



Contributed by Bro. John Cline, C.R.

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PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY

March 28, 2021
GATHERING TIME (10-15 minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

For “news hounds” or “political junkies,” the past months have presented a generous serving of discussions, demonstrations, rallies, accusations—and also disturbing images. And even the average person has not been insulated from news of movements like Me Too, Black Lives Matter, political wrangling, the dark web, and so-called homegrown terrorists. What seems to me to be a common element or starting point in all of this is a desire to correct an injustice. And taking a step back to examine a justice claim is not always easy, as theories, facts, opinions and fake news are not always easy to separate. What begin as good intentions can be misled, with opinions influenced by bias, attitudes determined by prejudice, or ideas entrenched by propaganda; resulting actions can produce fear, hostility and even violence. The pursuit of justice can bring about more injustice when the basic respect for the individual is lost. Without civility, respect, dialogue—Christian values—there can be little progress. Jesus left us an example, as well as His teachings, as to good relationships. The scriptures present us with many stories of Jesus’ interactions in various events and times in His life. Stories of healing, teaching and modelling ... and artists and sculptors have left us many priceless depictions of His actions. These representations enhance and/or form our imaginations and the mental pictures we carry with us. A Nativity scene, the Good Shepherd, the Transfiguration, forgiveness of a sinner, and the Sermon on the Mount readily come to mind. Of course, the most recognizable image and symbol is that of the Crucifixion.

This Sunday marks a transition from Lent into Holy Week. We are invited to journey with Jesus through the Triduum, and to enter into the mysteries that form the basis of our beliefs and theology—the Paschal Mystery. And a quick overview of our scripture readings confronts us with the juxtaposition of celebration and unjust condemnation, joy contrasted with suffering, cynical praise and execution. The scripture authors invite us to use our imaginations and, with our inner eye, to journey with Jesus and to contemplate Him.

Our Palm Sunday liturgy begins with the gospel relating Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, only to be followed with His Passion and death in the Passion narration. A great crowd greets Jesus' entrance into the city shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" and waving palm branches. Only days later, Mark records a sharp contrast as the same "king of Israel" is derided with contempt as He hangs on a cross. Indeed, the death of Jesus is most starkly portrayed in Mark's gospel. There is no good thief, there is no Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross, and there is no trusting affirmation of "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Instead, Judas betrays Him, the disciples flee, and Peter denies Him. Everyone else mocks, reviles, and derides Jesus: the soldiers who pass by, the chief priests, and those who are crucified with Him. Even the weather contributes to this scene, as we read that "it was noon, and darkness came over the whole land." In the midst of all of this, we hear the plaintive voice of Jesus: "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

In these final words of Jesus, no matter how dire the situation is, He is praying Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This psalm ends up with total *trust* in God, for Jesus is talking here to God His Father. Jesus' words give voice to the anguish that He feels in His final hours, as well as the silence that His anguish meets. He is left with only one thing, and that is to trust in God in the midst of this most solitary and agonizing death.

Like Jesus, we are called to trust in God's love and mercy in the midst of our chaos and suffering. We can trust, knowing that Jesus' trust in His Father was not in vain, because God's silence ended in Jesus' victory over death, the resurrection of Jesus! Alleluia!

Warm-up Activity (about 8-10 minutes):

- i. What is your favourite image of Jesus and does it influence your prayer time?
- ii. Do you have a story of joy and suffering? Was your suffering met with God's silence?
- iii. Is there a time when you experienced the new life of resurrection after suffering and God's silence?

The Table of the Word

"Take up your cross and follow me"

Our culture encourages us to be busy, to accumulate possessions, to make impressions, to seek pleasure—in other words, to "fill up" in order to be happy. However, the gospel invites us to discover that the secret to a happy life is to find ways to "empty" ourselves of these attachments. Jesus reveals that the path of losing oneself, being the least, and being the servant of all, will lead us to the fullness of life. Indeed, this path reveals that the secret of life is not to be "filled up" but to be "fulfilled." Choosing this path, however, means that we must give up being the "lord of our lives," making sure that we have managed and controlled our lives in ways of happiness. In contrast, to lose oneself for another, or to be of service to another in sacrificial love, means that we are willing to stop being self-centred. As Jesus trusted that God would provide, so we will experience the new life that comes from living this Paschal Mystery.

