

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 on 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; Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-19.**

***Liturgy of the Passion:* Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Mark 14:1-15:47 or Mark 15:1-47; 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.

Mark 11:1-11 is the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, as presented by Mark. It plays two related roles in that book, in that it both initiates the last part of the Gospel of Mark and announces the commencement of Holy Week. In the initiation of the last part of Mark, this story signals a change in Jesus' work from the demonstration of the power of God through healing and preaching to that of God acting through Jesus to bring liberation to those who embrace Jesus' "third way". In announcing the commencement of Holy Week, this story begins the mighty work of God that culminates eight days later in the resurrection of Jesus and his

“going before” his disciples (that is, “us”) into Galilee (and all the Galilees of the world) with the call to work for the transformation of the systems and peoples of the world into the world as God intended it to be.

The story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is one of the few stories about Jesus to appear in all four gospels (Matt. 21:111; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19). The Markan story tells of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples to find a colt “that has never been ridden, untie it and bring it (to me).” They do so, dealing with the questioning of bystanders. They brought the colt to Jesus who sat upon it, and they began the procession. “Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches (i.e. palm branches) that they had cut in the fields” (11:8). As Jesus processed into Jerusalem upon the colt, the people shouted “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David” (11:9-10). That is the pithy accounting of the Triumphal Entry, according to Mark.

What is the significance of this story? It is important to recognize, in understanding this story, that Mark built into it two intentionally conflicting themes. The first is its clear military implications of liberation, which is captured by Jesus’ symbolic ride into Jerusalem. Such a ride, accompanied by the people’s cry of “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”, was a clear statement by Jesus *in his actions* that he was the promised messianic king appearing for his enthronement. This ride is explicitly predicted in Zech. 13:2-4, II Kings 9:13 and I Maccabees 3:51.

But the second theme is that of Jesus, the conquering liberator, riding in on a donkey rather than a war-horse. The symbolism of the donkey-colt is that this is no conquering military figure but is rather a messiah of peace, who wins through the spread of shalom. It, too, is a fulfillment of prophecy (Zech. 9:9ff). Jesus enters Jerusalem as the “peace messiah”, cheered on by peasants waving palm branches, placing their cloaks upon the ground for the colt to walk upon, and crying “Hosanna” (see Psalm 118:25; II Sam. 14:4; II Kings 6:26). The mention of cloaks and branches (vs. 8) is of particular significance, because these two objects were the objects of choice used throughout the Jewish holy writings for the procession of kings (II Kings 9:13) and religious leaders (I Macc. 13:51; II Macc. 10:6-7).

One of the interesting points of Mark’s account of the Triumphal Entry is the amount of coverage that is given to the obtaining of the donkey colt (five of the eleven verses). Such an undue emphasis is likely given in order that it is made clear to the reader that the Triumphal Entry was not an action that happened *to* Jesus but *because of* Jesus. That is, the entry was not an action engineered by Jesus’ disciples or the crowd to honor Jesus. Rather, it was a very intentional action carefully engineered by Jesus so that it would occur precisely as he wished it to occur. Jesus’ very intentional and deliberate role in planning this action makes clear that he is not simply a cooperative recipient, but an active initiator. He is very intentionally making a statement that moves his “campaign” along to bring about Israel (and the world’s) transformation.

Finally, Mark’s account ends in a highly intentional “no-ending”. The text states, “Then Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve (11:11). When one reads the accounts

of the Triumphal Entry in the gospels of Matthew, Luke or John, one immediately perceives that each is an integral part of a larger story, with actions immediately resulting from the action of that dramatic entry. Not so in Mark. It's as if the writer doesn't quite know how to end the story. Jesus simply "looks around" the temple (as if he were a tourist) and then, "because it is late", leaves. Why this apparently anticlimactic ending in which nothing happens?

But that is precisely Mark's point! Nothing happens. This demonstration of people power on the part of Jesus ends in nothing happening! As Ched Myers puts it, "Mark has drawn the reader into traditional messianic symbols, only to suddenly abort them"¹

As we saw in the exposition on Mark 8:31-38 for the 2nd Sunday in Lent, Jesus did not prefer the title of "Messiah" to describe himself and the mission he was seeking to do. He only acknowledged Peter's declaration of him as Messiah; he did not accept it. He preferred the title, "Son of Man" because that Old Testament title stressed more the divine judge and reformers of Israelite society who would stand over against the systems, calling them to accountability while standing with and for the poor. Jesus saw the concept of "Messiah", on the other hand, as being counterproductive, causing Israel to see him as a political revolutionary seeking to overthrow Rome and endorsing the Temple. It was important to conduct the Triumphal Entry because of the highly symbolic role it played on Jewish political belief – so that there would be no question that he was the Messiah. But on the other hand, it was important to deconstruct that "symbolic" as quickly as possible. And what greater way could there be for deconstruction than to conclude the drama of the Triumphal Entry with *precisely nothing!*

