, so that they might be re-energized and work to form society as God intended it to be.

There will be those among the Israelites who will hold positions of power, and who will oppose both the words of the servant and his ministry, the prophet declares. In their hatred of him and of his proposed reform of their systems, they will attack, persecute and physically harm him. "I give 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" (50:6).

But in spite of the direct opposition of those holding political, economic and religious power, God will sustain the servant and stand by him. That sustenance will enable him to be both single-minded and uncompromising in his commitment to God and Israel's redemption. Thus, he will be able to accept his suffering with stoicism, and that suffering will become transformative for those who see and respond lovingly to it (vss. 7-9).

One can see how this servant song, as well as the others contained in Isaiah, would have sustained and encouraged Jesus, as he faced into the inevitable consequences that would inevitably occur because of the action he and his disciples took that first Palm Sunday morning.

Psalm 31:9-16 is a portion of a psalm that prays for deliverance from one's enemies. As such, it is most appropriate for Passion Sunday, as we center on the persecution, suffering and death of Jesus.

The psalm as a whole centers not only on the persecution and suffering that the Psalmist is receiving, but in God's care and support of him in the midst of such suffering. Such passages as "You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me" (vs. 3), or "Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God" (vs. 5) or again "Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me, when I was beset as a city under siege. You heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help" (vss. 21-22). Verses such as these remind the reader of the protection and shelter of God. It is not that trust in him rescues us from all of life's trials, for such trials fall upon us all. But it is that trust in God enables us to face into those trials so that they do not destroy us. For it is God's "steadfast love" that sustains us through the struggle.

However, the Psalter lesson for today – the ninth through the sixteenth verses of Psalm 31 has precious little of such reference to God's sustenance. Instead, it presents the full fury of the persecution and suffering that the loyal servant of God must at times face as the Psalmist pleads with God for mercy.

"Be gracious to me, O Lord; for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel.

For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around! – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life” (vss. 9-13).

The Psalmist cannot paint a more somber picture of a man or woman thoroughly beaten down by life, not only by the circumstances and the conditions that assail him, but also the opposition of those who are his regular companions who, sensing his vulnerability, move in for the kill! All seems totally hopeless.

But then comes the slightest glimmer of hope! “But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love” (vss. 14-16).

It is important to note that God has neither intervened to correct the situation nor has acted to buoy up the Psalmist. Rather, all that you have from the Psalmist is wishful thinking. He is choosing to trust in God – primarily because there is no other alternative available to him. He prays to God to “deliver me from the hand of my enemies” and begs God to “save me in your steadfast love”. But it depends upon other verses than this scripture to determine that God does respond and sustains the Psalmist. These verses indicate no such action on the part of God.

That is the appropriate expectation for Passion Sunday. There is no assurance to the Psalmist that his single-minded trust in God will realize liberation for him. Nor is there any indication that Jesus’ dependence upon God – at least in the Gospel of Matthew – will sustain him through the execution he is facing. Only the wish, the hope is there. At this stage, there is no empty tomb – only a blood-soaked cross. That is where Passion Sunday always ends!

Matthew 26:14-27:66 is the Matthean account of the last days of Jesus’ life. The Gospel of Matthew moves relentlessly to the stories of the Last Supper, the betrayal, the denial by Peter, the trial and the crucifixion. The story is told in terms of the continuing struggle between the kingdom of a marginalized Messiah and the Israelite political, economic and religious systems. Whereas in the Gospel of John, Pilate is portrayed as a co-conspirator, in Matthew he is clearly reluctant to execute Jesus. He is confused at Jesus’ unwillingness to defend himself, his wife tells him to release Jesus, and he calls Jesus “innocent” – indicating that he doesn’t see the crime of which Jesus is accused as being punishable by death. But the elders and chief priests are relentless in their insistence, and finally, Pilate acquiesces with the words “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves” (27:24b). Let’s look more closely at that story.

