

FIRST IMPRESSIONS PALM SUNDAY (B)
Processional Gospel Mark 11: 1-10 or John 12: 12-16
Isaiah 50: 4-7 Philippians 2: 6-11 Mark 14:1- 15:47
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

This Sunday is different in several ways. Today's liturgy has three parts: the remembrance of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In addition, we are given a choice of two processional Gospel passages. I am drawn to the Marcan passage and will focus my reflections on it. We also have the reading of Mark's Passion. I would choose not to chop it up, but to proclaim it in its entirety; after all, how many times will people get to hear the Passion in its entirety? The Missal suggests a "brief" homily; the long reading of the Passion is no excuse to eliminate the preaching.

Today Jesus enters the city where he will meet hostility, and he is showing the powers that he is not afraid of them; not afraid of their malicious and slanderous words or their power to crush and destroy him. He doesn't come armed, nor does he call the enthusiastic crowds that greet him to take up arms. He will not enter in secret to organize terrorist activities; the Zealots, who favored uprisings and a violent revolution, certainly would have wanted him to do that. Jesus' enemies wouldn't have to infiltrate the ranks of his disciples with spies to find out what he was teaching – for his words were public and his actions seen by anyone who wished.

Jesus' humble entrance into Jerusalem fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9). "Rejoice greatly O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." That's what the crowds acknowledge in their Hosannas. Jesus' "royal" entrance was on a colt of an ass. What an insignificant figure he would make. Jesus enters the city without fancy trappings, with the cloaks of simple folks on the colt. In the gospel Jesus doesn't have very much: he borrows a boat from which to preach and a room to eat the Passover with his disciples. Even his tomb will be borrowed. How could this man possibly free a people dominated by the most powerful force in the world, the Roman army? What would the Jewish leaders of big city Jerusalem possibly have to fear from this peasant from Galilee?

Despite the fact that his appearances were humble, this did not turn people off or drive them away from him - at least not on this day. We tend to be impressed by displays of power that fill us with awe. At some national events fighter jets fly low over the heads of the crowds, their roar startles us and turns our heads towards the sound and the impressive display. Jesus doesn't draw attention by similar displays of power or because he is spectacular, but because he holds out hope to the weary and hopeless who have suffered dominance by the religious, military and economic powers of the world.

The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed by the Nazis, warned of "cheap grace," if we do not take seriously the gravity of sin or the call to servanthood. This week, we disciples of Christ are called to follow and die with him; to die to sin and self. This week in its entirety must also be kept in focus, for Christ's death and the subsequent despair of his disciples are not the end of the story. The full story is revealed on Sunday morning when Christ defeated death and was raised to new life. What was an ending, was also an occasion for a new beginning. We will draw parallels from our lives this week with Christ's suffering, and we will also experience the transforming power of our God who raises the dead to new life.

Mark's gospel, to this point, has been terse, with an air of rapid movement. Now the gospel takes a turn towards detail and slower pace. For example, in the brief narrative of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, Mark spends some time describing Jesus' directions to the two disciples and their search for the colt Jesus would ride on. In contrast to the surrounding excitement, the two are given a mundane task.

Earlier, two disciples had asked to sit at Jesus' right and left when he came into his glory. Their attitude and request are more typical of disciples in Mark's gospel, who continually miss Jesus' message about servanthood and the cross. Still, Jesus is the "teacher" and he wants to continue teaching his disciples their role of humble servanthood – even as he sees his end approaching. The two sent on their assignment are not named and so are representatives of disciples then and now; maybe that's why Mark spends so much time on this seeming insignificant detail.

The crowd is looking for a glorious king and Jesus, sitting on a donkey, is saying quite clearly that he is not that kind of king and those who follow after him will be asked to serve, not in a glorious crowd-pleasing ways, but in the very mundane way we who minister are called to serve. At a parish where I was recently, the

parish staff were helping volunteers in the church basement make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the poor.

Thomas Long, who teaches at Candler School of Theology, wrote in “The Christian Century” (April 4, 2006), that Jesus’ disciples have to be willing to be “donkey fetchers” for the Lord – willing to serve in humble ways. Mark’s gospel opens with a trumpet call, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” – but the gospel makes it clear that the way we do that is by performing humble, routine and often exhausting tasks. In the end, Long says, preparing the way of the Lord” usually looks like standing hip-deep in the mire of some stable trying to corral a donkey for Jesus.

