5 APRIL 2020

Sunday Message

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

THE WORD

Year A • Psalter Week 2



HOLY WEEK BEGINS

(MATTHEW 26:14 – 27:66)

SAY

Christ was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:8)

LEARN

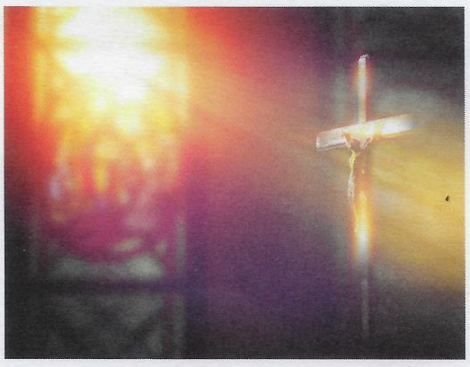
The passion narrative is the earliest connected unit in the Gospel tradition.

The Pharisees are mentioned only once in all the four accounts of the passion: that is in connection with the request to Pilate to set a guard at the tomb of Jesus.

It is the chief priests, the scribes and the elders who plot and secure the death of Jesus.

DO

Take time to contemplate the cross: remember that it is Jesus' commitment to his mission, his obedience to the Father, which redeems us, not his physical suffering.



With Passion (or Palm) Sunday we begin the most solemn week of the Church's year, and we listen to Matthew's account of the passion of Jesus.

We are accustomed to the Stations of the Cross and to hymns which dwell on the sufferings of Jesus, but when we read or listen to the narrative of these events, we notice that there is little, if any, stress put on the physical pain he endured. The evangelist is more concerned to show that Jesus is faithful to his mission, as the mental or psychological struggle in Gethsemane shows. The crown of thorns is an ironic mockery on the part of the soldiers: they are, unconsciously, correct in addressing him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" while they make fun of him. Jesus' cry from the cross, "Why have you deserted me?" is best understood as an expression of his feeling abandoned, and in this he is identified with all those who feel bereft and alone.

Matthew relates dramatic events which accompany the death of Jesus, such as the earthquake, the opening of the tombs and the appearing of dead people: these are his way of telling us that with the death of Jesus, the general resurrection has begun. The women from Galilee are the link throughout, being present, at a distance, at the crucifixion, at the burial, and later at the tomb on Easter morning. Matthew alone mentions the setting of the guard and the sealing of the tomb: thus he answers later objections to the proclaiming of the resurrection, that the body of Jesus was missing because it had been removed. ■

REFLECT

The community for which Matthew wrote his version of the Gospel was made up largely of Jewish Christians, and so the argument with the synagogue over the person of Jesus was especially bitter, as family quarrels often, sadly, are. There was also a concern to minimise the responsibility of the Roman authorities for the death of Jesus: so in this account, we find Pilate's wife reporting a dream she has had about Jesus which upset her: this reminds us that Joseph received messages from God in this way in the chapters which told about Jesus' birth. Pilate himself washes his hands of the matter and the people present are portrayed as accepting full responsibility for Jesus being condemned: "His blood be upon us and on our children!"

This text is one of those which have been tragically and cruelly misappropriated down the centuries to justify persecuting later generations of Jewish people. Despite the horrors of the Holocaust and the events which led up to it, antisemitic attitudes and behaviour have not disappeared. Jesus was a Jew: his mother was Jewish, as were his early disciples. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim Abraham as their ancestor in the faith. ■