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The beginning and the end of Jesus' life are the times most prominently portrayed in Christian art. While we may not think about it often, each depiction, all the nativity scenes, sets of Stations of the Cross and images of the Last Supper have great power to communicate an implicit theology, one that, like our hymns, subtly forms our spirituality and thus our way of living our faith.

Through the ages, Leonardo da Vinci and his colleagues have shaped our religious imagination, telling us, among other things, exactly who was at the Last Supper. They hardly ever deviate from showing only Jesus and the Apostles — almost never depicting the women who accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem and witnessed his crucifixion and burial. (Remember, women were at the table in the early Christian celebrations of the Lord's Supper and we have no evidence that they were excluded from Jesus' table.)

There is a little more breadth in representations of the Passion. We have graphic paintings and sculptures emphasizing physical suffering, Jesus' great loneliness, apocalyptic cataclysms and even portrayals of a victorious, priestly Christ. Often the disciples who stood at a distance or at the foot of the cross — almost always pictured as in John's Gospel, portraying the beloved disciple as more prominent than

the women.

What if we would turn to Isaiah and Paul instead of allowing Mel Gibson and Leonardo to be our primary interpreters for the events of this Holy Week? We can begin by trying to understand Jesus as the Suffering Servant of God. In today's passage, the third of the servant songs, Isaiah depicts a servant-disciple, a prophet and more. As a disciple, his every day begins with obedient listening; he is in intimate communion with God, sharing God's own heart. Because he is a prophet, the rest of his day is spent in speaking God's word to the weary, or as Isaiah says in another place, giving hope to those who walk in the shadow of death.

More than any other prophet, Isaiah's servant submits to suffering, accepting it without complaint. The difference between Jeremiah who loudly lamented his suffering and the one who gave his back to those who beat him demonstrates the distinction between a Jeremiah who, even knowing what it costs, does what the Master asks, and the suffering servant whose communion with God is so profound that he understands the rejection he suffers as a rejection of God and believes that God shares that rejection with him. There is no complaint because they are undergoing it together. Paul intensifies this interpretation of Jesus by giving us the hymn of Philippians 2. This depicts Jesus as the image of the self-emptying God, the God for whom no sacrifice is too great on behalf of beloved humanity.

The key difference in these interpretation is whether we conceive of Jesus as face to face with God, a servant sent on God's behalf, or as the son who flows from the heart of God, as we say in the creed, God from God, light from light. When we interpret Jesus' passion through the lens that understands it as divine self-giving, thoughts of "paying for sin" fade along with every hint that God could have anything to do with violence. Jesus brings home that idea when one of his followers cuts off somebody's ear. Jesus had taught his followers to contradict coercion with prophetic action by turning the other cheek; he had taught that God has nothing to do with vengeance but sends rain on the just and unjust. When we allow Isaiah and Paul and Jesus' own words to interpret his passion, we get the picture of Jesus as the expression of God's unfailing love, a love rejected but never overcome.

Entering into this holiest week of our year, Matthew, Paul and Isaiah invite us to look again at Jesus and to see him through their eyes. As we grasp the idea that Jesus was both victimized and invincible, we understand more fully how he was truly the revelation of God's way of being.

If we believe in Jesus as the revelation of God's unceasing love, our own notions of sin and punishment and forgiveness will begin to mirror God's mercy. Then our communal life will be capable of offering the world what it most needs: a living image of Jesus, the revelation of God's great love.

### **ISAIAH 50:4-7**

In four verses of this servant song the speaker explains who he is through God's gifts to him, the response his ministry received and his self-understanding in the light of all of that.

First of all, the servant in Isaiah is technically more a disciple than a servant. That comes out particularly in the fact that "morning after morning" God instructs him. This is not just a one-time call; the servant is in a relationship in which he attends daily to what God calls forth. His relationship with God is *the* defining factor of his life. In that respect, the passage puts particular emphasis on the title "the Lord God," underlining the fact that his call comes directly from the sovereign God of the universe.

The servant recognizes that God has given him the gift of prophetic speech, a gift whose only purpose is to rouse the weary. Even though the passage gives us no explanation of who they are, the context of the disciple's life shows that he knows first-hand the weariness that comes from offering a message that incites rejection and persecution.

A phrase that's easy to pass over is "I did not rebel." Commentators will point out how unusual that response is among the prophets. Jonah is the outstanding example of fleeing God's command, but Jeremiah and Moses were also more than mildly reluctant to take on their task. Perhaps Isaiah who offered himself as God's messenger avoided rebellion, but he and the servant described here are more precursors of Jesus than typical of their scriptural colleagues.

