

HOLY WEEK'S PASSION GOSPELS

Beginning a Parish Series of Scripture Study

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The dramatic reading of the Passion of Christ is an important feature of the liturgy of Holy Week. We journey with the Lord through all that he experienced, beginning with the Last Supper and ending with his burial. These detailed narratives bear the unmistakable character of original eye-witnesses, repeated for Christians eager to imprint in their own minds these climactic hours of Jesus as he fulfills his mission in compliance to his Father's will. In time these accounts were put into written form, and eventually came to be included in the gospels written by all the four evangelists.

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 how each evangelist retells the traditional passion narrative, each adding distinctive touches of his own. A great blessing comes to us when we appreciate how God in His Providence inspired each of them to contribute a certain tone and color to these events, bring new riches to the spreading of the good news of Christ's saving death.

St. Mark is generally considered to be the first to write a full gospel account. He writes in the language of the people, very intent on bringing to all, regardless of social status, the good news they were invited to believe in. Writing in a language and style that is vivid and graphic, his words describing the work and teaching of Jesus bring alive the impact of Jesus on the people: he emphasizes the immediacy of Jesus to people in His strong language, feelings and gestures. The Lord's readiness to respond to people bringing their life's burdens to his caring attention, his physical touching of the diseased, even for the leper, his ready embrace of the little children portray the real humanity of the Savior. The strength of Jesus is very evident as he shows his impatience and frustration with the apostles who are so slow to understand. As Jesus approaches the hour of his passion and death, he shares his own dread: "My soul is sorrowful, even to the point of death." This evangelist presents the accounts of a man who shows divine power in his miraculous healing power and in the heavenly source of the authority by which he preaches and teaches. We are left with no doubt Jesus is also living in a truly human condition.

Mark is thought to be writing for the Christians at Rome; his written account gives indications of this at several points. The powerful witness of the Roman centurion would not be lost on a community that knows the struggles of a faithful commitment to the faith. At the death of this good man, crucified like criminal, Rome's official witness to his execution was inspired to profess: "Truly, this man was the Son of God." The Christian believers in Rome, 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. Living in the far-flung areas of the Roman Empire, many other Christians would also know what this meant: Jesus greatly suffered in this terrible way. Mark recounts the depth of inner pain suffered by the Lord at the public denial of him even by Peter, chosen as a rock of faith for the Church. Abandoned by other apostles, Jesus experiences new pain. Hanging on the cross he 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 differing expressions 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", with his physical suffering and death, in reality, being 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 mysteriously in motion.

Few words are spoken by Jesus on the cross. His final act 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 pierced side of Christ the new Adam. Proclaiming that "It is finished", Jesus

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 the mind of the evangelist Old Testament prophecies. For John a deep meaning comes with this river of divine grace: the Lord issuing forth life and growth to this newly born Community. (Jn 5, 6-8) A new era has begun.