The action that the "Son of Man" (rather than the "Messiah") takes after this deconstruction, occurs on the next day in the combined stories of the cursing of the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14), the cleansing (or exorcism) of the Temple (11:15-19) and the lesson on the withered fig tree (11:20-26). We don't have the time or space to explore those stories in this exposition. But suffice it to say that, in the context of these three connected stories, Jesus could then act both to expose the temple as the religious-economic institution it had become in the service of Rome, and to offer the alternative of a movement of those committed to Yahweh who would both envision a world under the politics and economics of God and who would work for it.

John 12:12-19 is the expression of the triumphal entry as told by the author of the fourth gospel. It is the most abbreviated of all four accounts (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-40; John 12:12-16 with additional commentary in verses 17-19). In John's telling of the story, there is no attention given to preparation for the entry, no command by Jesus to do it, and no effort by the Jerusalem clergy aristocracy to stop Jesus and his disciples from this demonstration. It is simply a straight-forward description of the parade and a commentary on it. Why is such a strategic event presented so briefly? The answer lies in the event preceding it.

Before Jesus entered into Jerusalem, he was in Bethany where he miraculously raised his friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-12:11). A crowd had gathered to see what Jesus would do,

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988), p. 297.

once he reached Bethany. They were not disappointed. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, even though he was already dead four days (11:39-44).

The response to such a profound miracle was twofold. First, “many of the Judeans therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him” (11:45) and an excited crowd began following him (12:17-18). So it was not only Jewish peasants who were responding favorably to Jesus’ actions and message; even “many” of his opposition – the religious, political and economic leaders of Israel – were coming over to him. The “powers” of Israel were rapidly losing their control and, consequently, their domination of the people!

Therefore, the response to Jesus’ raising of Lazarus was not only positive, but extremely negative. The Jewish clerical aristocracy realized what a severe threat that Jesus actually posed to them. “If we let him go on like this,” they said to each other, “everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation (and, implied, “us”)” (11:39). Therefore, the Judean leadership made the decision to execute Jesus (11:47-12:8). But they also planned to kill Lazarus, as well (12:9-11).

The preparations for the Passover so carefully described by Matthew, Mark and Luke were irrelevant to John’s story of the Triumphal Entry, because he had substituted a far more powerful story of preparation – the story of Lazarus’ resuscitation and of the response of the “Powers”! It was that preparation that lay the grounds for John’s telling of the Triumphal Entry.

John’s account begins with the words, “The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem” (12:12). What crowd was this? It was not citizens of Jerusalem, coming out to meet Jesus but rather a crowd that had been journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Passover – Jesus’ compatriots! But there was something even more important about that crowd. “So the crowd that had been with Jesus *when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead* continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him” (12:17-18). The Palm Sunday crowd that greeted Jesus on the occasion of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem was the crowd that had been journeying with him from Galilee and who had stopped off with him in Bethany. It was the crowd that had become eye-witnesses to Jesus’ “raising Lazarus from the dead”. That excited crowd had run ahead of Jesus to Jerusalem, had told the residents there of his imminent arrival, and who had then organized themselves and Jerusalem’s residents to welcome him into the city!

Then John does something truly pivotal in his telling of this story. He tells us something that none of the other three gospel writers mentions. “So (the crowd who had witnessed Lazarus’ resurrection from the dead) took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Jesus” (vs. 12). Only John tells us that the crowd stripped palm branches from the trees. What is the significance of that action?

Palm branches were not the usual “prop” used to welcome visitors to Jerusalem. They had a highly specialized use in Jewish society. And John means us to understand that they are being used in this particular story in exactly the technical way by which they were intended to be used

by a crowd that had seen a miracle unlike anything they had ever witnessed before! What was that technical way?

Visitors – not even the most prominent visitors – would be welcomed with palm branches. Selecting and using the branches of palms to welcome a new arrival would have a highly specific and technical meaning. Palm branches were specified to be used in the liturgical processions of the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:40; Neh. 8:15). They were to be used in the procession of political leaders into Jerusalem (I Kings 6:29-35; Isa. 9:14-16; Ezek. 41). And most recently of all – and therefore most fresh in the people’s imagination, palm branches were the branches used in the triumphal procession of Judas Maccabeus on the occasion of his defeat of the then current empire that dominated Israel and the Near East (II Maccabees 10:7). Therefore, for the people to use palm branches to welcome Jesus was to declare him the new “Judas Maccabeus” who would liberate Israel from Roman (and therefore Judean aristocracy) control!

