

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PALM SUNDAY of the Lord’s Passion (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 week brings an abundance of liturgical and scriptural riches. The other side of that coin, however, is that it makes it difficult for us preachers to choose and focus our preaching. And focus we must, lest the preaching become generic and border on platitudes. The new lectionary calls this day “Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion”—seems like two names, two different moods and that creates a quandary for the preacher. We will need to make some choices for our preaching; the multiple name of the day calls for a decision; will we go with the jubilant entrance to Jerusalem or the more somber passion narrative. Granted the liturgy today is fuller (and longer) than usual. But I wouldn’t let that tempt me to shirk my responsibility as a preacher. Today may call for a briefer preaching; but not the elimination of the preaching.

Before we turn to the readings, a moment’s reflection on our liturgical role. It is always good for the preacher to be involved in liturgical planning, especially for this most special week. As we look at the readings we note that Mark’s Passion narrative is long; but I wouldn’t opt for the shorter version given in the lectionary. His gospel is usually noted for its brevity and so the sheer size seems to indicate that Mark wants to put a lot of emphasis on the passion. He must consider it important; why else would he depart from his usual quick and brief narrative? It has become customary to have three readers proclaim the passion. As we plan the liturgies for this week and especially the proclamation of the passion narratives, it is important to make sure the readers are well chosen and rehearsed for their roles. The missalettes are not helpful here. The gospel is meant to be heard in liturgical celebrations. With missalettes, the people have their heads buried in the book; there’s also the dreadful sound of everyone turning pages at the same time! Hardly conducive to a reflective listening to the scriptures, especially the solemn passion. Maybe the assembly could sing an acclamation at key moments in the story and do without the distraction of the missalettes. Again, the importance of prepared lectors.

Suppose we were to focus our preaching on the Procession Gospel, Mark 11: 1-10? This opening reading about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is celebratory, filled with biblical imagery of long-held hopes now fulfilled. There is lots of symbolism pointing to the Jewish royal messianic expectations. For example, Jesus uses a traditional prerogative of kings when he requisitions a colt for his entrance to the city of David (Zech. 9:9). His disciples are instructed to say, "The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once." This request is enough to satisfy the bystander's question, "What are you doing...?" At this stage of the week, Jesus is in complete charge of events. He exhibits knowledge of events to come, and he shows his royal authority.

The people spreading their cloaks and branches on the road are doing what people did for entering kings (2 Kings 9:13). "Hosanna" originally meant "save us"; and later became a shout of praise. So, there is a dual significance to the crowd's shout. We now know there are two reasons to proclaim Jesus, for he is both our savior and our sovereign. The people were anticipating the arrival of David's kingdom; they see Jesus as linked to the glorious moment when the David-like messiah would come.

We hear this highly charged and emotional reading at the very opening of today's liturgy. Later, in the passion narrative, we will hear the crowds shouting to Pilate for Jesus' death—"Crucify him!" How many preachings have we heard, or preached, about the fickle crowd; one moment pro-Jesus; the next, anti-Jesus? Why take the usual slant on the passage? Consider weighing in on the side of the crowd. I notice that this event and its excitement take place outside the city, "near the city" (11:1). Later, Mark will tell us that Jesus enters the city alone (11:11). So, the excitement is by those outside the city. Jesus goes into Jerusalem and there he meets opposition and death.

It seems to be the outsiders who are the ones excited about Jesus. Think of their life-long desperation. Are they the gospel "highway and by-way" people —those who never get special places at table, invitations to upper-crust banquets or places of honor in temple and synagogue? Jesus' mission has been to them. They have already experienced or heard about how welcome their lot is with him. Finally, someone from God to tell them they are not forgotten, indeed, they are loved, by God! Jesus, the one with authority, has recognized them, healed their afflictions and forgiven their sins. They know too that Jesus is a Galilean, an outsider, one of

their own, raised up by God and, as Zechariah had promised, come to Jerusalem riding on a colt.

We can look back to the 3rd. Sunday (January 26th.), when Jesus started proclaiming his message, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.” Now we are at the end of the same gospel, Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The sudden reversal that will lead to his suffering and death is about to take place. What happened to the bright promise of his beginnings? And is this what the “Time of fulfillment” looks like? This total collapse? During the intervening episodes, Jesus’ public ministry, we have learned more about the identity of Jesus, the nature of his reign and what it means to be his disciples. (After the Easter season, we will return to hearing Mark’s gospel on Sunday.) “Time of fulfillment,” has taken flesh in Jesus. He is the reign, the kingdom of God. He fulfills ancient promises, but not as his contemporaries expected.

In Jesus’ lifetime he has shown his authority over sickness, evil spirits and his opponents. He was also in control as he prepared to enter Jerusalem. Now he will use his power and authority; but it will not be in the way the world does. Rather, his power will be in service for others, he will lay down his life for our benefit. We will see in his way of service a new kind of authority over sin and evil, a triumph that will come, not by force, but by self-sacrifice in the interest of the other. His authority will not be forced on others; we will be free to choose his way to life through death. While we might ordinarily exert ourselves through power and military might, he will do so in self-emptying humility. Paul makes it clear that Jesus was willing to give all, hold back nothing on our behalf. No sacrifice was too great in order for Christ to show us God’s love for us. The church in Philippi was suffering both internal strife and outer persecution (1: 28-29). There were also those Jewish Christians who wanted all converts to keep the old observance. Paul places a reminder before this Christian community. Christ gave up all for them, from his equality with God, to his suffering and death. That’s the big sacrifice the community needs to focus on---- and not on its differences and theological squabbles.

