

LIVING THE GOSPEL

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION – Mar 28, 2010

2616 - Prayer to Jesus is answered by him already during his ministry, through signs that anticipate the power of his death and Resurrection: Jesus hears the prayer of faith, expressed in words (the leper, Jairus, the Canaanite woman, the good thief) (Cf. *Mk* 1:40-41; 5:36; 7:29; Cf. *Lk* 23:39-43.) or in silence (the bearers of the paralytic, the woman with a hemorrhage who touches his clothes, the tears and ointment of the sinful woman). (Cf. *Mk* 25; 5:28; *Lk* 7:37-38.) The urgent request of the blind men, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" or "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" has been renewed in the traditional prayer to Jesus known as the *Jesus Prayer*: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" (*Mt* 9:27, *Mk* 10:48.) Healing infirmities or forgiving sins, Jesus always responds to a prayer offered in faith: "Your faith has made you well; go in peace."

St. Augustine wonderfully summarizes the three dimensions of Jesus' prayer: "He prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God. Therefore let us acknowledge our voice in him and his in us."

2635 Since Abraham, intercession - asking on behalf of another has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints. In intercession, he who prays looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others," even to the point of praying for those who do him harm. (Phil 2:4; cf. Acts 7:60; Lk 23:28, 34)

Sharing and Discussion

1. With whom do you most identify in these passages?
2. What contrast do you see between the disciples and Jesus?
3. What do you think it means to share in Jesus' passion?
4. With what points of his passion can you identify?

Closing Prayer

All: Compassionate God, you invite us to enter into this holiest of weeks with arms extended to receive your presence and saving mercy. Strengthen us to carry our own cross, that one day we may enter into eternal glory. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader: May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil and bring us to everlasting life.

All: Amen

Saturday 10am - 12pm at Church of The Holy Cross (room #03-06)

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Theme: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Gathering Prayer

All: Almighty, ever-living God, you have given the human race Jesus Christ our Savior as a model of humility. He fulfilled your will by becoming man giving his life on the cross. Help us to bear witness to you by following his example of suffering and make us worthy to share in his resurrection. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Exploring the Word

Gospel Reading: Luke 23:1-56

¹ Then the whole company of them arose, and brought him before Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king." ³ And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." ⁴ And Pilate said to the chief priests and the multitudes, "I find no crime in this man." ⁵ But they were urgent, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee even to this place."

⁶ When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. ⁷ And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. ⁹ So he questioned him at some length; but he made no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then, arraying him in gorgeous apparel, he sent him back to Pilate. ¹² And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

¹³ Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and after examining him before you, behold, I did not find this man guilty of any of your charges against him; ¹⁵ neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. Behold, nothing deserving death has been done by him; ¹⁶ I will therefore chastise him and release him." [¹⁷Now he was obliged to release someone for them at the festival.] ¹⁸ But they all cried out together, "Away with this man, and release to us Barabbas"— ¹⁹ a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city, and for murder. ²⁰ Pilate addressed them once more, desiring to release Jesus; ²¹ but they shouted out, "Crucify, crucify him!" ²² A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him." ²³ But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate gave sentence that their demand should be

granted. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, whom they asked for; but Jesus he delivered up to their will.

²⁶ And as they led him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus.

²⁷ And there followed him a great multitude of the people, and of women who bewailed and lamented him. ²⁸ But Jesus turning to them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!' ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' ³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁴ And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹ And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

⁴⁴ It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

⁴⁶ Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, and said, "Certainly this man was innocent!" ⁴⁸ And all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance and saw these things.

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their purpose and deed, and he was looking for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid; ⁵⁶ then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment

Gospel Notes

1-2. Jesus underwent two trials—a religious one, following the Jewish system, and a civil one, following the Roman.

