

Jesus' Suffering—And Ours

The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

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Most of us know today as Palm Sunday. But the proper Prayer Book name for today is “The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday.” The “palm” part explains itself. “Passion” is the old-fashioned word for “suffering.” So today is the Sunday when we celebrate Jesus’ humble entrance into the city of Jerusalem and contemplate his unjust condemnation and death by torture.

We usually call what our first reading this morning describes as Jesus’ “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem. But it’s really his humble entry. Jerusalem had been occupied by the Roman forces for almost 100 years. Religious festivals, like this one, Passover, were often when revolutionaries rose up against the Romans. So the Roman forces were on high alert. As Jesus comes into the city, people cry “**Hosanna to the Son of David!**” “Hosanna” means “save us.” So the crowds are hoping that Jesus, who is

descended from the great warrior King David, will come and rescue them from Roman oppression.

But Jesus comes into town on a donkey's colt, not a magnificent warhorse. And he comes not to overthrow the Romans, but to rebuke the religious authorities, to clear the vendors and the moneychangers out of the Temple, to heal the sick, and to eat his final Passover meal with his disciples. All the delirious expectations of the crowds are disappointed.

Within a week the charged atmosphere of expectation at the Passover sets in motion Jesus' unjust condemnation and his death by torture. These are brutal facts. They are disturbing. Our Lord, our leader, the founder of our faith, was tortured to death by one of the most viciously cruel methods known to humankind. The crowds yell **"Crucify!"** because they find out Jesus isn't in town to lead a revolution. Instead, he's there so the Father can reveal him as God in human form. Jesus reveals himself as Savior at his meal with his disciples when he takes the cup of wine and says, **"Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."** He's in Jerusalem to fulfill the meaning of his name, **"God saves,"** that the angel gave to Joseph before he was born: **"You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."** (Matthew 1:21 NRSV)

As if subjecting Jesus to the injustice of a rigged trial and the horrific abuse of torture weren't enough, his persecutors make fun of him. But what they say to shame

and humiliate him turns out to be deeply ironic. Pilate has a sign put up over him on the cross, **“This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”** To a world drunk with power and self-righteousness, it’s a vicious joke to label a helpless, broken victim that way. A loser. But of course, Jesus really is king—not just of the Jews, but of all who trust in him, of the world itself.

The religious authorities accuse him of disrespecting their sacred space, the meeting place of God and humanity, the holy Temple. But of course, Jesus himself is the sacred meeting place of God and humankind. He is God in human form. He will make God available to all who trust in him. They jeer at him and say, **“He saved others; he cannot save himself.”** But all the time they don’t realize that that’s exactly what he’s doing—saving others at his own expense.

We are horrified and shocked at the monumental injustice and gruesome torture we’re forced to look at on this day. We live in a time and a place where things like this are rightly understood as wrong and evil. But for much of human history, this was the way things worked. And it’s sad to say, in many places today they still work that way.

But Jesus’ horrible treatment and death is different from all others. In it, God himself submits to his enemies and the enemies of everything he stands for—in order to forgive and save those very enemies. Some of us may have heard people say, **“If God is so loving, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world?”** Maybe you’ve

wondered the same thing. God understands our suffering. But more than understanding it, in Jesus he lowers himself into it like a swimmer coming down the ladder into the pool—to the death.

In his passion, Jesus shows us just how far God is willing to go to bring sinners like you and like me to eternal life in himself. He's willing to go to the death. We don't like to think about the horror of Jesus' death. But we should keep it in mind the next time we're faced with a choice between our way and God's way, between what we want and what God wants. That's what Jesus meant when he said that to follow him, we have to take up our cross.

But injustice and cruelty and death don't have the last word. We'll see that next Sunday, the day of Resurrection. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.