The words used by the crowd to welcome Jesus are particularly instructive: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel” (vs. 13). Buoyed by the exhibition of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, and thinking this man could do anything, the crowd immediately declare him “the king of Israel” – the Messianic king who will rid Israel of Roman and Judean domination! The word, “hosanna”, is particularly instructive, because it does not mean “hooray” or “whoop-de-do”. It means “Save us” – free us, liberate us! In declaring Jesus the national leader of Israel, the crowd is seeking to convert this miracle-worker into the one who will militarily and politically overthrow the “Powers” and create a new Israelite “kingdom of God”.

Jesus immediately sought to change the content and intent of the procession without dampening it. “Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it was written, ‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt’” (12:14-15).

Jesus is offering an alternative myth to the people than the myth of conquering monarch the people are using. By selecting an animal of peace – a donkey – rather than that of a war horse, and intentionally recalling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9-10, Jesus reminds the crowd that there is an alternative way of understanding his person and work. The primary theme of the Gospel of John is that Jesus is the Christ (the “Messiah” or “King of Israel”), but that the kind of Christ he presented to them was a “counter-cultural Christ” who was not a political revolutionary as much as he was a radical implementer of a new world order. Thus, by offering this alternative biblical metaphor and by acting it out in front of them, Jesus is hoping to receive an alternate response from that exuberant crowd – and perhaps even Israel’s leaders, as well – an embrace of a Messiah who had come to heal and raise from the dead a people poisoned by their own powerlessness and marginalization.

But, the author tells us, “his disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him” (12:16). Nor did the enthusiastic crowd understand. Nor did the Judean political, economic and religious leaders.

The story ends with a most poignant statement. “The Pharisees then said to one another, ‘You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him’” (12:19)! The statement, of course, is meant to be sarcastic and even demoralizing on the part of the Judeans. “What can we do to stop this man? No matter what we try to do, he seems to just keep becoming more and more popular. And if he isn’t stopped, we – and the nation – will receive the punishment of the Roman sword”. But even though it is meant to be delivered in disgust and resignation, the statement is strangely prophetic. And it is meant to be so by the author John. The Judeans see their power steadily, and even increasingly eroding before their very eyes. They seem helpless to stop this man. The only increasingly-clear alternative is to rid the threat he poses to them by eliminating him. Jesus must die! The world has gone after him! But the Judeans must snatch back the “world”. And the only way they can do that is to eliminate this Jesus. His execution becomes inevitable!

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 each other, with one inevitably following the other. “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. 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!

The 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 lesson 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 Mark – 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!

Mark 14:1-15:47 cannot be fully appreciated without reminding ourselves of the gospel writer's intentions in providing this telling of the story of Jesus. The gospel of Mark was likely written in that margin of time between Israel's seemingly successful revolt against Rome in 66 AD and that nation's total destruction by the Roman military machine in 70 AD. In that interim period, Jewish Christians, like all Jews, were being pressured to make a choice: to either remain loyal to Rome and the Jewish systems (chief priests, elders, Pharisees and Sadducees) or to join with the zealots in revolution. However, the writer of the gospel of Mark suggests that Jesus' life,

ministry, death and resurrection calls the church to a third way – to a *radical* approach to the world and its institutions that goes far beyond either the maintenance of the status quo or revolution. For to be radical means that one goes to the “root” (from the Latin *radix* or “root”) in both one’s social analysis and in one’s actions.

The radical nature of Jesus’ ministry is presented by Mark throughout his gospel account in three ways. First, Jesus keeps on confronting the dominant Jewish political, economic and religious systems of his day, and his confrontation of them grows both in frequency and in intensity as Jesus nears the end of his ministry. Second, Jesus remains centered on being for the poor and oppressed of Israel. Finally, Jesus is about the task of creating a new “nation of Israel” out of his followers and the poor, a society that returns Israel to its roots in Egyptian slavery. As Jesus draws toward his final days on earth, his call of those who had followed him to this radical ministry, and his confrontation of the systems in exposing them for the manipulative and self-serving institutions that they are intensifies until it reaches its denouement in chapters 14 and 15 of the Gospel of Mark.

All of this Gospel story has built toward the climax of Mark 14. “Who will you choose? Will you opt to continue with the status quo, simply keeping life in Israel the way it has been throughout your generation? Will you join the revolutionary forces and become a rebel, seeking to overthrow the *ancien regime*? Or will you choose Jesus’ radical third way?” Mark 14 is about four people who have come to the end of arguing between alternatives and must make a decision regarding Jesus.