In the first trial, the Jewish authorities condemned Jesus to death on religious grounds for claiming to be the Son of God; but they could not carry out the sentence because the Romans reserved to themselves the exercise of the death penalty. The Sanhedrin now arranges a new trial before Pilate in order to get the Romans to execute the sentence they themselves have already passed. Events are moving to fulfil Jesus' prophecy that he will die at the hands of the Gentiles (Lk 18:32).

and on our children!", a formula for ratifying a judicial sentence.(Mt 27:25; cf. Acts 5:28; 18:6) As the Church declared at the Second Vatican Council:

. . . [N]either all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his Passion. . . [T]he Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.(NA 4)

730 At last Jesus' hour arrives(Cf. Jn 13:1; 17:1) he commends his spirit into the Father's hands(Cf. Lk 23:46; Jn 19:30) at the very moment when by his death he conquers death, so that, "raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,"(Rom 6:4) he might immediately *give* the Holy Spirit by "breathing" on his disciples.(Cf. Jn 20:22) From this hour onward, the mission of Christ and the Spirit becomes the mission of the Church: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."(Jn 20:21; cf. Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47-48; Acts 1:8)

1011 In death, God calls man to himself. Therefore the Christian can experience a desire for death like St. Paul's: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ. "(*Phil* 1:23) He can transform his own death into an act of obedience and love towards the Father, after the example of Christ(Cf. *Lk* 23:46)

My earthly desire has been crucified; . . . there is living water in me, water that murmurs and says within me: Come to the Father.(St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Rom.*,6,1-2:*Apostolic Fathers*,II/2,223-224)

I want to see God and, in order to see him, I must die.(St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, chap. 1)
I am not dying; I am entering life.(St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Last Conversations*)

1021 Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ.(Cf. 2 Tim 1:9-10) The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul--a destiny which can be different for some and for others.(Cf. Lk 16:22; 23:43; Mt 16:26; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; Heb 9:27; 12:23)

2266 The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people's rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense. Punishment has the primary aim of redressing the disorder introduced by the offense. When it is willingly accepted by the guilty party, it assumes the value of expiation. Punishment then, in addition to defending public order and protecting people's safety, has a medicinal purpose: as far as possible, it must contribute to the correction of the guilty party.(Cf. Lk 23:40-43)

2605 When the hour had come for him to fulfill the Father's plan of love, Jesus allows a glimpse of the boundless depth of his filial prayer, not only before he freely delivered himself up ("*Abba* . . . not my will, but yours."),(*Lk* 22:42) but even in *his last words* on the Cross, where prayer and the gift of self are but one: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do";(*Lk* 23:34) "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise", "Woman, behold your son" - "Behold your mother";(*Jn* 19:26-27) "I thirst.";(*Jn* 19:28) "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?";(*Mk* 15:34; cf. Ps 22:2) "It is finished";(*Jn* 19:30) "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"(*Lk* 23:46) until the "loud cry" as he expires, giving up his spirit.(Cf. *Mk* 15:37; *Jn* 19:30b)

440 – Jesus accepted Peter's profession of faith, which acknowledged him to be the Messiah, by announcing the imminent Passion of the Son of Man. (Cf. Mt 16:16-23) He unveiled the authentic content of his messianic kingship both in the transcendent identity of the Son of Man "who came down from heaven", and in his redemptive mission as the suffering Servant: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Jn 3:13; Mt 20:28; cf. Jn 6:62; Dan 7:13; Isa 53:10-12) Hence the true meaning of his kingship is revealed only when he is raised high on the cross. (Cf. Jn 19:19-22; Lk 23:39-43.) Only after his Resurrection will Peter be able to proclaim Jesus' messianic kingship to the People of God: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:36.)

