

## PALM SUNDAY

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 22:14–23:56. In this reading of our Lord's passion we hear of Jesus' Last Supper, betrayal by Judas, trial both before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial. Various details are embedded in this account of our Lord's final hours of earthly ministry and each of those details is telling us something about the deeper meaning of what is happening. Our reflection this week will focus on only a few of these many details and how they might affect our lives as disciples. Each passion narrative is profoundly rich in meaning and helps us enter deeper into the mystery of the crucified Lord. You are encouraged to take time this week and carefully read the passion narrative in its entirety so as to enter into these Holy Days with Jesus as He leads us to His glorious resurrection.

The first thing to note is how Jesus takes time to accomplish some of His most outstanding ministry during His passion and crucifixion. Our Lord is continuing His incredible works of mercy even while He is suffering. Some points, which illustrate this particular concern for others, include the following:

- At the Last Supper, Peter professes his loyalty to Jesus. Jesus, for His part, knows that Peter and the others will abandon and betray Him. Nonetheless, He still shares the Eucharist with them (His very life) and prays for them. He even prays for Peter by name so that when Peter turns, that is repents and converts from his sinful denial, he would become a source of strength for the other disciples. It would certainly be difficult for us to do that for our friends if we knew they were about to betray, abandon, or deny us. Jesus loved His disciples to the end despite their sin and failure (see Lk 22:31–32).
- When the guards come to arrest Him, one of Jesus' disciples cuts off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves. Jesus takes time to heal the injury of those who were about to arrest Him. He cared for those who suffered violence even as they were in the process of arresting Him and about to begin His trial (see Lk 22:51).
- Notice, too, how Pilate sends Jesus to Herod for questioning. At the end of that scene Luke tells us that Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. It is no accident that this reconciliation occurred through the encounter with Jesus. He healed a broken friendship between Pilate and Herod even as they were shuffling the Lord back and forth from one to the other as part of a sham trial (see Lk 23:12).
- When Jesus is carrying His cross and meets the weeping women, He takes time to comfort them. Even while He is heavily burdened with the weight of the cross our Lord is not so burdened that He cannot offer a consoling word to others (see Lk 23:27–29).
- As He is on the cross, Jesus prays for the forgiveness of His persecutors. He had taught His disciples to pray for their enemies and to do good to those who hurt them in the Sermon on the Plain (see Lk 6:27-28). Now, He is showing us what love of one's enemy looks like in practice as He absolves His very executioners (see Lk 23:34).
- While He is on the cross, He consoles the Good Thief who asks to be remembered when

the Lord comes into his kingdom (see Lk 23:42). Jesus responds with the same generous mercy He exemplified each day of His life. What He gave the Good Thief was much more than what was asked. He said: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (see Lk 23:43). Even as He died, Jesus was reconciling a sinner to God and giving salvation to one who sought it (see Lk 23:39–43).

All of these details are particular to Luke’s Gospel. Luke relates them to us because he wants us to see that Jesus’ passion was a manifestation of our Lord’s greatest mercy and love for the world.

*How do you treat others when you are having a bad day?*

*What helps you to rise above your own concerns to address the needs of others?*

*Which of the above interventions of Jesus struck you as particularly meaningful and why?*

*Who is willing to die for you?*

*For whom are you willing to die?*

*As you go through this Holy Week, how can you make time to bring your needs to the Lord and receive His ministry of mercy? Who needs to experience the mercy of Jesus through you this week?*

A second distinctive element of the passion narrative in Luke’s Gospel is how the Evangelist phrases the three challenges to Jesus on the cross by the people, the soldiers, and the criminal (see Lk 23:35–39). These three groups not only mock Jesus but also actually tempt Him to prove His messianic identity. This temptation is more than human malice. Luke’s Gospel is very clear that when Satan tempted Jesus in the desert at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry (see Lk 4:1–12), the Evil One did not give up. Rather, Satan is said to have departed from Jesus until an opportune time (see Lk 4:13). Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Satan has been lying in wait for the opportune time to once again tempt Jesus.

Now that the Passion of Jesus begins, Luke tells us that Satan entered into Judas, the one surnamed Iscariot (see Lk in 22:3). The opportune time has arrived and Satan is ready to renew his efforts to thwart our Lord’s mission. It is in this light that we must understand the taunts of the three groups in Luke 23:35–39 as Jesus dies on the cross. Luke has carefully presented their assaults with language that parallels the temptations our Lord experienced in the desert.

Jesus is challenged to prove His identity as the Christ, the Chosen One, the King of the Jews. These last temptations on the cross are for Jesus to save Himself from suffering and death. The irony of these temptations lies in the fact that Jesus brings salvation not by avoiding suffering and death but by faithfully accepting it in fulfillment of the Father’s will. The temptation to prove His identity by doing what the crowds expect was subtle yet powerful.

This is an important teaching for us as disciples. Satan waits for opportune times to tempt us to prove our identity as Christians. Just like Jesus, Satan waits for moments that are particularly important in our faith life and discipleship to try and thwart us from being faithful to

the Father's will and to claim false salvation for ourselves. These temptations usually entice us to pursue momentary desires rather than obediently following God's commands. Christians throughout the centuries have noted that spiritual attacks are intensified especially during important moments of great spiritual growth. We should not be surprised by that reality because we see it happening to Jesus on the cross of Calvary.

