

HOMILY FOR THE PALM SUNDAY

Sunday, 28 March 2021

Welcome to Holy Week everyone. Today is Palm Sunday. We begin with the blessing of the palms outside the church and the reenactment of the joyous entry of the Lord into Jerusalem. Once inside the church (but not this year because of the pandemic), the mood shifts dramatically. We do a choral reading of Matthew's Passion. (A reading of John's Passion will come on Good Friday).

Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

Lectionary: 37 and 38

At the Procession with Palms – Gospel Mk 11:1-10

When Jesus and his disciples drew near to Jerusalem,
to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives,
he sent two of his disciples and said to them,
“Go into the village opposite you,
and immediately on entering it,
you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat.
Untie it and bring it here.
If anyone should say to you,
‘Why are you doing this?’ reply,
‘The Master has need of it
and will send it back here at once.’”
So they went off
and found a colt tethered at a gate outside on the street,
and they untied it.
Some of the bystanders said to them,
“What are you doing, untying the colt?”
They answered them just as Jesus had told them to,
and they permitted them to do it.
So they brought the colt to Jesus
and put their cloaks over it.
And he sat on it.
Many people spread their cloaks on the road,
and others spread leafy branches

that they had cut from the fields.

Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out:

“Hosanna!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come!

Hosanna in the highest!”

OR: [Jn 12:12-16](#)

When the great crowd that had come to the feast heard

that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem,

they took palm branches and went out to meet him, and cried out:

“Hosanna!

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,
the king of Israel.”

Jesus found an ass and sat upon it, as is written:

Fear no more, O daughter Zion;

see, your king comes, seated upon an ass's colt.

His disciples did not understand this at first,

but when Jesus had been glorified

they remembered that these things were written about him

and that they had done this for him.

At the Mass - Reading I [Is 50:4-7](#)

The Lord GOD has given me

a well-trained tongue,

that I might know how to speak to the weary

a word that will rouse them.

Morning after morning

he opens my ear that I may hear;

and I have not rebelled,

have not turned back.

I gave my back to those who beat me,

my cheeks to those who plucked my beard;

my face I did not shield

from buffets and spitting.

The Lord GOD is my help,

therefore I am not disgraced;

I have set my face like flint,

knowing that I shall not be put to shame.

Responsorial Psalm [22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24](#)

R. (2a) My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

All who see me scoff at me;

they mock me with parted lips, they wag their heads:
“He relied on the LORD; let him deliver him,
let him rescue him, if he loves him.”
R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
Indeed, many dogs surround me,
a pack of evildoers closes in upon me;
They have pierced my hands and my feet;
I can count all my bones.
R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
They divide my garments among them,
and for my vesture they cast lots.
But you, O LORD, be not far from me;
O my help, hasten to aid me.
R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
I will proclaim your name to my brethren;
in the midst of the assembly I will praise you:
“You who fear the LORD, praise him;
all you descendants of Jacob, give glory to him;
revere him, all you descendants of Israel!”
R. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Reading II Phil 2:6-11

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
something to be grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness;
and found human in appearance,
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Because of this, God greatly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name
which is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Verse before the Gospel Phil 2:8-9

Christ became obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
Because of this, God greatly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name which is above every name.

Gospel Mk 14:1—15:47

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread
were to take place in two days' time.
So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way
to arrest him by treachery and put him to death.
They said, "Not during the festival,
for fear that there may be a riot among the people."
When he was in Bethany reclining at table
in the house of Simon the leper,
a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil,
costly genuine spikenard.
She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head.
There were some who were indignant.
"Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil?
It could have been sold for more than three hundred days' wages
and the money given to the poor."
They were infuriated with her.
Jesus said, "Let her alone.
Why do you make trouble for her?
She has done a good thing for me.
The poor you will always have with you,
and whenever you wish you can do good to them,
but you will not always have me.
She has done what she could.
She has anticipated anointing my body for burial.
Amen, I say to you,
wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world,
what she has done will be told in memory of her."
Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve,
went off to the chief priests to hand him over to them.
When they heard him they were pleased and promised to pay him money.
Then he looked for an opportunity to hand him over.
On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread,
when they sacrificed the Passover lamb,
his disciples said to him,
"Where do you want us to go
and prepare for you to eat the Passover?"