441 In the Old Testament, "*son of God*" is a title given to the angels, the Chosen People, the children of Israel, and their kings. (Cf. Dt 14:1; (LXX) 32:8; Job 1:6; Ex 4:22; Hos 2:1; 11:1; Jer 3:19; sir 36:11; Wis 18:13; 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 82:6) It signifies an adoptive sonship that establishes a relationship of particular intimacy between God and his creature. When the promised Messiah-King is called "son of God", it does not necessarily imply that he was more than human, according to the literal meaning of these texts. Those who called Jesus "son of God", as the Messiah of Israel, perhaps meant nothing more than this. (Cf. I Chr 17:13; Ps 2:7; Mt 27:54; Lk 23:47)

591 - Jesus asked the religious authorities of Jerusalem to believe in him because of the Father's works which he accomplished (Jn 10:36-38) But such an act of faith must go through a mysterious death to self, for a new "birth from above" under the influence of divine grace. (Cf. Jn 3:7; 6:44) Such a demand for conversion in the face of so surprising a fulfillment of the promises (Cf. Isa 53:1.) allows one to understand the Sanhedrin's tragic misunderstanding of Jesus: they judged that he deserved the death sentence as a blasphemer. (Cf. Mk 3:6; Mt 26:64-66) The members of the Sanhedrin were thus acting at the same time out of "ignorance" and the "hardness" of their "unbelief". (Cf. Lk 23:34; Acts 3:17-18; Mk 3:5; Rom 11:25, 20.)

596 The religious authorities in Jerusalem were not unanimous about what stance to take towards Jesus. (cf. Jn 9:16; 10:19) The Pharisees threatened to excommunicate his followers. (Cf. Jn 9:22) To those who feared that "everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation", the high priest Caiaphas replied by prophesying: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." (Jn 11:48-50) The Sanhedrin, having declared Jesus deserving of death as a blasphemer but having lost the right to put anyone to death, hands him over to the Romans, accusing him of political revolt, a charge that puts him in the same category as Barabbas who had been accused of sedition. (Cf. Mt 26:66; Jn 18:31; Lk 23:2, 19) The chief priests also threatened Pilate politically so that he would condemn Jesus to death. (Cf. Jn 19:12, 15, 21)

597 The historical complexity of Jesus' trial is apparent in the Gospel accounts. The personal sin of the participants (Judas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate) is known to God alone. Hence we cannot lay responsibility for the trial on the Jews in Jerusalem as a whole, despite the outcry of a manipulated crowd and the global reproaches contained in the apostles' calls to conversion after Pentecost. (Cf. Mk 15:11; Acts 2:23, 36; 3:13-14; 4:10; 5:30; 7:52; 10:39; 13:27-28; I Th 2:14-15) Jesus himself, in forgiving them on the cross, and Peter in following suit, both accept "the ignorance" of the Jews of Jerusalem and even of their leaders. (Cf. Lk 23:34; Acts 3:17) Still less can we extend responsibility to other Jews of different times and places, based merely on the crowd's cry: "His blood be on us

Due to the fact that the Romans were very tolerant of religious customs of subject peoples—and took no interest in them provided they did not lead to public unrest—the Jewish leaders alter the charges they bring against Jesus: from now on they accuse him of political crimes—of inciting rebellion against the Romans and of seeking to become king. And they present these charges in such a way that a verdict favourable to the accused might be interpreted in Rome as a treacherous act: "If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; every one who makes himself king sets himself against Caesar" (Jn 19:12).

2. To give their charges a veneer of credibility, they produce half-truths, taken out of context and interpreted in the worst possible light. Jesus had taught: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21; cf. note on same), and in his preaching he stated that by virtue of being the Messiah he was King as well as Prophet and Priest; but he also preached that his was a spiritual kingship and therefore he energetically rejected all the people's attempts to proclaim him king (cf. Jn 6:15).

3-4. Jesus openly confesses that he is King, but from what he says he makes quite clear the spiritual nature of this kingship (Jn 18:33-38). Pilate becomes convinced that he is guilty of no crime (Jn 18:38; 19:4) and that all the charges brought against him are groundless (Mt 27:18). However, instead of efficiently delivering judgment in favour of the accused, he temporizes; he tries to gain popularity at Jesus' expense and settles for indicating that he is convinced of his innocence—as if inviting the accusers to back off; but this only encourages them to become vociferous and complicates the situation.

By behaving in this way Pilate becomes the classic example of a compromiser: "A man, a 'gentleman', ready to compromise would condemn Jesus to death again" (Bl. J. Escriva, *The Way*, 393).