*What are the opportune times in your life when Satan especially tries to tempt you?*

*What would have been the sin if Jesus had chosen to come down from the Cross and save Himself?*

*When are you most tempted to give in to other people's expectations of how you should act even when you know that those expectations go against your commitment as a disciple of Jesus?*

*In 1 Peter 5:8 we are warned to stay alert and sober because Satan is prowling like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. When have you felt that Satan has particularly attacked you because it was a time of increased spiritual grace in your life?*

*What do you think allowed Jesus to recognize and dismiss the temptations He faced on the cross?*

As Jesus died on the cross He offered His final words as a manifestation of His faith and confidence. Our Lord's final words are meant to be instructive for us as well. He said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (see Lk 23:46). Those are the words of Psalm 31:5 that were often used in Jewish evening prayer as preparation for sleep.

By proclaiming these words, Jesus was bearing witness to the confidence and faith He had in the Father's power to raise Him up. He approached His death with the same confidence that one approaches their nightly sleep. Jesus was teaching us to trust God and not be concerned about those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul (see Lk 12:5). In His final prayer on the cross our Lord shows us what true and faithful trust looks like.

As you read the entirety of Psalm 31, various other insights may emerge that can help you better understand why Jesus chose this Psalm as His final prayer in Luke's Gospel. It speaks of God's help in time of need, of faithful resolve, of not giving into temptation, and of ultimate deliverance from the forces of evil.

*What prayer do you pray before you go to sleep each night?*

*How does the prayer of Psalm 31 help you better understand the interior faith and spirituality of Jesus on the Cross?*

*How can you use this Psalm throughout Holy Week to deepen your trust in the Lord?*

One curious detail contained in each of the Passion Narratives of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), is that of the torn veil in the Temple. In Luke 23:45 we are told that the curtain of the temple "was torn down the middle". Luke's use of the passive form of the verb refers to an

action done by God and is known as the Divine Passive. Matthew 27:51 and Mark 15:38 indicate that the curtain was torn from top to bottom as a way of also indicating divine agency. Regardless of the phrasing differences, the reality is that all three Gospels record the same important event and indicate that it took place in response to, or as a consequence of, Jesus' death on the cross.

Much speculation has taken place in an effort to identify which Temple curtain is being referenced. However, such a distinction is a futile point to ascertain and may very well go beyond the historical knowledge of the biblical authors. It is commonly accepted that the Temple curtain was a general barrier to the sanctuary. The various meanings of the torn curtain are manifold and not mutually exclusive.

First, the torn curtain may be interpreted as a statement that the presence of God no longer resides in a physical temple and that the Lord is now to be worshipped in "Spirit and Truth" anywhere in the world (see Jn 4:23–24 and Acts 7:48). If this interpretation is correct then it may be another effect of the Exodus Jesus was to accomplish in Jerusalem as discussed with Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration (see Lk 9:31).

Second, the torn curtain may indicate that access to God is now available to all peoples including the Gentiles because the curtain served as a barrier to keep people out of various Temple areas. Paul alludes to the dividing and excluding effect of the Temple veil in Eph 2:14–15. The Roman Centurion's profession of faith in Mark's Gospel (see Mk 15:39) would support this interpretation.

Third, the torn curtain may be a symbolic statement of divine judgment on the Temple that initiates its destruction. This last interpretation would be particularly relevant for early Christians of the first century who witnessed the physical destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year AD 70. It would also be a fulfillment of Jesus' prediction of the Temple's destruction (see Lk 21:6 and Jn 2:19, Mk 14:58, Acts 6:14).

*Which interpretation of the torn Temple veil means the most to you and why?*

*Why do you think the destruction of the Temple veil was associated with the death of Jesus?*

*How do you think people responded when they saw the torn curtain and realized it was the result of the death of Jesus?*

*How can Christians today unintentionally set up barriers that can prevent people from coming to God?*

Finally, only Luke tells us that the Centurion who witnessed Jesus' death exclaimed, "This man was innocent beyond doubt" (see Lk 23:47). The phrase used by the Centurion is a legal declaration and refers to a person who has been absolved of all wrongdoing. This is not the first time in Luke's Gospel that Jesus has been declared an innocent person. Pilate declared Him to be innocent on three occasions (see Lk 23:4, 14, and 22). Herod found Him innocent as well (see Lk 23:15). Even the Good Thief who was crucified with Jesus declared the Lord to be innocent of

any wrongdoing (see Lk 23:41).

Throughout Luke's Gospel we have been introduced to various people who were identified as being righteous and just. They are always presented as examples of discipleship for us to follow. Being innocent, righteous and just was an important quality for a Christian of the first century especially during the age of persecution (see Lk 10:3). Luke goes out of his way to show how Christians are good law-abiding citizens so that secular authorities will know they have nothing to fear from Christian populations under their jurisdiction. Similar exhortations to innocence and righteousness appear in other parts of the New Testament as well (see Mt 10:16, Rom 13:1-7, Rom 16:19, 1 Pet 2:13-17 and Tit 3:1-8).

Luke encourages all disciples to be righteous (innocent of wrongdoing) and exemplary in fulfilling their just civic responsibilities. The Centurion recognized that Jesus was a just person by how our Lord endured His passion and death. Jesus prayed with trusting abandonment to the Father, forgave those who persecuted Him, and reconciled the Good Thief. Jesus' death had a profound effect on the Centurion and evoked his response of faith. The way in which our Lord impacted the Roman Centurion should instruct us in our discipleship so that we inspire other people by our example and they are motivated to seek Jesus who is the source of our life.

*How does the story of Jesus' death affect you?*

*If you were standing at the cross and you had seen what had taken place, what would be your response to it?*

*What does it mean for Christians to be found innocent in today's world?*

*What are ways in which Christians can try to unjustly excuse themselves from their civic responsibilities?*

*How would the the Gospel be promoted if Christians were found to be innocent of wrongdoing in our society?*

*What industries would cease to exist if all Christians really pursued innocent lives?*