

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD – B

On Palm Sunday we enter the most solemn and sacred week in the Church's year, Holy Week. The readings begin our meditation on the sufferings and death of Christ in preparation for his resurrection. The long gospel reading is Mark's account of the Last Supper, passion and death of Jesus. The opening verses of the third Servant Song from Isaiah in the first reading set the scene for our meditation and the second reading is an early Christian hymn, quoted by Paul, which tells us how Christ emptied himself of his divine glory in order to live a human life and undergo suffering.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah. He was a major prophet in Israel but the book which bears his name is not all his work. The reading today comes from the second part of the book, chs.40-55 (Second Isaiah), which deals with a period of Jewish history 200 years after Isaiah's day when Jerusalem has fallen and the nation is in exile in Babylon. Cyrus, the instrument of God, is about to come and overpower the Babylonian Empire and be the means by which the Israelites are able to return, a new Exodus. Embedded in the book are four passages called the 'Songs of the Servant of Yahweh.' They depict a perfect servant of God who is the light of the nations and gathers in God's people. He is one who preaches the true faith who expiates people's sins by his own death and is glorified by God. This part of the book, in contrast with the first part which is for the most part threatening, is far more consoling as the opening words announce: "Console my people, console them,' says your God."

The reading, 50.4-7, is the opening of the third Servant Song, if you have time read to the end of the song, to verse eleven. In this song the servant is more like a wise man, a faithful disciple of God. His duty is to teach those who fear God even the pagans and thanks to God's help he will endure very personal insults and sufferings which are developed in the fourth song (Good Friday). In the concluding verses of the song God grants his servant final triumph

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 21.8-9,17-20,23-24, is a prayer of lament and entreaty for the innocent one under persecution and ends in thanksgiving for his rescue. The response, from the first words of the psalm, is of course the 'word' cried out by Jesus as he is about to die on the cross according to Matthew and Mark's account. We read/sing eight verses of this impressive psalm and I would suggest reading the whole psalm if time permits. Verse 23 is addressed to the sons of Israel but the concluding verses bring in the whole wide world where the coming of the kingdom of God throughout the world seems to result from the ordeal of the faithful servant. Perhaps these latter thoughts should be in our mind as we read/sing this responsorial psalm, clearly a response to the first reading.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Philippi, one of the principal cities of Macedonia, had been evangelized by Paul in 50 A.D. on his second missionary journey. Paul is now on his third missionary journey and is imprisoned in Ephesus, the capital of Roman Asia. He hopes to revisit the Church at Philippi and while in prison he writes to them a friendly letter, giving some news to his converts there. He warns them to 'Beware of evil workmen!' who will destroy the unity of love and joy which he so much desires for them based on humility, the humility of Christ and to that end he gives the Philippians a poem on the humility of the Messiah. This poem may or may not be from Paul's pen, but it gives witness to early Christian understanding of the nature of Christ.

The reading, 2.6-11, comes from the section where Paul is teaching about the preservation of unity in humility. Read if you have time from the beginning of chapter two. The words immediately preceding the reading are: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus." These words give the reader the thought that should be in mind as the reading is proclaimed. The first verse may be seen as a contrast with Adam who was created in the image of God but sought to be like God, Jesus humbled himself. He takes on the form of a slave, a reference to the servant in the first reading who is going to be exalted through humiliation. Christ did not despise his humanity but was prepared to suffer death on a cross. God has raised him from this death to life in heaven and has given Jesus a name, the divine name, Lord, so that every being in heaven, on earth and in the underworld should, on bended knee and with the tongue, acclaim 'Jesus as Lord.' This is the essence of the creed we say each Sunday at Mass and in so doing we give glory to the Father. We must remember all this depended on Jesus' humility, emptying self and assuming the condition of a slave. It is with the thoughts expressed in these readings and the psalm that we are mentally and spiritually prepared to listen to Mark's account of Jesus' sufferings and death.