7. Herod Antipas normally went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, staying in his own palace in the centre of the city. By sending Jesus to Herod Pilate is trying to rid himself of a troublesome case and build up a friendship useful to his own political career.

8-11. Our Lord adopts a very different attitude to Herod Antipas compared with his attitude to Pilate. Herod was superstitious, sensual and adulterous. In spite of his regard for John the Baptist, he had him beheaded to keep his oath to Salome (cf. Mk 6:14-29). Now he tries to get Jesus to perform a miracle, as if Jesus were a magician putting on a show for Herod's entertainment. Jesus does not reply to his flattery. Our Lord's attitude is simple, stately and also severe. His eloquent silence is a perfect example of the way to deal with behaviour of this type. Herod reacts by dressing Jesus in a rich robe, to make fun of him.

12. Psalm 2 said this in prophecy of the Messiah: "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed." These words are now fulfilled to the letter, as the Book of the Acts points out: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27f).

17. Verse 17—"Necesse autem habebat dimittere eis per diem festum, unum" (see RSV translation below)—has not been included in the New Vulgate us 1 because it is absent from most of the better Greek manuscripts.

24-25. Jesus condemned to death and made to carry the Cross (cf. Jn 19:16-17) is devoutly contemplated by Christians in the *first and second stations* of the Way of the Cross. Pilate at last gives in to the Sanhedrin and condemns our Lord to the most

ignominious form of punishment, death by crucifixion.

It was customary for people condemned to crucifixion to be made to carry the instrument of their own death. Our Lord fulfils in his own person the prophecies of Isaiah: "By oppression and judgment he was taken away [. . .]; he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. And they made his grave with the wicked" (Is 53:8-9).

26. Christian piety contemplates this episode of the Passion in the *fifth station* of the Way of the Cross. The soldiers force Simon to help Jesus carry the Cross, not because they feel pity for our Lord, but because they realize that he is getting weaker and weaker and they are afraid he may die before reaching Calvary. According to tradition, preserved in the *third, seventh and ninth stations*, Jesus fell three times under the weight of the cross; but he got up again and lovingly embraced it once more in obedience to his heavenly Father's will, seeing in the cross the altar on which he would give his life as a propitiatory Victim for the salvation of mankind.

However, our Lord chose to be helped by Simon of Cyrene in order to show us that we—whom Simon represents—have to become co-redeemers with him. "Love for God invites us to take up the cross and feel on our own shoulders the weight of humanity. It leads us to fulfill the clear and loving plans of the Father's will in all the circumstances of our work and life" (Bl. J. Escriva, *Christ is passing by*, 97). God the Father, in his providence, gave his Son this small consolation in the midst of his terrible suffering—just as he sent an angel to comfort him in his agony in Gethsemane (Lk 22:43).

Other aspects of this scene of the Gospel are commented on in notes on Matthew 27:32 and Mark 15:21.

27-31. The piety of these women shows that Jesus had friends as well as enemies. If we bear in mind that Jewish traditions, as recorded in the Talmud, forbade wailing for people condemned to death, we will appreciate the value of these women's gesture.

"Among the people watching our Lord as he passes by are a number of women who are unable to restrain their compassion and break into tears, perhaps recalling those glorious days spent with Jesus, when everyone exclaimed in amazement: *bene omnia fecit* (Mk 7:37), he has done all things well.

"But our Lord wishes to channel their weeping towards a more supernatural motive, and he invites them to weep for sins, which are the cause of the Passion and which will draw down the rigour of divine justice: 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. . . . For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (Lk 23:28-31).

"Your sins, my sins, the sins of all men, rise up. All the evil we have done and the good that we have neglected to do. The desolate panorama of the countless crimes and iniquities which we would have committed, if he, Jesus, had not strengthened us with the light of his most loving glance.

"How little a life is for making atonement" (Bl. J. Escriva, *The Way of the Cross*, VIII).