Mark 14 recounts the last moments of Jesus leading up to – but not including – his crucifixion. The events cover the period from Jesus’ anointing at Bethany and arrangements for the Last Supper to Peter’s denial of Jesus during the trial. It begins with the introductory statement, “It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him, for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people’” (14:1-2).

Then the first of the four people is introduced who must make a choice in regards to Jesus and Jesus’ third way. “While Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head” (vs. 3). Those sitting at the table were shocked and took offense at such a profligate “waste” of wealth, for it represented almost a full year’s wages. And such anointing recalled the ancient ritual of Israel in preparing a “king-elect” for his coronation (e.g., I Sam. 10:1; II Kings 9:6). The implications of what she was doing were clear, and the only way to minimize the act was to criticize it!

“Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor” (vs. 5)! But Jesus can easily see through their righteous indignation, knowing that it was not because they had a heart for the poor as much as they had a commitment to the status quo. Therefore, Jesus responds, “She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial” (14:6b-7, 8b).

This passage, of course, is used often to justify the existence of the poor and even the refusal to act on their behalf. But that is clearly taking the passage out of context. It is not a statement of justification, but of fact. The disciples criticized the use of the ointment on Jesus, stating it would have been better for it to have been sold and the profit given to the poor. Jesus responds, not by justifying the existence of the poor or of this woman's selfless act, but simply by noting the existence of the poor and of commending her. The contrast in the passage is not between the poor and Jesus, but is a contrast of time. Because the poor will always be around, you can donate to them whenever you choose (if you really do care as much about them as you are pretending that you do). But Jesus has only a few days of life left. If you are going to give to him, it must be right now. Now is the time to decide whether you will embrace Jesus and his third way, or opt for the other alternatives. The contrast is a contrast of urgency, not of relative importance.

The disciples, for all Jesus' statements, can't see the urgency. For them, the events through which they are currently moving are only the advent of Jesus' reign. For Jesus, it is the end, culminating in his inevitable death. But they can't see it, simply because they won't see it. They are committed to their understanding of the work of the Messiah because it is too much for them to consider the alternative. They simply shut out what Jesus is saying about betrayal and crucifixion and death. And, therefore, they miss the significance of this woman's act and consequently surround it with irrelevant banalities.

The center of the attention, however, is on the woman and her selfless act. She acts out of single-minded devotion to Jesus, irrespective of the consequences of that act. She prepares Jesus' body for burial. She had no intention to garner praise or credit or even status before God for doing so. She was simply responding to Jesus, committing her all (even a year's wages) to him. And for that selfless act, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (vs. 9). She is remembered for the act for which she sought no remembrance, only to symbolize her resolution and faithfulness to take the third way, and be publicly identified with Jesus even though it might mean her ostracization from Jewish society and perhaps even her own death.

The second follower of the Christ must make his decision, as well. "Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him" (vss. 10-11).

There are three references to Judas in chapter 14 of Mark. The first is his agreement with the priestly caste to betray Jesus (14:10-14). The second is Jesus' exposure of Judas and his intentions at the Passover meal (vss. 17-21). The third is Judas' betrayal of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Master's consequent arrest (vss. 43-50).

Perhaps what is most poignant about Jesus' betrayal was the way Judas chose to do it. "So when Judas came, he went up to Jesus at once and said, "Rabbi", and kissed him. Then they laid hands on Jesus and arrested him" (vss. 45-46).

It is bitter enough to be betrayed by one of your followers in whom you had trusted and in which you had invested yourself. But to betray him with a kiss? The sign of love and of commitment to Jesus was used to betray him. How painful that must have been for Jesus – how utterly painful!

The other painful section is when Jesus reveals to the disciples that he is to be betrayed. He said, “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born” (vs. 21)!

There must have been much that had been commendable about Judas. There certainly was much that was competent, for he would have otherwise not been given the responsibility for being the treasurer of the disciple band. But Judas would also have had to have convictions and dreams that would have drawn him to Jesus. Those dreams would have been for the restoration of Israel and the overthrow of injustice – honorable dreams. If he had not had such motivations, he would have never joined the disciple band. There may have been disillusionments, as well – disappointments in Jesus, despair over the way things had worked out regarding the independence of Israel. And yet, the final commentary that can be spoken of this man is one of sheer pain and of the greatest tragedy. “It would have been better for that one not to have been born!” So it was that, decisively and irretrievably, Judas chooses to say “no” to the call to follow Jesus’ third way – and in so doing, sets into play the forces that will finally bring Jesus to his death upon a cross!

And that brings us to the third person who must make a decision that day – Simon Peter! Like Judas, there are three stories about Peter. First, Jesus states that Peter will deny him three times before morning dawns (14:26-31). Second, Peter could not even stay awake and participate in Jesus’ vigil in Gethsemane (vss. 32-42). Third, Peter denies Jesus three times in Pilate’s courtyard (vss. 66-72). Thus, just as Judas – a pivotal disciple – betrays Jesus, so Peter – the leader of the disciple band – denies him and also becomes a broken reed.