When we read verse 6 we come face-to-face with the problem of the suffering of the just one. But Scripture tells us that rejection is the lot of the prophets. The task of the prophet is to proclaim God's will in a sinful world, and that's a task generally appreciated only by those who suffer under the rule of injustice. Those who profit from injustice usually have at hand the power to maintain their privilege which typically includes the ability to persecute or eliminate those who contradict them. If

there is anything unanticipated in the situation of this servant it is that he submitted to the abuse. The simplest rationale for that is proclaimed even today by the prophets of non-violence: No one is converted by the use of force; and, retaliation in kind ultimately legitimizes the violence perpetrated. A prophet presents alternatives to coercion, sometimes as simple as turning the other cheek.

Finally, the servant/disciple/prophet proclaims that in spite of rejection, he finds his help in God. He clearly knows that God will not rescue him from suffering, but he lives in the conviction that the suffering he undergoes is not a sign of God's abandonment. In spite of what the world may think, in spite of all he goes through, he redefines success by proclaiming that he will not be put to shame.

### **PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11**

Today's second reading is generally recognized as a hymn honoring Christ. In introducing it, Paul tells his community that the attitude of Christ praised in the hymn is the attitude they need to cultivate, especially in relation to one another. While we, and perhaps they, can appreciate the beauty of the work, if we delve into its message, it is shockingly iconoclastic and exceptionally challenging.

Much of our normal interpretation of the entire hymn hangs on the opening phrase, "Christ Jesus, *though* he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped." The Greek New Testament does not have the word "though;" it is added to help the interpreter. But it leads to an interpretation that may not be correct. The New International Version translation reads "Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God ..." When we remove the interpretative word "though," the meaning of the passage changes dramatically. Without the added "though," the passage seems to say that *because* Christ was in the form of God he did not grasp. Now Christ's refusal to grasp at status is understood as a divine characteristic rather than a departure from the divine way of being. This makes everything else the hymn attributes to Christ a revelation of divinity rather than a deviation from godliness.

Understood this way, the hymn overturns typical conceptions of divine power. It proclaims that divinity is manifested in self-emptying, in serving, in taking on the condition of the beloved. In this sense, the hymn echoes Johannine Christology which sees the raising up of Jesus on the cross as his glorification, his most profound revelation and vivid expression of what it means to be Son of God. While such a

conception may feel dubious at first, it is surely one that can be affirmed through the doctrine of the Trinity, a triune community of love and mutual self-giving.

From this vantage point we can understand that Jesus' obedience on the cross does not distance him from the Father, but manifests the depth of their union. Jesus expresses in history what God is eternally: nothing other than self-giving love.

This understanding of the message sheds new light on the statement that "because of this, God greatly exalted him." Referring to God's exaltation of Jesus in the resurrection, this interprets the resurrection as God's absolute "Yes" to how Jesus revealed the true nature of divinity through his life and death. Because of that, every knee must bend and every tongue proclaim that Jesus is the revelation of the glory of God.

Did the early Christian community understand what a radical song they were singing in this hymn? Can we join with Paul in the desire to cultivate this attitude of Christ in our own lives? Paul believes that it is possible. He says so explicitly in his introduction to this hymn when he says "Have among yourselves the same attitude *that is also yours* in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

May it be so.

### **MATTHEW 21:1 - 11; 26:14 - 27:66**

Today we listen to Matthew's passion account from the entry into Jerusalem through Jesus' death on the cross. We begin with the first of the two solemn liturgical processions of our week and the Gospel account of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

There is a strange correlation between the entrance into Jerusalem and the preparations for the sharing of the Passover supper. In both cases, Jesus seems to know who in the area is ready to provide him with what he needs. The uncanny availability of just what was needed, a unique pair of circumstances in the Gospel accounts, underlines the sense of divine providence in all that is about to take place. As always, it is divine providence with human collaboration.

According to Matthew, the procession with Jesus was reminiscent of Solomon's entry into Jerusalem to receive the crown of his father, David. Matthew refers specifically to two other passages: Zechariah 9:9 and Isaiah 62:11, both of which announce the

triumphal arrival of the savior. More importantly, the people around join in the celebration, doing Jesus honor by spreading their cloaks and waving palms while they sang psalms and called out “Hosanna” or “Son of David! Save us!”

In the Liturgy of the Word, we hear the narrative at the heart of Christian faith, the shocking story of Jesus’ purposeful and fully conscious entry into the drama that would end with his crucifixion and resurrection. It begins with the account of Judas’ preparation for betrayal contrasted with Jesus’ preparation for the supper at which he would ritualize the total self-gift he was about to act out with his passion and death.