Christian devotion also includes in the Way of the Cross a pious tradition that a woman, called Veronica (Berenice), approached Jesus and wiped his face with a linen cloth—a brave action on her part, in view of the hostility of the crowd (*sixth station*). And another station, *the fourth*, venerates Jesus' meeting with his blessed Mother on the way to Calvary, a sorrowful meeting which fulfils Simeon's prophecy to the Blessed Virgin (Lk 2:35).

On the way to Calvary the only people who give Jesus consolation are women—evidencing their bravery and religious sensitivity during this painful time in Jesus' life; whereas only one man—John—is to be seen.

In spite of his awful suffering, Jesus is mindful of the terrible times which are approaching. His words in response to the women's lament are a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem, which will come about without a few years.

The "green wood" refers to the just and innocent; the "dry wood", to the sinner, the guilty

emptying for the good of others could be so total! We pray that our compassion might increase and abound so that we have the same utter confidence in God's presence and care as did Jesus.

The first reading from Isaiah challenges us to allow the word to "rouse" us. The word that rouses us is no less than the power of innocence and compassion. As we've moved through the Lenten season we've been invited to lay aside more and more of our sinful ways, repent and change our lives, and so come to a new innocence before God and each other. The second reading reminds us that Jesus laid aside his divinity and even his life for our sake. Jesus lays down high standards for us!

Jesus' innocence conditions how he approaches others with compassion. His innocence is an invitation and challenge for us to take up our own cross and participate in self-emptying dying not just during this holiest of weeks, but during every week of our lives. The real pity of this Holy Week would be that we miss the opportunity to empty ourselves, take up our own crosses, and follow Jesus through death to new life. The real triumph of this week would be that we are roused to self-emptying, humility, obedience, mercy, and compassion that confess in our everyday lives and in all our actions that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (second reading), and thereby witness to and glorify God (passion gospel).

Living the Paschal Mystery

For most of us Holy Week unfolds like many other weeks; we still contend with work, school, preparing meals, doing laundry, cranky folks, the usual triumphs and setbacks. Palm Sunday begins an extraordinary week—a week that concentrates in a few days the ultimate meaning of our whole lives. We must slow ourselves down and make choices so that this week doesn't go by without our taking the time to enter into its meaning. We celebrate in the liturgies what

we live every day—all the dying to self that characterizes truly faithful disciples of Jesus. We are invited to proceed in innocence by being compassionate toward others. This means doing our usual tasks with joy, being kind to those cranky folks around us, meeting setbacks as paths to learning. This innocence is possible when we commend ourselves into God's hands.

Old and New Testament links

First Reading — Isaiah 50:4-7

⁴ The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary. Morning by morning he wakens, he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. ⁶ I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not my face from shame and spitting. ⁷ For the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been confounded; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame...

Second Reading — Philippians 2:6-11

...⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Catechism of The Catholic Church

49. We should note here the presence of a number of women, some of whose names have been recorded by St Matthew (27:56) and St Mark (15:40-41)— Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Joseph, and Salome. The soldiers would not have allowed them approach the Cross while Jesus was alive; but the women would have waited, watching from a distance, and then come up close to it, and unashamedly stood there (cf. Jn 19:25), impelled by their deep love for Jesus Christ. "Woman is stronger than man, and more faithful, in the hour of suffering: Mary of Magdala and Mary Cleophas and Salome! With a group of valiant women like these, closely united to our Lady of Sorrows, what work for souls could be done **in** the world!" (Bl. J. Escrivid, *The Way*, 982).

50-54. St John's Gospel tells us that "Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight" (Jn 19:39). "Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus visit Jesus privately when things are normal and also in the hour of triumph. But they are courageous in the face of authority, declaring their love for Christ *audacter*, boldly, in the hour of cowardice. Learn from them" (*The Way*, 841).

"With them I too will go up to the foot of the Cross; I will press my arms tightly round the cold Body, the corpse of Christ, with the fire of my love ...; I will unnailed it, with my reparation and mortifications ; I will wrap it in the new winding-sheet of my clean life, and I will bury it in the living rock of my breast, where no one can tear it away from me, and there, Lord, take your rest!