The Institution of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus gathers with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. One of the three festivals annually required of all Israelites, the Passover was its most important. It commemorated the primary salvific event in Israel’s history – their miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery, their liberation as a people through God’s profound intervention in both Israelite and Egyptian history, and the slaying of the firstborn of all those whose doorways had not been covered by the blood of a slain lamb. Therefore, “you shall offer the Passover sacrifice for the Lord your God, from the flock and the herd, at the place that the Lord will choose as a dwelling for his name, . . . in the evening at sunset, the time of day when you departed from Egypt” (Deut. 16:2, 6b).

It is significant that the most Jewish of the Gospels, Matthew, specifically tells the reader that it was the Passover that was celebrated by Jesus and his disciples on the night he was betrayed and condemned to death. He who is to die at the hands of the domination systems for the liberation and redemption of the “New Israel” – both Gentiles and Jews who would believe in him – begins the drama of his death with the celebration of the festival commemorating that earlier liberation of Israel built upon the death of the first-born and of a people protected by the sacrificial blood of a lamb!

It is in this context that Jesus fittingly institutes the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist – symbol, now, of this new sacrifice for the liberation of a new Israel.

“While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (26:26-28).

Jesus picks up the same symbols of a sacrificial lamb slain, his flesh broken and his blood shed, thus bringing about liberation and new life. It is powerful imagery.

Betrayal Predicted and Acted Out. The disciples and Jesus sing a hymn and then retires to the Mount of Olives. While going there, Jesus says to his disciples, “You will all become deserters because of me this night” (26:31a). Peter, offended at what Jesus had just said and absolutely certain of his own loyalty, replies, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you” (vs. 33).

“Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.’ Peter said to him, ‘Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you’. And so said all the disciples” (26:34-35).

How certain Peter is! And how certain the disciples are! They cannot envision denying Jesus. And it is intriguing that Jesus doesn’t debate Peter about it. He answers Peter only once, and only in the light of Peter’s bravado and certainty. Yet Peter continues to be out of touch with his reality, and cannot perceive the depth of his own cowardice and perfidy.

What Jesus predicted would happen did happen. Chapter 26 ends, not with the trial of Jesus but with Peter’s denial of his Master (26:69-75). After Jesus’ arrest and during his trial, Peter is standing outside the courtroom in a courtyard. There he is recognized by a servant-girl, then by another servant-girl, and then some bystanders. Each of his denials is more vehement and more profound than the one before it. First, he simply denies knowing Jesus (vs.70). Then, the second time, he denies “with an oath” (vs.72). Finally, “he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know the man!’” (vs. 74a).

Filled with fear and intimidation, Peter not only denies knowing or associating with Jesus, and not only does so with an oath (that is, he swears to make his denial more emphatic), but the third time the text tells us he “curses”. That doesn’t mean that he swears; that is already covered by

the word “oath”. It is that he brings God’s curse down upon himself. He says something like, “May God strike me dead right now if I lie when I say to you, ‘I do not know this man!’” So it is not simply that he denies knowing Jesus when his testimony might save Jesus. It is that he is so frightened and is so driven by the necessity to distance himself from Jesus that he places his own soul in jeopardy – and is willing so to do! That is the degree of his fear and intimidation by the systems. That is how greatly he is frozen by them. Despite all his good intentions, the capacity of the systems to so intimidate him so that he will compromise his own relationship with God is an indication of how much the systems still internally control Peter.

All of this realization floods in on Peter – how trapped he is that he would deny his Lord and his best friend. And the text ends by telling us, “And he went out and wept bitterly” (26:75b)!

The Garden of Gethsemane. The next story in Matthew’s crucifixion narrative is the scene of Jesus’ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane as he is awaiting the arrival of the betraying Judas and the Temple guard. Up to now, Matthew has been presenting to us an exhibition of the dominant systems closing in on this marginalized Jew who has become such a threat to them. But then Matthew suddenly shifts the focus onto Jesus, as we are given a glimpse of the pain and struggle through which he is going.