Jesus’ rejection, suffering and death fulfill what he has been telling his disciples. This should come as no surprise to Mark’s audience. Jesus’ own suffering is a central focus in the story and must have been a consolation to Mark’s community

and to us contemporary Christians, for whom faith and allegiance to Jesus come with a cost.

When the passion narrative begins we can hear that a change has taken place in the gospel. Jesus, the one with authority and power, now becomes the one who suffers. He is on the receiving end of much activity. He is---conspired against, denied, betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, tortured, crucified and finally buried. In his suffering, Jesus identifies with those who have undergone similar injustices and with all those who suffer. One of the names we give this day is "Passion Sunday." The word passion, has roots in words meaning "suffering" and "being acted upon." There are many people who must suffer or have something done to them; they have no choice. We suffer old age, sickness, physical debilitation. We also suffer from the pressures of economic and social systems. We cannot always change these circumstances and so we identify with Jesus, receiving strength from his own endurance under his passion. Passion, in English, also suggests strong feelings. In this sense Jesus was an initiator, one who felt strongly about what he was to do and went about doing it. He was a passionate lover of God and humanity, and this passion energized and forged his determination to continue on the path God gave him to follow for us; to preach God's love for the outsider. No opposition could prevent this passionate savior from completing his task for us, even if it meant his death.

One response we can make this week of our Savior's execution, is to address the issue of the death penalty in our preaching. Our church's stand against the death penalty provides ample material for this preaching as we hear the gospel's description of Jesus' execution today and on Good Friday. Over these past months I have been posting the names of people on North Carolina's death row. This may provide an opportunity for the preacher to suggest writing to inmates on death row, either the names that have appeared in these reflections, or those at a death row closer to you. If you need information, your diocesan peace and justice office would be one source and of course the internet has ample web pages dedicated to the topic. One such web page is provided by our North Carolina ecumenical group, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."
www.netpath.net/~ucch/pfadp

PRAYERS REQUESTED

Update on our Dominican sisters in Iraq

Reliable information about our Sisters in Iraq and their families is very sketchy at this time. We do know that two of the hospitals in Baghdad are run by Dominican Sisters -- one by the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena (Rihab's and Luma's congregation), the other by the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation. Both groups of sisters have made the decision to stay in Baghdad and serve the people, at great risk to their own lives.

We also know that some of our troops are moving north toward Mosul. This is where the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena have their motherhouse. As you can imagine, this is a particularly tense time for them.

I know you continue your prayers daily, and I can assure you that the Iraqi Sisters are very grateful. I don't have any information about the Dominican Friars or Lay Dominicans, but perhaps some of you can fill in the gaps there.

May peace reign!

Mary Jean Traeger, OP

TWO GOOD BOOKS FOR THE PREACHER

A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES, by Raymond E. Brown. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989. Paper, 72 pages.

An eminent biblical scholar reflects on the four Passion narratives. His strong pastoral interests come through these very readable essays. Good for preachers. Also good for those who want to do some meditative reading during Holy Week.

MARK, by Wilfrid Harrington, O.P. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1979. Paper, 252 pages.

This is a fine study of Mark's Gospel and makes good reading during this liturgical year when Mark is being read on Sundays.

QUOTABLE

"The Gospels never tell us quite how the sufferings of Jesus reverse completely

his fortunes and ours, only that they do. The Philippians hymn provides an answer. Jesus was not spurred by selfishness or conceit in anything he did. In humility he counted everyone better than himself in the sense that they were worth dying for. He knew that God would make it right somehow. That is what he always taught. And he lived by what he taught, up to the end. A homily on hosannas sounding in the ears of Jesus—this Jew who trusted God completely—on the brink of his dissolution might be the most powerful parable out of life that could be shared this day.”

—Gerard Sloyan in, PROCLAMATION 4: AIDS FOR INTERPRETING THE LESSONS OF THE CHURCH YEAR, SERIES C. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988.

JUSTICE NOTES

Here are some ideas for peace and peacemakers:

- * Provide time in church for quiet or liturgical prayer. Many people will seek the comfort of prayer.
- * A candlelight vigil is very simple to organize
- * Assemble medical kits for Iraq
- * Wear black ribbons as a sign of mourning
- * Put a candle or light in your window
- * Fast from buying things (gas, BART tickets, food, etc) one day a week
- * Send money to Catholic Relief for Iraq Aid.
- * Find ways to create dialogue and unity in the parish
- * Reach out to support families with relatives in military,
- * Plan a potluck for peace: bring people together to share food, pray, share concerns, maybe sing, collect money or canned food.... build community and support each other.
- * Grieve as needed- there may be deep sadness and anger, and it may trigger other experiences of sadness or loss.
- * Take care of yourself, with sleep, exercise, and less news.
- * Speak to your children about peace and practice nonviolence at home
- * Share any other ideas you have!

----Mary Doyle, MDiv., Social Justice Resources
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POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."*
Thanks,

Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Daniel Garner #014374 (On death row since 9/3/93)
- Raymond D. Rowsey #0353653 (10/1/93)
- Johnny R. Daughtry #0099090 (10/4/93)
- George C. Buckler #0054499 (10/8/93)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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