"Were the whole world to abandon you and to scorn you . . . , *serviam!* , I will serve you, Lord" (*The Way of the Cross, XIV* , 1).

Joseph of Arimathea's and Nicodemus' love for our Lord leads them to ignore the dangers—the hatred of their colleagues in the Sanhedrin, possible reprisals from fanatics. They show the body of Jesus utmost reverence, doing everything required for its pious burial and thereby giving an example to every disciple of Christ who should be ready to risk honour, position and wealth for love for his Lord. In the *thirteenth and fourteenth stations of the Cross* Christian piety contemplates the descent from the Cross, and the noble actions of these two men, whose respect God chose to reward by inscribing their names in the Gospel text (cf. note-on Matthew 15:43-46).

55-56. These holy women—who were familiar with the material poverty of our Lord when he was born in Bethlehem, and in the course of his public ministry and on the cross—do not skimp in showing veneration for the body of the Lord. When the Christian people generously endow eucharistic worship they are simply showing that they have learned well the lesson taught by these first disciples.

Gospel Reflection

This Sunday is unusual for so many reasons: we begin the holiest of Christian weeks; we wear red vestments even before we put away for another year the red- violet ones of Lent; we fill the sparse environment of Lent with fresh greens; we have two gospel proclamations; we carry palms in procession; we proclaim a passion account. But perhaps most unusual is that in Luke's passion account Jesus hands himself over, not to his executioners, but to his Father: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." This is the utter confidence of an innocent man.

On five occasions in Luke's passion account Jesus is declared innocent (three times by Pilate, once by the Good Thief, once by the centurion at the foot of the cross). Jesus died, not because of guilt, but because of his infinitely compassionate love for us. Even in the midst of great suffering, he extended his compassion to others (to the servant whose ear was cut off, to the weeping women, to the Good Thief). His compassion was so total that he willingly emptied himself "to the point of death" (second reading). We enter into this holiest week of the year, praying that our self-

one. Jesus, the Son of God, is the only truly just and innocent man.

33. The crucifixion is contemplated in the *eleventh station* of the Way of the Cross. The soldiers nail Jesus' hands and feet to the beams. The purpose of this punishment is to bring on a slow death, involving maximum suffering: "Now they are crucifying our Lord, and with him two thieves, one on his right and one on his left. Meanwhile, Jesus says: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Lk 23:34).

"It is Love that has brought Jesus to Calvary. And once on the Cross, all his gestures and all his words are of love, a love both calm and strong.

"With a gesture befitting an Eternal Priest, without father or mother, without lineage (cf. Heb 7:3), he opens his arms to the whole human race.

"With the hammerblows with which Jesus is being nailed, there resound the prophetic words of Holy Scripture: 'They have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones, and they stare and gloat over me' (Ps 21:17-18).

"My people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!" (Mic 6:3).

"And we, our souls rent with sorrow, say to Jesus in all sincerity: I am yours and I give my whole self to you; gladly do I nail myself to the Cross, ready to be in the crossroads of this world a soul dedicated to you, to your glory, to the work of Redemption, the co-redemption of the whole human race" (Bl. J. Escrivid, *The Way of the Cross, XI*).

"It is good for us to try to understand better the meaning of Christ's death. We must get beyond external appearances and clichés [. . .]. Let us, above all, come close to Jesus in his death and to his cross which stands out in silhouette above the summit of Golgotha. But we must approach him sincerely and with the interior recollection that is a sign of Christian maturity. The divine and human events of the Passion will then pierce our soul as words spoken to us by God to uncover the secrets of our heart and show us what he expects of our lives" (Bl. J. Escriva, *Christ is passing by*, 101).

