

Passion Sunday/Palm Sunday

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Liturgy of the Palms

RCL: Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 LM: Matthew 21:1-11

Liturgy of the Passion

RCL: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14–27:66 or Matthew 27:11-54

LM: Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14–27:66 or 27:11-54

Passion or Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week, the heart and center of the Christian year. The processional Gospel, Mathew 21:1-11, is an unmistakable political scene. The people long for deliverance from their Roman oppressors and their accomplices. They acclaim Jesus as “Son of David,” the Messiah they hope will finally bring that salvation. He is that king, but not in the way they expect and desire. God’s rule in the world is going to be different, exercising not brute force and coercion, but the power of love, forgiveness, and hope. It does not shy away from calling sin what it is and calling the powers of the world to account. Witness the lives of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (killed on April 4) and Bishop Oscar Romero (March 24). But it does so with humility and love for the oppressors and perpetrators of evil, even while standing solidly with their victims. That is the power loosed by a King, a Romero, a Gandhi, and others. Jesus and his followers come to initiate the reign of peace and justice through the offering of their own lives. Perhaps it’s a good Sunday to focus some attention on the Sunday offering in its true and full meaning, expressed in one way in the Lutheran liturgy: “Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us—ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love” (LBW, p. 87). The reading from chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew’s Gospel



begins with Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus’ words are evocative of an earlier meal, the so-called feeding of the five thousand (plus many more women and children). The important point in each meal is that Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples to eat and distribute. What seems like an insignificant, hopeless amount, placed in Jesus’ hands, proves more than enough for all. In our communion celebrations we usually receive a small

wafer, or a little piece of bread, a small sip of wine or grape juice, and this is called a “supper.” But it is a foretaste of the feast to come, because it is given in remembrance of Jesus, recalling all that his life meant and means for us. It points us to the possibility of sharing what we have, not holding it close to save it for ourselves, but letting Jesus bless it for the sake of feeding all.

The Jewish Passover contains a litany to which the response is “dayenu!,” which means “it would have been enough.” (“Had God brought us out of Egypt and not divided the sea for us, dayenu!” “Had God brought us to Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, dayenu!”) We trust that God will provide what we need, what is enough for life. How do we communicate and live God’s promises so that others may come to trust in God’s “dayenu!” and in fact experience what is “dayenu” for their lives? The Holy Communion strengthens and empowers God’s people to “Go in peace, serve the Lord!” in the world.

The lesson from Philippians reminds us that Jesus did not seek equality with God but emptied and humbled himself. This, Paul says, is the mind to have: the mind, the heart, the self-giving in the image of Christ. I use this passage as a “last word,” just prior to the benediction, to provide biblical commentary and explanation as we hear the Passion of the Lord read, hear Jesus despair for God’s presence (see Psalm 22, the responsorial psalm in the Roman Catholic Lectionary), and give himself to death for our sake. The closing words of the text then point us to a week hence, when “Alleluias!” once more pour from our hearts and out of our mouths: “Therefore God has highly exalted him . . .”

The day began with a scene of political expectation and ends with Jesus crucified and buried. Hope seems to have been killed along with Jesus. In the movie *On the Waterfront*, Karl Malden plays the local priest, trying to serve a parish of dock workers facing corruption in their leadership. A falling pallet in the ship’s hold kills a fellow worker, a deed the mob has ordered. Malden comes to give the victim the last rites, then starts to leave. He stops and looks toward the gathered onlookers, workers, and mob power brokers. He speaks of Christ’s crucifixion having happened once more and of Jesus’ presence right there with them at that very moment. The church, he says, is not off in some building but right there in that hold, where death has seemed to reign. He tells them that they are the ones who can put a stop to such abuse of power, destruction of lives, and denial of justice. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” he seems to be saying, echoing St. Paul.

Children’s Time

Since children of all ages like parades, a good way to get the younger members of the congregation on board at the beginning of worship is to involve them in a procession. They could start from an area outside the sanctuary and come into the church worship area, leading the rest of the congregation with their “Hosannas” and maybe a simple song. They should have palm branches and perhaps colored robes and other light clothing to wave. Ask them questions about where Jesus is going and what it means to follow Jesus. This would spark their attention to the rest of the service and the lengthy reading of the Passion (which could be done as a liturgical reading involving members taking the part of the characters in the drama).

Musical Suggestions

God of Grace and God of Glory—LBW 415 Lead On, O King Eternal!—LBW 495 Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service—LBW 423 Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us—LBW 424 For the Bread Which You Have Broken—LBW 200 Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love—WOV 765

(also BP 218) A New Commandment—WOV 664 Bind Us Together—WOV 748 Let Us Talents
and Tongues Employ—WOV 754 (also BP 213) Bread of the World in Mercy Broken—BP 110
Lord of All Nations, Grant Me Grace—BP 178