Jesus did not go to his crucifixion with peace and bravery. This text lets us know that he was in severe emotional pain at the prospect of his coming death. It tells us he was “grieved” and “agitated” (26:37). His prayer in the garden captures that agitation. “My Father, if it is possible, let his cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (26:39)! Jesus was frightened. He was overwhelmed. He was intimidated both by having to so directly confront the systems and to face death by crucifixion. But he was going to go through with it. He was going to do what had to be done. And he was going to take upon himself all that the systems could do to him, and yet take that on redemptively so that humanity could be liberated. This was the very essence of courage.

Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is the willingness to do what has to be done in spite of one’s fear. It is choosing to carry out God’s call, even if that has to be done in the midst of intense opposition and intimidation. And here we see that courage acted out in the decision by Jesus to go through with his trial and crucifixion. “Not what I want but what you want”. This is true courage – what John Calvin called that which made Jesus’ death salvific. It was his obedience to God, Calvin taught, in spite of the consequences. And that obedience came out of the courage God gave him which enabled him to do what had to be done, although it filled him with “grief” and “agitation” – the deepest of fear! It is that kind of courage – and only that kind of courage – that can defeat the systems.

Betrayal and Arrest. Matthew 26:47-56 makes two insights. The first is that Judas has, in essence, joined the dominating systems by agreeing to betray Jesus, but betrays him in a relational way (he kisses Jesus). The second insight is that when the followers of Jesus seek to use domination system strategy, they fail, and are stopped by Jesus.

Judas was likely a zealot. He belonged to the revolutionary Jewish party, the Zealots, along with his father who likely was another disciple of Jesus’, Simon Iscariot (also called Simon the

Zealot) (John 6:71; 13:26). As a zealot, Judas would therefore be a person convictionally opposed to the religious, economic and religious partnership between Rome and the Jewish leaders. He was as anti-establishment as one could imagine, a revolutionary seeking the violent overthrow both of Rome and of the Judean powerful.

There is some evidence that it was that hatred of both Rome and of Judah's power elite that caused Judas to embrace Jesus and to become one of his disciples, for if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, then to join Jesus was to join the winning side of the revolution against the Powers!

But Judas ended up becoming disillusioned by Jesus' own actions. Even though the Master spoke radical words and both criticized and exposed to the people the intentions of both the Gentile and Jewish domination systems, Judas didn't see Jesus moving to lead a military revolt that would overthrow both power blocs. In fact, if anything, he passed up numerous opportunities to mobilize the people to revolt. So it was that the disillusioned Judas acted to destroy the Man who had betrayed his trust.¹

Thus Judas "came over" to the opposition and partnered with them to eliminate Jesus. What is most ironic, however, is Matthew's description of how Judas chose to betray Jesus. He did so with a kiss! The text tells us, "Now the betrayer had given (the arresting police) a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him'. At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him" (26:48-49).

Jesus will have no part of this deception. To the kiss, Jesus responds, "Friend, do what you are here to do" (26:50). Jesus' use of the word "friend" indicates that he continues to care deeply about Judas, even though he knows that the disciple is there to betray him. The words "do what you are here to do" are very direct. "Get on with what you have conspired to do, Judas", Jesus is in essence saying. "Finish what you have set out to do, and betray me. But do not be dishonest to yourself, to me and the disciples by feigning a caring for me. Get real! And get on with what you have to do!"

Why did the authorities need a betrayer? As Jesus says later in this scene, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the Temple teaching, and you did not arrest me" (26:55).

The systems were still terribly afraid of Jesus, even as they arrested him. They were afraid to arrest him in public because of his popularity. To arrest him in public would be for the systems to be most vulnerable, for they would be severely criticized and perhaps even be constrained by the people. So they chose the cowardly way, when Jesus was virtually alone except for his disciples, and during the night of the prime religious festival when all the people would be gathered with their families to observe the Passover. It was the ideal time to arrest Jesus. But because they might arrest the wrong person (it wouldn't necessarily be obvious to the guards who Jesus was), they needed one of his own to betray him. So they conspired with Judas. And

¹ Some biblical scholars and political theorists suggest that Judas was not so much disillusioned as he was intending to force Jesus' hand. He felt by putting Jesus in a life-threatening situation, Judas would force Jesus to act to begin his revolution (e.g., F.W. Gingrich, "Judas", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume E-J (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 1006-1007).

so Judas had carried it out. And this he did by joining the systems he had previously hated. He, who had opposed the system's use of power, used the same kind of power to betray his Lord and to begin the salvific event!