Jesus' terrible suffering on the cross clearly shows the gravity of the sins of men, of my sin. This gravity is measured by the infinite greatness and honour of God, the offended one. God, who is infinitely merciful and at the same time infinitely just, exercised both these attributes: his infinite justice required an infinite reparation, of which mere man was incapable; his infinite mercy found the solution: the second person of the Trinity, taking on human nature, becoming truly man while not ceasing to be true God, suffered the punishment which was man's due. In this way, by being represented in Jesus' sacred humanity, men would be able to make sufficient atonement to God's justice. No words can express God's love for us as manifested on the cross. A living faith in the mystery of our Redemption will lead us to respond with gratitude and love: "We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ redeemed us by the sacrifice on the Cross from original sin and from all those personal sins to which we confess, so that the truth of the Apostle's words is vindicated that where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Paul VI, *Creed of the People of God*, 17).

34. Jesus addresses the Father in a tone of supplication (cf. Heb 5:7). We can distinguish two parts in his prayer—his simple request: "Father, forgive them," and the excuse he offers, "for they know not what they do." We can see him as one who practises what he preaches (cf. Acts 1:1) and as a model whom we should imitate. He had taught us that we have a duty to forgive offences (cf. Mt 6:12-15; 18:21-35), and even to love our enemies (cf. Mt 5:44-45; Rom 12:14, 20), because he had come into the world to offer himself as a victim "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28; cf. Eph 1:7; Col 1:4) and to enable us to obtain pardon.

The excuse which Jesus offers may at first take us by surprise: for they know not what they do." His love, his perfect mercy and justice make maximum allowance for factors rendering "oil- sins less heinous. It is quite clear that the people directly responsible were perfectly aware that they were condemning an innocent person to death, that they were guilty of homicide; but they did not realize, in these moments of passion, that they were also

committing deicide. This is what St Peter means when he tells the Jews, encouraging them to repent, that they acted "in ignorance" (Acts 3:17), and St Paul adds that if they had understood the hidden wisdom of God "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8). Jesus in his mercy excuses them on the grounds of ignorance.

In any sinful action there are always areas of darkness, passion, blindness, which without taking away a person's freedom and responsibility do enable him to carry out an evil action through being attracted by apparently good aspects which that action involves; and this does lessen the evil that we do.

Christ teaches us to forgive those who offend us and to look for excuses for them, thereby leaving open the door to the hope of their pardon and repentance; only God can be the ultimate judge of men. This heroic charity was practised by Christians from the very beginning. Thus, the first martyr, St Stephen, dies begging God to pardon his executioners (Acts 7:60). "Force yourself, if necessary, always to forgive those who offend you, from the very first moment. For the greatest injury or offence that you can suffer from them is as nothing compared with what God has pardoned you" (Bl. J. Escriva, *The Way*, 452).

35-37. The Roman governor's soldiers join the Jewish people and their leaders in mocking Jesus; thus, everyone—Jews and Gentiles—contributed to making Christ's passion even more bitter. But we should not forget that we too make a mockery of our Lord every time we fall into sin or fail to respond sufficiently to grace. This is why St Paul says that those who sin "crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt" (Heb 6:6).

39-43. The episode of the two thieves invites us to admire the designs of divine providence, of grace and human freedom. Both thieves are in the same position—in the presence of the Eternal High Priest as he offers himself in sacrifice for them and for all mankind. One of them hardens his heart, despairs and blasphemes, while the other repents, prays with confidence to Christ and is promised immediate salvation. "The Lord," St Ambrose comments, "always grants more than one asks: the thief only asked him to remember him, but the Lord says to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' Life consists in dwelling with Jesus Christ, and where Jesus Christ is there is his Kingdom" (*Expositio Evangelii sec. Lucam, in loc.*). "It is one thing for man to judge someone he does not know; another, for God, who can see into a person's conscience. Among men, confession is followed by punishment; whereas confession to God is followed by salvation" (St John Chrysostom, *De Cruce et latrone*).

While we make our way through life, we all sin, but we can all repent also. God is always waiting for us with his arms wide open, ready to forgive us. Therefore, no one should despair: everyone should try to have a strong hope in God's mercy. But no one may presume that he will be saved, for none of us can be absolutely certain of our final perseverance (cf. Council of Trent, *De justificatione*, can. 16). This relative uncertainty is a spur God gives us to be ever vigilant; this vigilance in turn helps us progress in the work of our sanctification as Christians.