This narrative is simple and subdued. Despite the excitement around him and the few words Jesus’ speaks in giving directions to his disciples, he is remarkably silent in Mark’s version of the event. If we want details of a “triumphant entry” we will find it in Matthew – not in Mark. Jesus seems to sense that he is no longer traveling in his home region of Galilee engaging his opponents in debate. Instead, he is in the capital city where threatening civil and religious powers hold sway.

If the disciples recalled Jesus’ words they would have known that he was on his way to death. Judging from their previous lack of comprehension, we can imagine the disciples being caught up and distracted by the excitement. But Jesus is calm and determined and ready to push ahead. After his resurrection the disciples will receive his Spirit and finally learn Jesus’ message of service, or as Long puts it, their role as “donkey fetchers.”

During Lent the liturgical color is purple or violet; today it is red. Red is worn on the feasts of martyrs and on Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the Spirit’s coming upon the gathered community. Thus, even the liturgical color today reminds us that those who follow Christ, filled with his Spirit, must be willing to lay down their lives.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches.

Those preceding Jesus as well as those following kept crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Reflection:

Despite the fact that Jesus' appearances were humble, this did not turn people off or drive them away from him. We tend to be impressed by splash and displays of power that fill us with awe. Jesus doesn't draw attention by such grandiose spectacles, but because his words and actions hold out hope to the weary and hopeless. Today we join the crowds who greet Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. and add our own "Hosannas" to theirs.

So, we ask ourselves:

- What is there about Jesus that draws me to him and keeps me as his follower?
- What can I do to reflect his simplicity and humility in my daily actions?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

Jesus: A Victim of Capital Punishment

We worship a God whose Son died as a common criminal despite His innocence. During this week when we recall the execution of Jesus Christ, we hear our Pope and Bishops call us as Catholic Christians to work for an end to the death penalty in our state and in our nation.

"A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew my appeal for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary" (*Pope John Paul II, Jan. 27, 1999, St. Louis, Missouri*).

The Catholic bishops of the United States have spoken out clearly and strongly against the use of the death penalty. In 2005 they issued *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. They acknowledged that sentences such as "life in prison

without parole” provide non-lethal alternatives and called for an end to the use of the death penalty in the United States, stating “it is time for our nation to abandon the illusion that we can protect life by taking life.”

Did you know?

§ 36 states have the death penalty; 14 do not.

§ Recent Supreme Court decisions have limited the use of the death penalty by declaring it unconstitutional to execute persons with mental retardation and juveniles under the age of 18.

§ Since 1973, there have been 130 exonerations of death row inmates.

§ Since 1976, there have been a total of 1138 executions in the United States including two in 2009.

§ The United Nations General Assembly has voted to urge a global moratorium on the death penalty, *over the objections of the U.S., China, Iran and Sudan.*

§ More than 200 men and women await execution on North Carolina’s death row. Only four states have more death row inmates than North Carolina.

What can I do?

· Form your conscience by studying the following links: Be aware. Be vocal.
Contact your local and national legislators.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

THE DEATH OF INNOCENTS: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF WRONGFUL EXECUTIONS, by Sr. Helen Prejean.

Random House Adult Trade Publishing Group Pub. Date: December 2004 ISBN-13: 9780679440567.

(Notes by Sr. Helen)

On December 28, 2004, on the Feast of the Holy Innocents, my new book, “The Death of Innocents,” was released by Random House. In it I review the cases and stories of how two men, Dobie Gillis Williams in Louisiana and Joseph O'Dell in Virginia, were executed. I present you with a lot of information their juries never got, and I believe the facts argue for the innocence of both of these men. I invite

you to read it and decide for yourselves. I also describe the evolution of Catholic thinking on the death penalty, and give the background for the changes that Pope John Paul II made to the Catholic Catechism on the subject of capital punishment.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- William L. Barnes #0020590 (On death row since 3/10/94)
- Jeffrey Kandies #0221506 (4/20/94)
- Vincent Wooten #0453231 (4/29/94)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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