Our Lenten practices have helped us to grow in this very way of trusting in God. We have given more time in prayer, curbed our desires for pleasure and material things by fasting, and have been more generous in the almsgiving of our treasure and time for the poor. Each of these activities has helped us to die in small ways—giving up our time, our self-fulfillment, and our self-centredness in order that we might grow in our trust in God. These Lenten practices have helped us to conform ourselves more closely to the suffering and death of Christ, so that we might be more fully alive as the person God invites us to be.

As we enter this holiest of weeks, we are called to pray for the grace of trust, especially in those situations that are most trying or that seem the darkest. This week provides us with an opportunity to name those situations and to see them through the lens of trust in the Father that Jesus has. All this leads to dying to self, and to our final Resurrection in glory.

Let us pray

Leader: In the name of *Jesus*, a name that is above every name, let us pray to the one who placed all his trust in God.

Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself to manifest the nature of your love, **Lord, have mercy.**
Christ Jesus, you continued to trust in God in your darkest moments, **Christ, have mercy.**
Lord Jesus, your Spirit empowers us to imitate you in our sufferings, **Lord, have mercy.**

Together we pray

Open our hearts this week so that we may respond to the promptings of your Spirit.

Open up our ears today so that we may be moved by your WORD.

Open up our eyes to the pain and suffering around us.

Open our hands that we may give witness to Jesus' compassion in our good deeds.

For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

FIRST READING (*Isaiah 50:4–7*)

The servant of the Lord said: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens – wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. “The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

“I gave 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.

“The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (*Philippians 2:6–11*)

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. Therefore God 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.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (*Mark 14:1–15:47*)

(Please Note: *What follows are excerpts from today's Passion Narrative from the Gospel of Mark.*)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

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. Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” “You say so.” Then the chief priests accused him 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.

Now at the festival Pilate used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the

chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” They shouted back, “Crucify him!” Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace, that is, the governor’s headquarters; and they called together the whole cohort. And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. They 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. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, “*The King of the Jews.*” And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, “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.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him. When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” Which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

Lectio Divina means “sacred reading.” It was a popular form of prayer in the early Church. This Word proclaimed today is God’s own Word, God’s way of speaking to you today through his own Spirit. So take a few moments to be quiet, allowing this Word you have just heard to touch you as you reflect quietly on the three readings. Is there a word or thought that somehow attracts you or has your interest? If so, simply identify it—no need to explain it—just identify it.

COMMENTARY:

The question of suffering is a profound mystery of our human condition and, Isaiah ponders this issue, attempting to make some sense of reality. Written during the Babylonian captivity, the author reflects through the lens of hope the experiences of Israel’s journey and God’s guidance. The suffering servant in this text reveals the cost of faithfulness to the Lord. Pain and suffering are inflicted but the servant has not been disgraced but rather helped by the Lord. His hope and experience are put in a theological context and his faithfulness is rewarded.

For Christians, Jesus is like this “suffering servant.” He has proclaimed God’s Good News in His words and deeds of healing and attention to the marginalized and sinners that provoked controversy early in the gospels. “Who but God alone can forgive sins”? “Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?” “Why do your disciples not fast?” “Why do you do what is unlawful

on the Sabbath?”. Despite their criticisms, Jesus continues to listen to God’s voice calling Him to continue to proclaim God’s Good News. Jesus is content to trust in God for help as he endures the suffering that comes as the result of obedience to God’s will.

The second reading reveals a similarity to the first as the “suffering servant” follows the will of God. And Paul’s recognition of Jesus being in the form of God, acknowledges His equality to God.

This divinity is exercised, not as a god and king demanding subservience, but as God-Man, humanly willing to serve and suffer in humble obedience. Paul’s letter uses this image to instruct and illustrate the understanding of who Christ is. Paul’s message is one of encouragement to the Philippians, and us, to live in hope without complaining.