He sent two of his disciples and said to them,
“Go into the city and a man will meet you,
carrying a jar of water.

Follow him.

Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house,

‘The Teacher says, “Where is my guest room
where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”’

Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready.

Make the preparations for us there.”

The disciples then went off, entered the city,

and found it just as he had told them;

and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he came with the Twelve.

And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said,

“Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me,
one who is eating with me.”

They began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one,

“Surely it is not I?”

He said to them,

“One of the Twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish.

For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him,

but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed.

It would be better for that man if he had never been born.”

While they were eating,

he took bread, said the blessing,

broke it, and gave it to them, and said,

“Take it; this is my body.”

Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them,

and they all drank from it.

He said to them,

“This is my blood of the covenant,

which will be shed for many.

Amen, I say to you,

I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine

until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

Then, after singing a hymn,

they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Then Jesus said to them,

“All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written:

I will strike the shepherd,

and the sheep will be dispersed.

But after I have been raised up,

I shall go before you to Galilee.”

Peter said to him,

“Even though all should have their faith shaken,
mine will not be.”
Then Jesus said to him,
“Amen, I say to you,
this very night before the cock crows twice
you will deny me three times.”
But he vehemently replied,
“Even though I should have to die with you,
I will not deny you.”
And they all spoke similarly.
Then they came to a place named Gethsemane,
and he said to his disciples,
“Sit here while I pray.”
He took with him Peter, James, and John,
and began to be troubled and distressed.
Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death.
Remain here and keep watch.”
He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed
that if it were possible the hour might pass by him;
he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you.
Take this cup away from me,
but not what I will but what you will.”
When he returned he found them asleep.
He said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep?
Could you not keep watch for one hour?
Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test.
The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”
Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing.
Then he returned once more and found them asleep,
for they could not keep their eyes open
and did not know what to answer him.
He returned a third time and said to them,
“Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?
It is enough. The hour has come.
Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners.
Get up, let us go.
See, my betrayer is at hand.”
Then, while he was still speaking,
Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived,
accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs
who had come from the chief priests,
the scribes, and the elders.
His betrayer had arranged a signal with them, saying,
“The man I shall kiss is the one;

arrest him and lead him away securely.”
He came and immediately went over to him and said,
“Rabbi.” And he kissed him.
At this they laid hands on him and arrested him.
One of the bystanders drew his sword,
struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off his ear.
Jesus said to them in reply,
“Have you come out as against a robber,
with swords and clubs, to seize me?
Day after day I was with you teaching in the temple area,
yet you did not arrest me;
but that the Scriptures may be fulfilled.”
And they all left him and fled.
Now a young man followed him
wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body.
They seized him,
but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked.
They led Jesus away to the high priest,
and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together.
Peter followed him at a distance into the high priest’s courtyard
and was seated with the guards, warming himself at the fire.
The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin
kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus
in order to put him to death, but they found none.
Many gave false witness against him,
but their testimony did not agree.
Some took the stand and testified falsely against him,
alleging, “We heard him say,
‘I will destroy this temple made with hands
and within three days I will build another
not made with hands.’”
Even so their testimony did not agree.
The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus,
saying, “Have you no answer?
What are these men testifying against you?”
But he was silent and answered nothing.
Again the high priest asked him and said to him,
“Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?”
Then Jesus answered, “I am;
and ‘you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of the Power
and coming with the clouds of heaven.’”
At that the high priest tore his garments and said,
“What further need have we of witnesses?