The second portion of the story of Jesus' betrayal and arrest involves an act of resistance on the part of the disciples when faced with the soldiers who are there in the garden to arrest Jesus. The text tells us, "Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (26:51). Jesus' response to this resistance is intriguing:

"Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way'" (26:53-54)?

Jesus is enunciating a terribly important principle. The Church cannot use the strategies and "powers" of the political and economic systems without compromising itself. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." The strategies of domination – even in a good and righteous cause – will inevitably lead to the absorption of ourselves and our cause into the domination system. To use strategies of domination is to succumb to that domination. You cannot act oppressively in the cause of liberation, expecting good to result. Only oppression will occur as the result of oppressive acts. If God did not intend for Jesus to be taken, God would have provided for Jesus' rescue. But in reality, it is God's will that Jesus would be betrayed, arrested, judged guilty and executed. Only in that way can the liberation and salvation of the world occur. For the disciples to use violence to stop that arrest is, in reality, to seek to thwart the will of God – and to thwart it by using the same principles and tactics the domination systems use. By thus thwarting God's will by using domination tactics, the church will have lost its moral authority to call the systems into judgment and to accountability. For we would have shown ourselves to be no better than the systems we criticize.

With Jesus' rebuke of his disciples, the inevitable happens. "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled" (26:56b). And Jesus was arrested and brought to trial.

Jesus on Trial. The arrested Jesus is now brought before the Jewish high priest for trial (Matthew 26:57-68). In this story, the high priest seeks to build a case against Jesus but can't get witnesses to agree sufficient to enable an adjudication and verdict to be made within the constraints of the Mosaic Law. It is not until Jesus' freely-given testimony before the court that they are given the case.

"Then the high priest said to Jesus, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, 'From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven'. Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death'." (26:63-66)

Why would the high priest and the Sanhedrin court perceive Jesus' statement, "You have said so" as blasphemy and justly deserving of death? Well, Jesus' answer is actually far more direct than the English translation of the Greek suggests. "You have said so" doesn't mean, "That's your suggestion, not mine". It means, instead, "You have verbalized what is already true – that I am the Messiah!" We know that this is the way to translate those words because of what Jesus says next.

Immediately after confirming their accusation, Jesus says, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." That is not Jesus' statement. Jesus is reciting the words of Daniel the prophet (Dan. 7:13) regarding the Messiah. It is actually a part of a larger prophecy (Daniel 7:9-14) of the coming of the Messiah ("the Son of Man"). It states that the Messiah will depart from the side of God in order to restore God's kingdom to earth. The passage ends with a statement of praise to this Messiah: "To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingdom is one that shall never be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14).

The quotation is also a reference to Psalm 110:1. Psalm 110 is a psalm of praise and thanksgiving for the coming of the Davidic king and priest of the nation – the Messiah

This explains why the high priest reacted as he did. Both he and the court (Sanhedrin) were learned men, students of the holy books that now make up the Old Testament. Therefore, both he and they realized the significance of what Jesus was saying, and they reacted accordingly.

In reality, this was the last chance of the Jewish religious system to embrace what God was doing. They could have, at this point, accepted Jesus' profession and worshipped him. Instead, they chose to condemn and crucify him. And in so doing, they condemned themselves and the systems of Israel to destruction.

The choice is always before us – both as individuals and as systems. Do we embrace a relational Savior – and consequently a relational life style – or do we follow the systems of domination? "Choose this day whom you will serve!"

The Denial by Peter. (The story of Peter's denial that occurs here in the text (26:69-75) is found in the earlier commentary in today's gospel lesson under the title, "Betrayal Predicted and Acted Out".)

