

HOLY WEEK'S PASSION GOSPELS

Beginning a Parish Series of Scripture Study

by Msgr. Peter Nugent

Palm Sunday brings to us the dramatic reading of the Passion of Christ, one of the four accounts that invite us to give our special attention to this detailed explanation of all that Christ experienced from the Last Supper to his burial. The eye-witness character of these texts is especially noteworthy.

This year we hear the Passion from St. Mark's gospel on Palm Sunday, and that of St. John on Good Friday. We appreciate their richness all the more when we are able to see in each rendering special personal qualities that moved God in His Providence to inspire each of them to share with God's people this account of Christ's saving death.

St. Mark is generally considered to be the first to write a full gospel account. He is also thought to be writing for the Christians at Rome; his written account gives some indication of this. If so, those believers more than those elsewhere, would know what crucifixion meant: torture, humiliation and degradation, bodies stripped of clothing, on public display as criminals, hanging in agony for hours, screams of pain heard by all. Many people subject to the imperial power of Rome in those years would know what that meant. Jesus suffers this cruelty. In the garden, he suffers a "deep sorrow, even unto death." He knows of the public denial of him by Peter, chosen as a rock of faith for the Church. Abandoned by other apostles, he now on the cross cries out to the Father: "...why have you forsaken me?" (A reading of this entire Psalm 22 brings out for us the fulness of meaning behind these words uttered by Jesus.) Then, starkly, "Jesus uttering a loud cry, breathed his last." His body is buried.

On Good Friday, we hear contrasts in the telling of the same story. St. John, the Beloved Disciple, writing of this many years after the events, shares with us the power of his spiritual insights and prayerful experience of the sufferings of Jesus, deepened by his own personal friendship with the Lord, and the contemplation of this mystery over a lengthy period of time. He had written in the opening passage of this gospel that "the Word was made flesh", a true birth as a human. But there is a divinity in Jesus which never disappears.

John's account of the Passion views Jesus as being "lifted up", even his physical suffering and death being, in reality, the beginning of His ascent into glory. The Lord's personal experience of pain and suffering are scarcely mentioned.

The reader is asked to see through and beyond the afflictions endured by Jesus, beyond what Pilate could not understand--yet what he unwittingly proclaimed and had written, that this was the King of the Jews. The kingship of Jesus, his divine glory, are not diminished by this dreadful treatment. Initially proclaimed by the people at his entrance into Jerusalem, his ascent on high is in motion. Few words are spoken by Jesus on the cross. His final work comes with his establishing a new reality: the disciple with the Mother, the beginning of a new relationship. The Church is born, issuing from the side of Christ the new Adam. Proclaiming that "It is finished", he bows his head down towards this new creation, and with his last breath, "handed over the Spirit". John the disciple, writing personally of his wonderment, tells us what occurs next. The piercing of the side of Jesus by the soldier's spear opens a flow of blood and water--bringing to his mind Old Testament prophecies. For John deep meaning comes with this river of divine grace giving life and growth to this newly born Community. (1 Jn 5, 6-8) A new era has begun.