42. "Many times have I repeated that verse of the eucharistic hymn: *Pew quod petivit latro poenitens*, and it always fills me with emotion: to ask like the penitent thief did! He recognized that he himself deserved that awful punishment. . . . And with a word he stole Christ's heart and 'opened up for himself' the gates of heaven" (Bl. J. Escriva, *The Way of the Cross*, XII, 4).

43. In responding to the good thief, Jesus reveals that he is God, for he has power over man's eternal destiny; and he also shows that he is infinitely merciful and does not reject the soul who sincerely repents. Similarly by these words Jesus reveals to us a basic truth of faith: "We believe in eternal life. We believe that the souls of all those who die in the grace of Christ—whether they must still make expiation in the fire of purgatory, or whether from the moment they leave their bodies they are received by Jesus Christ into Paradise like the good thief—go to form that People of God which succeeds death, death which will be totally destroyed on the day of the Resurrection

when these souls are reunited with their bodies" (Paul VI, *Creed of the People of God*, 28).

45. The darkening of the sun is a sign of the magnitude and gravity of the Lord's Death (cf. note on Mk 15:33). The tearing of the curtain of the temple shows the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant, sealed in the blood of Christ (cf. note on Mk 15:38).

46. The Way of the Cross contemplates Jesus' death as the *twelfth station*. Christ's life is totally influenced by the fact that he is the only Son of the Father: "I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (Jn 16:28). All along, his only desire was to do the Will of him who sent him (cf. Jn 4:34), who, as Christ himself says, "is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29).

At this, the climax of his life on earth, when he is apparently left totally on his own, Christ makes an act of supreme confidence, throws himself into his Father's arms, and freely gives up his life. He was not forced to die nor did he die against his will; he died because he wanted to die. "It was the peculiar privilege of Christ the Lord to have died when he himself decreed to die, and to have died not so much by external violence as by internal assent. Not only his death, but also its time and place, were ordained by him. For thus Isaiah wrote: 'He was offered because it was his own will' (Is 53:7). The Lord, before his Passion, declared the same of himself, 'I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again' (Jn 10:170" (*St Pius V Catechism*, I, 6, 7).

"We know", says St Paul, "that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed and might no longer be enslaved to sin. . . . The death he died he died to sin, once and for all you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:6, 10). Therefore, Vatican II explains, "This work of redeeming mankind [. . .] Christ the Lord achieved principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed Passion, Resurrection from the dead, and glorious Ascension, whereby 'dying, he destroyed our death, and rising, he restored our life.' For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the Cross that there came forth 'the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5).

47. The three Synoptic Gospels all report the profound reaction of the centurion, the reaction of an upright man who, helped by grace, studies these events with an openness to the mystery of the supernatural. The parallel accounts in Matthew 27:54 and Mark 15:39 show more clearly that the centurion recognized the divinity of Jesus Christ. See the note on Matthew 15:39.

48. Jesus' redemptive death on the cross immediately begins to draw people towards God by way of repentance: as he made his way to Calvary there was the probable conversion of Simon of Cyrene and the lamentations of the women of Jerusalem; at the cross, the repentance of the good thief, the effect of grace on the Roman centurion, and the compunction felt by the crowd reported in this verse. Jesus had prophesied, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12:32). This prophecy begins to come true on Golgotha, and it will continue to be fulfilled until the end of time.

"On the Cross hangs our Lord's—now lifeless—body. The people, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts (Lk 23:48).

"Now that you have repented, promise Jesus that, with his help, you will not crucify him again. Say it with faith. Repeat, over and over again: I will love you, my God, because ever since you were born, ever since you were a child, you abandoned yourself in my arms, defenceless, trusting in my loyalty" (Bl. J. Escriva, *The Way of the Cross*, XII, 5).