What Happened to Judas? Matthew 27 begins with two verses simply reporting that Jesus was bound over to Pilate for adjudication, with the recommendation by the Jewish clergy aristocracy of death. The first real story of Matthew 27 belongs to Judas Iscariot.

Judas realizes, too late, what he has done, and seeks to return the money to the chief priests and elders with the words, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (27:4). Their reply to his deep and obvious pain revealed how calloused and unspiritual they were. "What is that to us?" they replied. "See to it yourself" (or, in other words, "We don't care. Deal with it yourself")!

Judas does deal with it himself. He throws the money to the ground in front of them, rushes away and commits suicide. And the aristocracy, now having received blood money, buys a potter's field for destitute foreigners – a graveyard that became known as “the Field of Blood”.

We do not know what was the motive for Judas' act of betrayal. That motive is only speculation (see the section above, “Betrayal and Arrest” for our speculation on Judas' motives). But one thing we know for sure. Before he died, Judas realized that he had made a terrible mistake. Perhaps he was angry at Jesus for having not acted as Judas intended him to do to bring in God's Kingdom. Perhaps he sought to force Jesus' hand. Perhaps he was “beside himself” in frustration with Jesus. But whatever his motive, after the betrayal he realized what he had done and sought desperately to rectify it. But it was too late. Jesus had been delivered into the hands of the religious establishment. And now his death was guaranteed! It is a tragic, tragic story with terrible consequences. And it is a reminder that we cannot force God's hand. We fit into God's expectations of us, not he into ours!

Jesus Before Pilate. Matthew does a magnificent job of describing Jesus' trial before Pilate in a way that demonstrates the struggle between the Jewish systems and Rome. According to Roman law, the religious leaders of a nation had the right to execute an offender for heresy, but not for treason against the state. Treason was a Roman crime because it was an attempt to usurp or to overthrow the power of the Roman government; it was therefore punishable by crucifixion. For Israel's religious establishment to bound Jesus over for adjudication and sentence by the Roman authority was an indication that they perceived Jesus' crime as more political than religious. So as the client (local) system, the chief priests had to request the superior system, Rome, to both condemn Jesus to death and to execute him. What the encounter between the chief priests and Pilate demonstrates is that the theoretically weaker system used power astutely enough that it won against the more powerful system, and thus proved the inherent power they actually had.

In Matthew's telling of the story, Pilate is clearly reluctant to execute Jesus. He is amazed at Jesus' unwillingness to defend himself, his wife tells him to release Jesus, and he calls Jesus “innocent” – indicating that he doesn't see the crime of which Jesus is accused as punishable by death. But the elders and chief priests are relentless in their pursuit of the case. Finally, Pilate acquiesces with the words “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves” (27:24b). All of the preceding occurs in order that the story can reach its real denouement in the response of the people, “His blood be on us and on your children” (27:25)! With these words, “the people as a whole” (27:25a) join themselves with their nation's political, economic and religious systems in rejecting Jesus; the seduction of the people by their own systems is now complete! “So Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified” (27:26).

Taunts and Crucifixion. Matthew 27:27-44 is the crucifixion story that is similarly told in the other three gospels. The Matthew account includes the representatives of the systems mocking him as “king of the Jews” and his actual crucifixion by the Roman authorities (including their derisive sign, “This is Jesus, the king of the Jews”). It describes, as well, the people (“those who passed by” deriding him. And it includes the most extensive and specific description in any of the gospel accounts of the taunting of Jesus by “the scribes and elders” of the Law. That description is very significant.

“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’.” (Matt. 27:41-43)

This is not simply a mocking of Jesus. It is far more than that. Each of these three disdainful statements recalls a previous claim Jesus made about himself. The speaker then asserts that Jesus’ death invalidates that claim.

First, the authorities jeer at Jesus, “He saved others; he cannot save himself” – Jesus claimed to be the Savior; now we see that he not only cannot save anyone else; he can’t even save himself.

Then they insult him with the words, “He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him”. Jesus claimed to be Messiah, yet whoever heard of a crucified Messiah?

