

## ‘Part-taking’ in His Passion with Open Palms

### Passion (Palm) Sunday – Cycle A – April 5, 2020

Mt 21:1-11 (blessing of palms); Isa 50:4-7; Phil 2:6-11; Mt 26:14 – 27:66

“*Though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant*” (Phil)

Prologue: The celebration of this year’s Passion/Palm Sunday will be muted and homebound due to the national lockdown. The public procession after the blessing and distribution of the palms will not be possible. Thus, while the official liturgy and Mass will be telecast/broadcast via electronic media, it will help the family—the ‘domestic church’—to enter more deeply and personally into the Lord’s passion not waving palms, but with ‘open palms’ symbolizing surrender and solidarity to the Lord with the whole world that is, for the first time, suffering through Covid-19. A meditative family reading and reflection of the Passion from the gospel according to St Matthew is advised.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. All the readings, homilies and liturgies of Holy Week can be viewed from the prism of LOVE. More than just being God’s response to sin and suffering, Jesus’ mission, entry into Jerusalem, passion, death and resurrection are a reflection, revelation and culmination of the deep love that God has for you and for me. The mystery of love is not to be listened to or learnt as one would a lesson in class or college, but it is *Divine Drama* where God’s love unfolds upon the stage of human history. Hence, it’s important not to be a mere spectator in the events of Holy Week, but to be a ‘*part-taker*’ an actor, imagining as if one were acting in any popular ‘passion play’. Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and his subsequent passion and death, narrates ‘the greatest love-story ever told’. So, let’s strive to not only read with our eyes, hear with our ears, grasp with our minds, but, most importantly, *experience* in our hearts. Just as today’s second reading says: “Jesus emptied himself to assume the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7), let’s empty ourselves and be filled with Jesus alone. Behold the man! Behold your king! Matthew’s passion narrative places us face-to-face with Christ, the king: a ‘foolish king’ by worldly standards who wanted disciples to be ‘fools for the kingdom! The ‘kingly’ focus of Matthew’s Passion narrative is seen in: (a) Jesus’ royal reception in Jerusalem, (b) the trial scene between Pilate and Jesus, (c) the soldiers’ taunts, (d) the signboard over the cross and (e) the mocking of the bystanders. But Jesus’ kingly character is paradoxical since his exaltation is humiliation, his kingship is *kenosis* (self-emptying) and his coronation is the crucifixion. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann calls Jesus: ‘The Crucified God’! The God who grieves and weeps with/in Jesus (last Sunday’s gospel) now enters from action → into his passion → and to his crucifixion.
2. Jesus’ ‘Passion’—Latin, *patior*, meaning, enduring or suffering or undergoing—marks the culmination of Jesus’ ‘action’ and is obvious outcome of his ‘*com*-passion’ (suffering *with*). In all the gospels, Jesus is God’s ‘suffering servant’ (see today’s first reading from Isa 50:4-7), who came into the world for the *missio Dei*, his Abba-Father’s mission to *be* God’s Word, and to speak God’s prophetic word. His options for the poor (i.e., for the sick, suffering, lepers, tax-collectors, harlots, sinners, Samaritans, etc.) and his actions born out of compassion for them, lead him inescapably to his passion. During this week, we will see the active Jesus enduring his passion (his ‘suffering *with*’ those he loved). He will surrender to God’s will. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he is sadly ‘palmed off’ by his closest

friends. He will be ‘handed over’. No longer will he be in control of his life, but the vilest of tortures will be heaped upon him as he trudges through the ‘stations of the cross’, so to say. Despite enduring all insults and injuries—like being spat upon, giving his back to those who scourge him and pull out his beard (see Isa 50:6)—he “does not feel disgraced” because he believes that his victimization will be vindicated by the God of justice.

3. While reading the Passion of our Lord, it will help to see the sequence of Jesus ‘being handed over’: from Judas → to chief priests and elders → to Caiaphas → to the Sanhedrin (council) → to Pilate → to the executioners to crucify him. Rather than standing uninvolved and ‘*apart*’ from the ‘action of the passion’, become ‘*a part*’ of every scene: look and see, listen and hear, shout and be silent, touch the thorns, smell the blood, taste the wine mixed with gall. Enter the sandals of Judas, Peter-James-John, Pharisees and Pilate, Barabbas and soldiers, Simon of Cyrene or Mary Magdalene, and, most of all, Mother Mary: Jesus’ and our mother. Let Mary lead you into the pierced heart of Jesus. Each of these characters is an actor in the Jesus’ passion-scene, as well as undergoes the passion, since things get out of control and lose meaning in the sudden arrest, passion and death of Jesus, their Master.

### **Linking the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading and the Psalm to the Passion Theme:**

Paul’s well-known ‘kenotic hymn’ of Jesus’ self-emptying measures the infinite height and depth of God’s selfless, sacrificial love that marks his descent from being “in the form of God” (*kyrios*) to not only becoming man, but a servant (*doulos*) who embraces the most shameful death on a cross. But, this downward *kenosis*-descent is paralleled by a *plerosis*-ascent where God raises and exalts Jesus above all of creation, that everyone might worship him as Lord. The response to the psalm (22) expresses the cry of Jesus stripped and naked, crowned and crucified: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It also appears in Matthew’s passion narrative (27:46). This is the Passion-psalm par excellence which is also shot through with hope, for the forsaken one will also reveal and proclaim God’s deliverance (see v.31).

### **Three ‘Part-takers’ in Jesus’ Passion Today:**

Victims of Covid-19: Thousands today, worldwide, are wallowing in the depths of human misery, Today, the psalmist says: “I am a worm and *no man*” (Ps 22:6) echoing the cry of the ‘*no-man*’, the ‘*no-woman*’, the victims of Covid-19 crowned [*corona*] with thorns and crucified with respirators and ventilators, not knowing what awaits them. With the current national lockdown, thousands have been ‘handed over’ to fend for themselves, and thousands have washed their hands (like Pilate) of their social responsibility. There are the victims and there are also the victimizers who seek to profit even from human tragedies.

Caregivers to Victims of Covid-19: Hundreds of doctors, nurses, caregivers, priests, nuns and even a bishop, Angelo Moreschi, SDB, have sacrificed their lives in striving to provide medical aid and spiritual sustenance to those struck by the pandemic. They have been ‘part-taking’ in our Lord’s passion, and they challenge us to do likewise.

Believers without Palms, but with Open Palms: While there are no palm-branches to move in procession and sing aloud praises of the King, we can sit silently at home with ‘open palms’ in a posture of prayer and trustful surrender to God’s will, saying, “*Abba*, Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what *You* want” (Mt 26:39).

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