You have heard the blasphemy.
What do you think?"
They all condemned him as deserving to die.
Some began to spit on him.
They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, "Prophecy!"
And the guards greeted him with blows.
While Peter was below in the courtyard,
one of the high priest's maids came along.
Seeing Peter warming himself,
she looked intently at him and said,
"You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus."
But he denied it saying,
"I neither know nor understand what you are talking about."
So he went out into the outer court.
Then the cock crowed.
The maid saw him and began again to say to the bystanders,
"This man is one of them."
Once again he denied it.
A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more,
"Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean."
He began to curse and to swear,
"I do not know this man about whom you are talking."
And immediately a cock crowed a second time.
Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had said to him,
"Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times."
He broke down and wept.
As soon as morning came,
the chief priests with the elders and the scribes,
that is, the whole Sanhedrin held a council.
They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate.
Pilate questioned him,
"Are you the king of the Jews?"
He said to him in reply, "You say so."
The chief priests accused him of many things.
Again Pilate questioned him,
"Have you no answer?
See how many things they accuse you of."
Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.
Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them
one prisoner whom they requested.
A man called Barabbas was then in prison
along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion.
The crowd came forward and began to ask him
to do for them as he was accustomed.

Pilate answered,
“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?”
For he knew that it was out of envy
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 again said to them in reply,
“Then what do you want me to do
with the man you call the king of the Jews?”
They shouted again, “Crucify him.”
Pilate said to them, “Why? What evil has he done?”
They only shouted the louder, “Crucify him.”
So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd,
released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged,
handed him over to be crucified.
The soldiers led him away inside the palace,
that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort.
They clothed him in purple and,
weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him.
They began to salute him with, “Hail, King of the Jews!”
and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him.
They knelt before him in homage.
And when they had mocked him,
they stripped him of the purple cloak,
dressed him in his own clothes,
and led him out to crucify him.
They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon,
a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country,
the father of Alexander and Rufus,
to carry his cross.
They brought him to the place of Golgotha
— which is translated Place of the Skull —,
They gave him wine drugged with myrrh,
but he did not take it.
Then they crucified him and divided his garments
by casting lots for them to see 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.”
With him they crucified two revolutionaries,
one on his right and one on his left.
Those passing by reviled him,
shaking their heads and saying,
“Aha! You who would destroy the temple

and rebuild it in three days,
save yourself by coming down from the cross.”
Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes,
mocked him among themselves and said,
“He saved others; he cannot save himself.
Let the Christ, the King of Israel,
come down now from the cross
that we may see and believe.”
Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him.
At noon darkness came over the whole land
until three in the afternoon.
And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
“*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*”
which is translated,
“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
Some of the bystanders who heard it said,
“Look, he is calling Elijah.”
One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed
and gave it to him to drink saying,
“Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.”
Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

Here all kneel and pause for a short time.

The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom.
When the centurion who stood facing him
saw how he breathed his last he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
There were also women looking on from a distance.
Among them were Mary Magdalene,
Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome.
These women had followed him when he was in Galilee
and ministered to him.
There were also many other women
who had come up with him to Jerusalem.
When it was already evening,
since it was the day of preparation,
the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea,
a distinguished member of the council,
who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God,
came and courageously went to Pilate
and asked for the body of Jesus.
Pilate was amazed that he was already dead.
He summoned the centurion
and asked him if Jesus had already died.
And when he learned of it from the centurion,

he gave the body to Joseph.
Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down,
wrapped him in the linen cloth,
and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock.
Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb.
Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph
watched where he was laid.

God our strength and our redeemer:
you do not leave us in this life
nor abandon us in death.
Hear our prayer for those in despair,
when days are full of darkness
and the future empty of hope.
Renew in them your sustaining strength
for we believe that there is nothing in all creation
that can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Amen.

PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS

Many years ago (decades actually), a young man started to come for mass at St. Leo's. He was in his later twenties. Soft-spoken and gentle. Unfailingly polite and eager to be useful.

Clearly, he was looking for someplace to call home.

He was from somewhere in the Midwest, far from family, and had come up to Sonoma after living some years in San Francisco. He had something troubling him that he would eventually reveal to our pastor at the time (Msgr. Jack O'Hare) and then to me.

I am happy to report that the people of the parish opened their hearts to this likable fellow. He quickly became one of us.

About a year after he started to come around, he took me aside after mass and said he wanted to speak with me.