Finally, they ridicule him by saying, “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to, for he said, I am God’s Son”. Jesus claimed to be divine (the Son of God); well, you don’t see God delivering him, do you? The taunting of the Jewish leaders, therefore, is very specific, seeking the invalidation of each of Jesus’ claims about himself as savior, Messiah and the Son of God.

This, then, is God’s darkest hour – for the very systems God created to enhance humanity’s relationship with God and to build a society of justice and equitable distribution of wealth are now the systems that reject Jesus politically (Messiah), religiously (Son of God) and economically² (savior).

It is Friday. But Easter’s coming!

The Death of Jesus. Jesus’ death is recorded in Matthew 27:45-56. The only words Matthew has Jesus speak are ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (27:46)? He also reports that, at his death, “Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last” (vs. 50), but doesn’t tell us what he said. What is significant in the story, besides Jesus’ cry of despair, is the testimony of the Roman centurion, “Truly this man was God’s Son” (vs. 54)! The Jewish leaders of the systems can only mock him in death, but it takes a Gentile – and one who is a servant of Rome’s political power – who can perceive Jesus for who he truly is! Thus, one of Matthew’s principal themes – that it was the marginalized that both received God’s mercy and could discern God’s call to justice – is given voice by the Apostle once again.

Burial and Guards. The last two stories dealing with Jesus’ crucifixion – Matthew 27:57-66 deal essentially with fear. In the first, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea went to Pilate and

² The word “savior” had, in the ancient world, an economic as well as a religious meaning, still captured today in our use of the word “save” to refer to accumulating or putting aside money or goods into a reserve fund or storehouse (e.g. a “savings account” at a bank).

asked for the body of Jesus. Granted his request, Joseph placed the body of Jesus in his own tomb (27:57-61).

This was an extraordinarily dangerous thing to do. Joseph – one who had benefited from the systems, confronts the systems in order to get the body of Jesus. In doing so, he faced not only the danger of rejection of his request, but rejection of himself as well – for by the action of respectfully burying the rabbi, he had exposed himself as at least a sympathizer if not an outright follower of Jesus. By doing so, he had become a marked man – a man labeled as a sympathizer of one guilty of treason. Yet he didn't allow that to stop him. He was not about to be intimidated nor diverted from what his heart told him to do. In his request, Joseph may have been greatly afraid, but he displayed immense courage in the face of such fear, doing what he knew was right. And of course, such a display of courage was completely contrary to the fear that had so intimidated the disciples and Peter!

The second story (27:62-66) tells of the Jewish leaders coming to Pilate, and requesting a guard and the imperial seal on the tomb, to guarantee it would be protected. Their reasoning was that, remembering Jesus' prediction of his resurrection, they were fearful that his disciples would steal him away and then make resurrection claims. By having a seal and guard, the clergy aristocracy could protect against that possibility.

In other words, the Jewish leaders were still afraid of Jesus! They had killed him – and yet they still feared his power! The systems were afraid of a dead prophet. So it is important to recognize that systems are always afraid. Their rhetoric is one of power and control. But the systems themselves know how fragile they actually are. Their use of dominating power is flaunted precisely because they know that, in the final analysis, they rule only by the consent of the governed, and that they can't sustain for long their use of dominating power if the people reject them. So they fear even a dead prophet whom they, themselves, have executed!

So the chief priests and elders insist upon a Roman guard and seal to protect the tomb. But in doing so, they don't realize the degree to which they will be forced to once again make the choice between Christ and the Caesars' of the world, because their own action of fear will, in three days, face them with the undeniable fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead!

Philippians 2:5-11. This passage, along with I Corinthians 13 and Psalm 23, is among the most famous and beloved poems in the scripture. Whether it was written by Paul the Apostle or simply "borrowed" by him as an already well-known poem about Christ, we do not know. But we do know that it is one of the most powerful statements in the scripture of what God chose to do both for us and for all humanity.