Jesus’ statement to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane is particularly worth noting, especially in the light of Peter’s vehement statement to Jesus’ prophecy that Peter will deny him. “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (vs. 31).

Jesus says to Peter later on in the Garden of Gethsemane when the disciples can’t maintain Jesus’ vigil but instead fall asleep, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (vss. 37b-38).

Indeed, the spirit is willing but the flesh weak. That was indeed Peter’s problem. But he couldn’t even stay awake, much less stand by Jesus when it would result in a threat to Peter’s life. Even though he had been with Jesus for the entirety of the Master’s ministry, Peter still moved from out of the flesh. Although he had confessed Jesus as Lord and Messiah, he still was not a man who lived under the influence of the Spirit. Consequently his spirit was weak, for it was sustained only by his own effort. And that effort proved itself wanting! So Peter was bound to deny Christ when his work or life became threatened.

The fourth follower of Jesus in Mark 14 is unnamed (as was the first), although it is often supposed to be Mark himself – the author of the Gospel that bears his name. It is thought to be Mark because the Gospel of Mark is the only one that tells this strange little story – a story that only the person who is its subject would have known about.

“A certain young man was following Jesus, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They (the soldiers of the high priest) caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked” (vss. 51-52).

This is the response of this follower to the threat posed by Jesus’ arrest and execution. He ran away, shedding all dignity in his headlong flight. One betrayed, another denied, still another abandoned Christ. Only one stood firm with him. Yet would any of them had predicted that this would be their respective responses? I doubt it. It is an indication of what fear of authority and power will do to even the best intentioned and committed of us!

For this story is also about power and its exercise – both in the unilateral power of the political/religious systems of Israel and of the personal relational power of Jesus.

The most striking reality of the exercise of power in the fourteenth chapter of Mark is the absence of a Roman presence. There is no mention of or even allusion to Roman power. Rather, lying behind all of the stories of that chapter is the menacing presence of the power of the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy! It was “the chief priests and the scribes (who) were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him” (14:1). It was “the chief priests” who conspired with Judas for the disciple to betray his master (14:10-11). Most remarkably of all, Mark does not suggest that any Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was a police action, exclusively, of “a crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests, the scribes and the elders” (vs. 43). And, finally, Jesus is brought for trial before “the high priest” along with “all the chief priests, the elders and the scribes assembled” to judge him (vs. 53). Rome is not mentioned anywhere. This is an action of the Jewish political, economic and religious elite, working in concert together to rid themselves of that man who most threatened their power over the Israelite people.

And their aim was clearly to rid themselves of Jesus. There was no intention to give him a fair trial. Besides the menacing opening words of the chapter, Mark tells us at the trial that “the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none” (14:56).

The council or Sanhedrin was, of course, the highest court of the land, capable of sentencing a man to death for heresy or blasphemy against Yahweh.² But they were not a dispassionate court, concerned with fairly distributing justice. Rather, their commitment was to distribute revenge. Jesus, with his use of relational power, had threatened their power, position, presence and plenty with his advocacy of a third way for the liberation of Israel. Now was their opportunity to get rid

² It is often assumed that the Sanhedrin could not put a person to death, but rather only Rome could. That was not true. They could sentence a person to death and have that sentence carried out by stoning. But they could give a death sentence only for religious crimes (i.e., the crimes of teaching heresy or blaspheming God). Roman jurisprudence allowed national courts to execute those who broke religious laws of the nation, but they reserved to themselves the exclusive right to execute people guilty of political crimes against either Rome or the host nation.

of him. Their intention was to use the Law of Moses to find cause to have him executed. Their problem, however, was that they could not make a sufficient case against him to find him guilty of breaking the Law by acting in a heretical or blasphemous manner. It wasn't that they hadn't tried. Mark tells us, "Many gave false testimony against him, *and their testimony did not agree*. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him. But even on this point their testimony did not agree" (vss. 56-59).

Jewish Law required that for a guilty verdict to be given on any crime worthy of death, there had to be at least two Israelites who would be willing to offer eye-witness of the crime, that it had to be public and that the two could not talk together nor be coached in their response (in order to eliminate collaboration Deut. 19:15-21). Although many testimonies were given at Jesus' trial, "their testimony did not agree". So the Jewish Law prevented the Sanhedrin from finding Jesus guilty or sentencing him to death!