In the gospel, Mark takes the liberty of rearranging the story of Jesus and Mary of Bethany which occurred prior to the Passover meal (by six days in John’s gospel), and relating it after the scheming by and vengeance of the priests. Judas’ contempt and intended betrayal is followed by Jesus’ love for the disciples at the meal. In each instance, Jesus responds, not in kind, but with care, respect, and compassion for others. And notice this spirit of Jesus as you reflect on the remainder of the Passion narrative.

(Allow about 5–10 minutes for the participants to react to the **Commentary** and identify a newly discovered insight).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. (Isaiah 50) *“I gave my back to those who struck me … I did not hide my face from insult …”*
 - a) Have you ever had to endure insult or suffering because you were doing what was right?
 - b) What enabled you to do this? Did you ever have the experience of being vindicated afterwards that what you did was right?
2. (Mark 14:14) *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*
 - a) Share in your group a time when you felt totally alone, or abandoned, or that “nobody really cared.”
 - b) Considering current events in our society, who are some of the “alone” or “abandoned” people that you fear are being ignored in the pursuit of fairness and justice? Share your thoughts.
3. Your group is invited to reflect on and talk about “crosses.”
 - a) What makes a cross especially burdensome? What makes it bearable? Who has impressed you with the way she/he carries her/his cross?
 - b) Which cross do you personally find to be the most dreaded and difficult to bear? When has your own suffering been a blessing for you?

CARING-PRAYING TIME (15-20 minutes)

1. **Word for the Week:** “Truly, this man was the Son of God.” (Mark: Passion Narrative)

2. Suggestion for the Week:

- a) If your church should be unable to accommodate Holy Week services, take time to read and reflect upon the scripture readings for Holy Thursday and Good Friday.
- b) “The supreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it”. (Simon Weil)

3. Intercessions: (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

Leader: As we commemorate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and His passion and death, we offer our prayers in faith and hope.

That the Church, teaching and acting in the name of Christ, may provide relief for the weary, poor, and suffering, we pray...

For civil authorities to respond generously to the voices that cry out for food, for justice, and for peace, we pray....

Lord you were betrayed, abandoned and rejected; help us to remain faithful, and willing to pay the price of discipleship, we pray...

That those who face insult and degradation because of race, religious belief or political opinion may be supported by disciples of Jesus, we pray...

For those who by their sufferings share in the Passion of Christ, may they share fully in Christ's victory, we pray....

Lord, our expectations and opinions can be entrenched and stagnant; grace us with openness to your inspirations, we pray...

Jesus, you forgave Peter's betrayal; help us to forgive others who let us down or turn on us, we pray...

O God, the path to holiness includes times of emptiness and darkness, help us realize that you are with us, as you were with Jesus on the way to Calvary, we pray...

For Pope Francis' prayer intention for March: that we may experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation with renewed depth, to taste the infinite mercy of God, we pray...

How can we help you in prayer this week?

Let us pray (together)

Lord our God,

as we enter this Holy Week, let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, Your servant.

*Empty us of ourselves, and draw us close to the cross of Christ,
that, looking on One forsaken, we may acknowledge this man to be truly the Son of God,
and confess Him as Christ and Lord. We ask this through your Son,
Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.*

With hand and hearts united in gratitude for God's favours today, we pray that all those in our influence will be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, while we say as one, **OUR FATHER...**

The most beautiful Creed is the one we pronounce in our hour of darkness. (Padre Pio)

Celebrating the Word, Resurrection Ministries of the Congregation of the Resurrection Ontario-Kentucky Province (including the former Resurrection Centre), 265 Westmount Road North, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G7. (**Celebrating the Word** was founded by Father Frank Ruetz, C.R., deceased 2012). For information: Email: provincialoffice@resurrectioncollege.ca Website: www.resurrectionists.ca The Scripture version used in this commentary is the **New Revised Standard Version** (copyrighted by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA).