

Reflection for Palm Sunday

5th April 2020

If you don't have a copy of the missalette for Sunday, you can download the reading at: www.universalis.com

Today has two Gospels: At the beginning of Mass we hear of Jesus' joyful entry into Jerusalem where everyone is singing Hosanna to the Lord most high. Then the Gospel in the Mass is an account of the passion of Jesus where five days later those same people are calling for him to be crucified. The two Gospel's stand in stark contrast to each other.

This year on Palm Sunday we read the Passion of St Matthew – other years we get to hear from Mark or Luke. The Passion of John is read every Good Friday. Each tells the same story, but each has a special flavour of its own as each Evangelist chooses to highlight some aspects of the story.

One of the key themes for St Matthew is to show what it means to be “King of the Jews” – the sign that is put up on the cross by Pilate. The Jewish people were awaiting a Messiah – the anointed one – the Christ. Many thought that this person, when he came, would be a successful military leader, and one who would rule an independent nation. Matthew shows us that Jesus has other ideas.

The Jesus that rides on the donkey into Jerusalem being hailed by the crowds – he is the Christ. People are overjoyed to welcome him. They tear down branches from the trees to lay in his path. They welcome him with great joy. Of course, this triggers off a reaction from the religious authorities. They are afraid that such a display will not be taken lightly by the Roman authorities. The Chief Priests are further dismayed by the language Jesus uses to describe himself and his mission. To them his words are pure blasphemy.

In the Passion we see who “the Christ” really is. Jesus is eventually condemned for claiming to be the Son of God. Pilate, who does not want the blood of this man on his head, but stands aside to let the Chief Priests have their way. The mockery of the soldiers point to his true identity. It is the Centurion, a Roman citizen, who at last recognises who has just died.

What Jesus has achieved is much deeper than the liberation of just one nation. By submitting to the Father's will, a cup he shrinks from in the garden, by drinking that cup he achieves liberation for all of us from whatever impedes us from living life and living it to the full. Through his death our wounds are healed, our sin is taken away.

The work of salvation which we see unfold before our eyes in the Passion story is something Jesus has to achieve alone. One of the 12, Judas, sells Jesus for a month's wages. The others run away in the garden as Jesus is arrested. Peter follows at a distance but ends up denying Jesus three times. A stranger, Simon of Cyrene is forced to help carry his cross – none of his own disciples is anywhere to be found.

In Matthew's account, the women are there, but at a distance as onlookers of the scene that is unfolding. Only after his death, which happens while Jesus is praying from the psalms, does Joseph of Arimathea come forward to claim the body and see to the burial.

As a glimmer of hope as to what lies ahead, a Roman guard is mounted before the tomb, to make sure ensure that the body is not stolen by the disciples. However, no guard could stop what was about to happen on Easter Sunday morning.

During this Holy Week we are not able to gather to celebrate the events of our salvation. So let me suggest that we use some of our lockdown time to prayerfully contemplate these events at home, either individually or as a family. Let us accompany our saviour, see what he does and allow his sufferings to put our own trials into perspective.

Later in the week I will be providing some more materials to help us celebrate Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. We cannot gather, but we can be united with each other in our prayers. May God's Spirit be with us.