The limits of unilateral power had seemed to be reached! And even in spite of all the effort to try to force the execution of Jesus, the case against the radical rabbi seemed to be slipping away. Whatever could they do? The high priest, seeing his plot dissolve before his very eyes, cried out to Jesus in utter frustration, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" It was a last seemingly futile effort on the high priest's part. All that Jesus had to do to win acquittal was to remain silent.

And then Jesus rescued them! Relational power acted to solve the trap into which unilateral power had driven the Sanhedrin. "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" (vs. 62, quoting from Ps. 110:1 and Dan. 7:13-14).

"Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him" (vss. 63-65)

Jesus had confessed to the "crime" of breaking the Law by witnessing to the fact that he was "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One". But the high priest, in his frustration, had made a terrible mistake. He had used the word, "Messiah"! If he had asked Jesus whether he was "the Son of the Blessed One", and Jesus had responded yes to that question, the Sanhedrin could have stoned him for blasphemy. But the high priest had asked him if he were the Messiah. And the word "Messiah" was a political term (similar to "Caesar"). The Sanhedrin could shout all they wanted that it was blasphemy, guilty of death by stoning. But such insistence would make no difference. Jesus' confession made him ultimately guilty, not of the crimes of blasphemy and heresy, but of treason against Rome and the threat of insurrection against the state. Jesus would have to go on trial before the Roman procurator of Palestine, Pilate. And if he would be found guilty by Rome, he would have to be executed by Rome as a traitor and as a clear and present danger to the Empire! And that, according to Mark, is how Rome eventually got involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

Over against the machinations of the political, economic and religious system of Israel, in this chapter, stood the loving and relational power of Jesus. That caring and commitment of his followers and of the people reverberates throughout this entire story. Here are just a few:

- ? Of his anointing by the unknown woman: “She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial” (vs. 8).
- ? At the Passover celebration: “Truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me” (vs. 18b).
- ? At the Mount of Olives: “It is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered’” (vs. 27).
- ? At the Garden of Gethsemane: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want” (vs. 36).
- ? At the Garden: “Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (vs. 38a).
- ? At the Garden: “The hour has come! The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (vs. 41b).

But the most significant example of Jesus’ relational power is Mark’s account of the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion. In this telling, it is freed from the sanitization with which we celebrate it today, so that it is revealed in all the intrigue and pathos of real life. The sacrament is instituted in the midst of Jesus’ pain over one of his followers betraying him, in the midst of the recognition that his closest friend will deny him, in the agony of prayer, beseeching God to “remove this cup from me”. It is intriguing, as well, that Jesus continues the metaphor of the cup (“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many”), as he beseeches God to release him from his obligation. Yet he still prays, “Yet not what I want, but what you want” (vs. 36b). The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak!

It is a stunning demonstration both of Jesus’ clarity about what would happen to him and his abiding commitment to his disciples that somehow, even in the worst possible scenario, their spiritual formation and discipleship was of paramount importance to Jesus. What a commitment to others! And what a lived-out demonstration of relational power the last days of Jesus’ life is to us all!

Mark continues to tell the story of Jesus’ last day in 15:1-47 is Mark’s telling of the execution of Jesus at the hands of the Roman state. The chapter presents to us Mark’s understanding of the trial, crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus. It begins in a way that directly ties the story into the events that preceded it in chapter 14.

“As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate” (15:1). The religious/political powers of Israel met after Jesus’ Hebrew trial in order to determine what they were to do in the light of the high priest’s mistake of calling Jesus “Messiah”. They realized there was no alternative but to bring him to trial before Pilate, but they needed to so orchestrate that trial that it would end in their desired result. Once their action plan was completed, they delivered him to the Roman procurator.

One word needs to be said here about the emphasis of chapter 15. Some have accused Mark of anti-Semitism because of his report of the evil machinations of the chief priests that pressured the reluctant Roman governor to do their will. But that accusation is ill-founded for two clear reasons. First, the Romans played the pivotal role in Jesus' death. In the final analysis, it was the Roman political/military machine that made the decision to crucify Jesus, who unnecessarily mocked him, and undertook that execution. They – and not the Jews -- are responsible for their own actions. Secondly, it wasn't the Jews who insisted on Jesus' death; it was the political/economic/religious system of Israel whom the Romans placed in power to rule Judah in Rome's stead. To insist that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' death would be like insisting that the Germans were responsible for the Holocaust; it was the Nazi Party (and Hitler) that was responsible for that mass destruction and it was the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy (and its high priest) along with Rome that was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. In fact, the Gospel of John seeks to make that clear by calling that aristocracy the "Judeans".

It is further important to note that chapter 15 is virtually devoid of any mention of Jesus' primary disciples; in fact, one must ask whether they were even eye-witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion. The only of Jesus' followers mentioned in this death scene is Mary Magdalene and three other women who held vigil at his execution, and Joseph of Arimathea, who claimed Jesus' corpse. Everyone else who was mentioned was an enemy of Christ or an onlooker (a "passer-by").