Western art has fixed interpretations of the Last Supper more definitively in the Christian imagination than thousands of theological tomes or even the Gospels themselves. A prime example of our stereotypically fixed, non-scripturally based understanding has to do with the participants at the supper. Matthew specifies that the “disciples” asked Jesus about the meal and prepared it. It is only when Jesus reclines that the “twelve” are mentioned, indicating that while they were at that table with him there remains the probability that other disciples were there as well — perhaps at the same table, perhaps at others. Obviously, considering that possibility, it would be clear that women could have been among them, most especially those women whom Matthew named as the only disciples present at the crucifixion, those who witnessed the burial and discovered the empty tomb on the third day.

It is worth being alert to how our images of Jesus’ last days have been conditioned by non-scriptural art, hymns and prayers because those depictions have a strong, often culturally biased and potentially destructive, influence on our spirituality. Today’s liturgy offers an effective antidote to that influence if only we take all of our readings seriously and remember that God’s servant suffers not to pay for sin, but because God’s love never fails in spite of human rejection. Jesus came to transform our image of God, revealing the merciful, unrelenting lover of humanity. Now is the time to allow that to happen.

## **Planning: Palm Sunday**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Passion (Palm) Sunday begins what is traditionally called Holy Week. The week really consists of two distinct parts: Sunday through Thursday afternoon are still days of Lent. Thursday evening through Sunday evening comprise the Triduum or the Great Three Days. Speaking of Holy Week tends to obscure this shift from one season to another. Still, it is a week in the calendar, and Triduum is certainly linked to Lent, since Lent prepares us for these holy days.

For presiders, preachers and planners, however, this week might be called “hectic week.” No other week of the year makes as many demands on our time and energy as this one does.

The challenge for all those charged with preparing these central liturgies of the year is finding a way to participate in them prayerfully while still attending to the myriad details that require our attention. The liturgy is intended to bring us into an encounter with God’s presence and grace. That is as important for the ministers as it is for the rest of the assembly.

Give some thought to how you can enter prayerfully into each of the liturgies of this week. A good start would be to take a few minutes sometime before each liturgy begins to remember the presence of God and to reflect on the meaning of the day. What does this liturgy mean to you? What part of it usually touches you the most deeply? What do you want God to do for you or within you as the community celebrates this liturgy? Is your heart open to ways that God might surprise you?

The difficulty, of course, is figuring out when to steal those few minutes for prayer. Can you claim a time of quiet and undistracted prayer when you first arrive at church? Is there a place you can go that is hidden and out of the way? Does it require arriving a bit earlier than you normally would, so that you can calmly enter into God’s presence even for a few moments? Maybe you need to take the time at home before you leave for church. Can you coax your spouse, housemates or family to join with you in a few minutes of quiet prayer?

If you need a little help to focus, look to the texts of the liturgy itself. Almost any text in these liturgies could provide a focus for your prayer. Read and reflect on one of the readings. Slowly pray the opening collect for the liturgy. Sing (aloud or silently) the refrain for the responsorial psalm. Picture one of the unique rituals of this week: the washing of feet, the veneration of the cross, the Easter fire and paschal candle, or the baptism of new members at the Vigil. Focusing on the elements of the liturgy will help you be more aware of God’s presence when the liturgy itself is celebrated.

## **Prayers: Palm Sunday**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

## **Introduction**

Today we enter into the heart of the Gospel and our faith. Again, we look at the question of life and death, with a focus on Jesus' suffering and death. We are always looking forward, but there is no escaping death — and for most of us — some level of suffering in life. How do we deal with, accept and relate to this reality?

Fortunately, we have a model in Jesus. Will the model inspire or repel us? Or, in a world of “reality” in the media, will it have any impact at all?

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you willingly entered into suffering and death for us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you showed us the extent of your great love: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to follow you on the painful journey: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray, my brothers and sisters, for ourselves and for all who must walk on the path of suffering and death.

**Minister** For the church, that it may stand in solidarity with the suffering and dying of the whole human race ... we pray,

- For those who fear suffering and death, especially those who are alone ... we pray
- For all Christians and believers of every religious tradition who suffer because of their faith ... we pray,
- For those who seek to embrace Christianity without suffering ... we pray,
- For those who overlook and exploit the suffering of others to enhance their own lives ... we pray,
- For those who cannot celebrate this Holy Week in their churches because of war, illness, poverty or the need to work ... we pray,
- For those dying and grieving within this community ... we pray,

**Presider** God of the abandoned: We come before you, remembering what it is like to feel lost and alone. During this sacred week commemorating Christ's passion and death, we pray for the courage to walk that same path. Help us remember Jesus accompanies us. Amen



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