

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

Gospel: Mark 15: 1-39

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?" He answered him, "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 he 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!"

REFLECTION 1:

DECISION IN JERUSALEM

Jesus' whole existence was for the sake of the reign of God. Jesus was working towards the restoration of Israel, so as to create a space where God's reign could thrive. His entrance into the capital city on a

young donkey was one of those final efforts. It was well planned in detail beforehand and not just a casual event. As he enters Jerusalem, many festal pilgrims who are also on the road to the capital accompany Jesus. Large groups of pilgrims were usually greeted in Jerusalem with the words 'blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord', at the moment when they entered the space before the Temple area. Here this welcoming cry has been transformed into an acclamation addressed exclusively to Jesus and in addition the shout now comes from the pilgrims themselves.

This is nothing less than a royal entrance. The scene in Luke describes the entry of a king into his city, the arrival of the messiah on Zion. In a sense Jesus is taking possession of his city. Passages in the Old Testament spoke of the mount, a donkey as the one destined for the messiah, 'Lo, your king comes to you, humble and riding on a donkey' (Zech. 9:9). Jesus rides not on a parade horse, but on a donkey, the beast of the poor. He is the longed-for king in whom God is well pleased. Ancient cities received a royal ruler with branches and garments spread on the road and 'hosanna' (originally a plea for help) had now become a cry of homage and rejoicing. Jesus was surrounded by excited festal pilgrims, some from Galilee who had seen his miracles – most recently the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus in Jericho.

Nowhere in the Gospel accounts is there the slightest indication that Jesus distanced himself from the acclamations of the crowd around him. He wanted to come to the city as a poor unarmed king, the messiah of peace and the one who proclaimed the reign of God. Jesus read the Bible with profound sensibility of what is essential, being extremely reticent about using the word 'messiah'. The concept could all too easily be misunderstood in a political sense while Jesus would have understood it in a deeper way than many of those who were shouting it. The solemn entrance into the city was connected with his understanding of the reign of God that was breaking out. It had been proclaimed everywhere, but especially in Jerusalem – not only proclaimed but made present in a sign by Jesus as representative of the reign of God. He was aware that everything would be decided in Jerusalem. A confrontation was imminent. This was the centre of Israel and there the people of God gathered around the Temple for the greatest feast of the year. There at the Passover feast all Israel was represented and the knowledge of the reign of God must be as public as possible. We now enter with Jesus in spirit into the city of Jerusalem on his sorrowful journey to Golgotha. Palm Sunday was the calm before the storm.

REFLECTION 2:

LUKE'S PASSION NARRATIVE

Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem has many historical parallels in which public acclaim precedes tragedy and violence. Take for instance that famous speech of Martin Luther King in Washington in 1963 where he proclaimed, 'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed; we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal'. Yet, just months after, President John F Kennedy was dead and within five years, Martin Luther King was also murdered.

In an attempt to help other believers enter into the mind of Christ, the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have told their story. It was their hope that believers could move beyond logic to understand the love that motivated Jesus – to be guided by this great mystery.

St. Luke, whose account of the passion we read today, had his own insights and concerns in the telling of Jesus' passion. Luke affirmed the Lord's presence repeatedly. Only in Luke does Pilate issue a

verdict of innocence. In the Lucan version alone, the Centurion declares, 'Surely this was an innocent man!' Even the criminal crucified with Jesus attests, 'This man has done nothing wrong'. Luke showed Jesus to be the suffering servant, dying shamefully, yet in the end vindicated by God through his resurrection.

Another quality of the Lucan Passion account is that it was intended to call believers to pray the words of Jesus on the cross and to become participants in the ordeal and not mere spectators. In a departure from the other Evangelists, Luke specified that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross behind Jesus and so brings to life the statement of Jesus 'Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple'.

Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had stressed that discipleship involved following him daily. Guided by this message, Jesus' disciples continue to participate in the saving mystery.