In the opening scene, Jesus stands on trial before Pilate. Pilate cuts to the chase. "Are you the King of the Jews", he asks? As a question, it is filled with mockery. Here is a man on trial before Pilate for treason and sedition who (Pilate thinks) was attempting to set himself up as king of Israel and thus determined to overthrow the might of Rome. So Pilate assaults this man with the insulting question, "Are you king of the Jews?"

What is mocking about this question? Pilate did not ask "Are you the king of Israel"? That would have implied the legitimacy of the Jewish state – that there ought to be a nation named "Israel". Instead, by asking the question, "Are you the king of the Jews", Pilate is showing his great contempt for Jesus, for Judah and Galilee and even for the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy that is seeking to pressure him for their desired verdict. The title, "king of the Jews" was the former title given by Rome to King Herod who had not ruled as a sovereign king over an independent nation but as a client king serving over a client province of a mighty Roman empire. By using this title for Jesus, Pilate is expressing his contempt for a people who don't even have sovereignty over their own land. That Pilate meant this slight is confirmed by the fact that five times he or his soldiers very intentionally use this term throughout Mark 15.

Jesus returns the insult. "**You** say so!" In other words, Jesus responds, "You are the one who gives me the title of "King of the Jews" and all that title means. I don't call myself by that title. But if it gives you a big kick to make fun of me and of my people, go right ahead. Have a big laugh at our expense. All that your sarcasm reveals is how immature and petty you and your Roman empire are!"

The text then continues, "Then the chief priests accused Jesus of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed" (vss. 3-5).

Behold how effectively Jesus used the power that was at his disposal. He didn't have the military power of Pilate standing behind him or the political clout of the chief priests. But he did have the power of his mouth – and he used it quite effectively. He didn't say anything – and he drove Pilate nuts!

Jesus does not defend himself. He knows the trial is rigged against him, so that defense is futile. Instead, what Jesus does is simply refuse to speak. They can't make him speak in his own defense. But his very silence, by its very nature, condemns – and condemns most loudly! He demonstrates his disdain for the legal game that is being played by refusing to play the game, to refuse to argue a defense, to refuse even to be intimidated by Roman and Sanhedrin power. Thus, he stands in defiance of Rome. And Pilate doesn't know how to cope with such passive resistance, such silent disobedience. The text tells us that "Pilate was amazed", filled with wonder that a lone man can face down the state and all its intimidation with such calm determination.

The result is that Pilate is paralyzed! He simply can't function! Such is the power of standing in the sense of one's own dignity and the rightness of one's cause or calling. And the systems – whether Roman or Jerusalem clerical aristocracy -- don't know what to do with such defiance!

Totally flummoxed, Pilate changes his tactic. "Now at the Passover festival, Pilate used to release a prisoner for the people, anyone for whom they asked" (vs. 6). Thus, Pilate asks them whether he should release to the clerical aristocracy-organized crowd Jesus or a rebel named Barabbas. They choose Barabbas, and that gets Pilate off the hook. Breathing a sigh of relief, Pilate turns over Jesus to his soldiers for execution!

Pilate comes across as a rather pathetic figure. He who is appointed to govern instead becomes governed by the whims of the crowd, the pressure of the local political/religious leaders and even by a silent Jesus. He is clearly, in this narrative, not his own man. He is instead shaped by the circumstances and the people around him, presenting an uncertain call to the crowd while acting like he is master of the situation. But, in reality, the situation masters him.

The story now moves to Jesus' preparation for execution (including his being mocked by the Roman soldiers), his crucifixion and death, and then his burial. It is intriguing that in his last minutes, Jesus was surrounded by those who opposed, scorned or dismissed him. The soldiers mocked him (vss. 16-20). Simon of Cyrene, who carried his cross, was clearly a bystander who got pressed into service³ (vss. 21-22). The soldiers further crucified Jesus, gambled over his clothes, and watched him die (vss. 24, 39). Two bandits, the text tells us, were crucified with him but Mark records no conversation between them (vs. 27) except to say they "tormented him" (vs. 32).

³ There is an intriguing side comment of Mark in the story of Simon of Cyrene, however, that inevitably leads to speculation. Mark wrote, "The soldiers compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, *the father of Alexander and Rufus*". Clearly, Mark adds that observation as if the readers of his gospel account knew these two men. And that is what leads to speculation. Did Simon's encounter that day with Jesus lead either to his conversion or – as he told the story – his sons' conversions? Otherwise, why would their names be mentioned in such a way that it is clear that the author of the gospel assumes the reader knows of these two men? It is a most intriguing aside!