"Of course."

It was Spring, I think. The Valley was green, and the poppies were blooming, like they are right now. We sat on a bench behind the church and looked across the field toward John Serres's property. I could tell he had something on his mind.

"Father, I want to tell you what I told Msgr. O'Hare."

“Okay... what’s that?”

“I’m gay.”

I don’t remember what I said, exactly, in reply. It would have been supportive. Probably, I said something like,

“I’m okay with that. Are you okay with that?”

What I said does not matter. What matters is what he said next.

“Father, I just found out that I have AIDS.”

This happened in the 1980s, at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. There were no medications for the HIV virus in those days. He was telling me that he would die in a year or two, or maybe three.

I must have asked him, at some point, if his family knew about this. He told me,

Yah... I called my parents a few days ago and told them I was gay.
Then, I told them that I had tested positive for HIV.

I asked him about their response. He told me that his mom cried a little. And then she said to her son,

“Well, I guess this means that you won’t be coming home this Christmas.”

Why am I lifting-up this member of our parish to you as we enter Holy Week? I thought of this gentle human being when I read the passage in today’s Gospel where Jesus called out to God from his cross.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land
until three in the afternoon.
And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice,
“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”

Jesus called out to God in Aramaic, his native language (it’s a close cousin to Hebrew). Matthew translates it for us:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I think we need to grapple in depth with this passage in Matthew’s Gospel.

Jesus – the Rabbi who healed lepers and cast out demons, who taught us the beatitudes and instructed us in parables, who expelled the moneychangers from the Temple – died in despair. The Messiah, the Son of David, died thinking that he had been abandoned not only by his disciples, but by his God as well.

There are those who say things like,

Well, Jesus was really divine, so he knew all along what was going to happen on Easter Sunday.

Or even things like,

Jesus was God so he only pretended to despair. But he didn't despair. He didn't even suffer on the cross. He only appeared to despair and only appeared to suffer.

People have been saying foolish things like this since Matthew wrote his Gospel two thousand years ago.

I think we need to take Matthew at his word: Jesus died a shameful death, rejected by the Elders of the people, tortured by Roman centurions, ridiculed by onlookers, and forsaken by his disciples. And then, in his dying words, he called out to his God asking if God had abandoned him as well.

I need to try to explain something difficult – something I will not be able to explain in the depth it requires. It's just this:

If we fail to recognize Jesus's despair on the cross, we will never understand what it means to be fully human. But, in addition, in failing to understand our own humanity, we will also fail to understand the Mystery of God into which our faith plunges us. Do not doubt this. This teaching goes to the very heart of Christian faith.

In the fall of the First Adam, despair became part of our human condition. God did not create us and place us in a garden only that we might come to despair. Despair became a part of the human condition East of Eden, through sin. In fact, I think we must say that despair lies at the heart of every sin that has ever been committed.

And, now, on his cross, the Second Adam has drawn our despair to himself.

"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"

These words of Jesus were our words long before they issued from the mouth of the Messiah. On his cross, Jesus has made our despair his own.

All this is just another way of saying what was later written in the First Letter of Peter:

He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pt 2:24)

And so, on this Palm Sunday, I am reflecting on Christ's Passion and I am remembering that young man who had been abandoned and who had come to Saint Leo's looking for a place to call home. I think, with much gratitude, of the people at St. Leo's who welcomed him, and eventually cared for him when he became too weak to care for himself.

As we enter Holy Week, create a place in your heart for those who have been abandoned to their cross. I am thinking of all the people, especially the children, who have been forced to leave their families in Central America and head North. I am also thinking of a young woman I know in Japan. She has just been deserted by her husband. I am thinking about an old friend who has just lost his wife to cancer, and another friend, very dear to me, who lost a husband to Covid-19.

In the First Adam, despair became a part of our human condition. And now, as we prepare ourselves for the great liturgies of Holy Week, let us recall that, on his cross, the Second Adam has taken our despair and made it his own.

PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as "a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys"). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don't rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually "reading" the Bible. Rather, we are "listening" to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?

- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?