The poem divides into two relatively equal parts: verses 6-8 proclaiming Christ's humiliation, and verses 9-11 celebrating his exaltation. It begins "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus", and then launches into the poem. The poem's larger context (vss. 1-5) is on the importance of Christians being of the same mind with one another, and Paul's recognition that one cannot have unity without humility. That is, that which enables people to be united with each other and committed to the common good is their willingness neither to be first nor to be

always right. He then, in essence, says, “That’s the way Jesus was. And if humility was good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for us!” To demonstrate the depth of humility that lay in Jesus, Paul then presents this poem.

“Christ 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” (vss. 6-8).

Before the incarnation, Christ had both a “form” and a status equal to God. The word “form” doesn’t mean that he is “like God” in appearance, but that he was divine – what centuries later the church fathers would call “God of Very God”. But, though he was fully and totally God, Christ did not see that relationship as “something to be exploited” (or, in other translations, “grasped”). Jesus was not trying to become God; he already was God. But his love for humanity was so profound that he did not cling to his privilege of being God, “but emptied himself”.

Jesus relinquished his heavenly status, Paul is telling us, in order to return our world and humanity itself into the world as God intended it to be. He “emptied” himself or “made himself nothing”, and he did so in three ways.

- ? “Being born in human likeness” -- Christ becomes a human being, so that he is not just “similar to” other human beings, but is himself uniquely human *as God created humanity to be* (that is, before the Fall);
- ? “taking the form of a slave” – Christ not only deprived himself of his exalted status to become a human being, but assumed the lowest possible human status – that of a slave before God;
- ? “becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross”. Not only was Christ, in becoming human, willing to face the reality of death that being human requires. Christ was willing to submit to the Father’s will by both living a life of obedience, but carrying out that obedience in the death prescribed for disobedient and rebellious slaves – crucifixion!

“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” (vss. 9-11).

God’s grateful response to Christ’s commitment to and acting out of total obedience to him and love for humanity is that God exalts Christ. He is restored to the glory he voluntarily relinquished so that humanity might be returned to society as God created humanity to be. Humiliation is replaced with exaltation; obedience is replaced with glory; servanthood is replaced with power. Christ’s very act of “emptying” himself becomes the means that makes humanity’s salvation possible and the world transformable. Now, all humanity will bow the knee in homage to the servant-king. All the systems and powers of the world and even of heaven and the underworld – political, economic or religious – will confess Jesus as Lord. God will be glorified because Christ chose to “empty himself” and to take upon himself “the form of a slave”!

Philippians 2:5-11 is a magnificent poem of the depth of the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made for the world. And it is consequently the most powerful of examples in motivating each of us to act humbly as we seek to build the Body of Christ with our brother and sister Christians. But why would this scripture be used as the epistle lesson in the lectionary for Palm Sunday? Would it not be more appropriate to use it for Good Friday or even Maundy Thursday?

Not really! It is most important to use it on the day we celebrate the Triumphal Entry of our Lord into Jerusalem. And the reason why it is so important is to remind us that this entry was not for the purpose of bringing acclaim to Jesus or initiating the overthrow of Rome and of the Jewish clerical aristocracy. If that were its purpose, then it had already miserably failed.

But that was not the purpose for the Triumphal Entry. The purpose of that entry was to declare that Messiah had come – the Messiah who was not to be a conquering warlord but a humble monarch seeking to build a kingdom of shalom. The purpose of that entry was to proclaim that it was the Son of Man who was entering Jerusalem as its Lord -- the One who had come to stand with and for the poor and who was standing over against the systems, calling them to accountability and acting as their judge. The purpose of that entry was to announce the coming of the Suffering Servant – the One who would suffer and be persecuted, be tortured and die both for the people and systems of Israel – and therefore the people and systems of the entire world.

The purpose of that entry was to initiate the final week of Jesus' life, as he moved relentlessly toward that humiliation when God-in-the-flesh would "become obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross". For the law of God is that the way up is down, the way to victory is the way of defeat and the death of the Almighty One becomes the means for the liberation of each person and system whom God would call!

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