Mark does tell us, however, that those who watched the crucifixion were not a gathering of peasants and expendables, looking for some entertainment that day. He tells us that the crowd included “the chief priests and the scribes” (vs. 31). They derided and mocked Jesus during the entire three-hour ordeal. Those taunts are recorded:

- ? “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross” (vss. 29-30).
- ? “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe” (vss. 31-32).
- ? “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down” (vs. 36).

The effect of all this abuse – both psychological and physical -- and of abandonment by all close to him had its inevitable toll on Jesus. What he must have been going through in his soul and mind as well as in his body is clearly exposed in that unbelievable cry of abandonment – not in Aramaic but in Hebrew – “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani” (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” vs. 34). Those who would seek to discredit or deny Jesus’ humanity would suggest that he only recited Psalm 22, which opens with these words. But I think not. To me, this is a cry of dereliction, of abandonment, of complete brokenness. This – and not simply the physical wounds he received – was the profound pain with which Jesus was overwhelmed. And all this pain he took alone, for he had been abandoned by all who called him “Lord” and “Master” and “Rabbi”!

All but the women! Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome, and “many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem” (vss. 40-41) stayed on with Jesus. Mark tells us that they “looked on from a distance”. But they were there. And they alone – those who were the marginalized, the relatively powerless ones of Jewish society, stayed by Jesus and were with him while all those who were – by society’s norms – perceived as their leaders turned tail and fled. The women were the truly courageous ones. And they were courageous because they were full of love for Jesus. And that love overcame any intimidation or terror that might otherwise have overwhelmed them. Truly a great lesson is here about the nature of true discipleship, and of the necessity of our commitment and loyalty to one another.

The final story in Mark’s crucifixion narrative is Jesus’ burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph is, therefore, the only other person beside the women who openly identifies with Jesus. The passage of such identification – which could have resulted in his being branded a heretic and traitor, and which would have minimally alienated him from the Sanhedrin – is quite direct in what he did:

“Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Sanhedrin, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus” (15:43).

Joseph’s act of mercy is the only place in scripture where he is mentioned – in the same place in all four gospels! The Synoptics do not suggest that he was a follower of Jesus but only that he “waited expectantly for the kingdom of God”. John, on the other hand, says he “was a disciple

of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fears of the Jews” (Jn. 19:38). Joseph is otherwise not mentioned in the scripture.

Was he a follower of Jesus? If he was a disciple, “though a secret one”, his secret was no longer kept. With his action to claim the body of Jesus, all Jerusalem knew that he had buried Jesus in his personal tomb.

It is possible that he was not a true disciple but only one who “waited expectantly for the kingdom of God”. Perhaps he had hoped that Jesus would be the one who would bring in that kingdom. Perhaps, now with Jesus’ death, that hope had been dashed. Perhaps he had attended the “kangaroo court” trial of Jesus by the Sanhedrin. After all, Mark tells us that he was a member of that body. He would have had every right to attend that trial and see how the powers were arrayed against Jesus. He may or may not have protested, but whether he did or not, his voice swayed no one.

Whether he remained a fervent follower of Jesus or even if he was not disillusioned, his decency and honor required him to do right by the man who had brought such hope to so many in Israel. He might not have been able to stop Jesus’ death, but he could be sure that Jesus would be buried with dignity. And doing so, he unconsciously fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and unwittingly played the next step in the preparation for the resurrection morning!

There is something so admirable in Joseph – such integrity, such tenacity, such courage. It deeply spoke to the gospel writers. For all of them record this act of mercy, even though Joseph plays no further discernible role in the church. And they all record it, I suspect, because it stands in such marked contrast to their own behavior. For while those who dearly loved Jesus, publicly gave themselves to him and followed him in the three years of his ministry abandoned and fled from him on this dark day, a man who only “waited expectantly for the kingdom of God” risked his status, his career, his place in society and perhaps even his own life to provide the body of Jesus with the dignity of a proper burial and grave! What a rebuke that must have been to the church. And what a witness to the nature of authentic commitment!

Finally, the entire crucifixion account ends with the words, “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid” (15:47). The whole story ends with the women, just as it began with a woman preparing Jesus’ body for burial by anointing him with oil. Now, the women observe his burial. And the tragedy is complete. Alienated, abandoned, betrayed, rejected, Jesus dies with only the women among his followers – also the rejected, alienated and marginalized ones of Jewish society, silently standing by as his mourners and his escorts into death. They – along with Joseph – are the truly courageous ones. And thus, they are the ones who display the most authentic and convictional faith!

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 his 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;
- ? "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!

(Cycle B Lent Holy Week 1.doc)