

Passion (Palm) Sunday – A/B/C – Part 17

The Beginning of Holy Week

The Sixth Sunday of Lent has traditionally been called "Palm" Sunday because of the palms spread before Jesus upon his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The Mass can begin with some kind of procession from the parking lot into the church with believers holding palms in their hands. Most times the Gospel is simply read in the Church. The congregation hold palms that are distributed as they gather. Many keep the palms and put them in their bedroom when they arrive home. Some when seeing the palms throughout the year are reminded of Jesus' kingship. Often these left over palms are kept and burnt later and used for next year's ashes. Depending on the year, various selections are read about Jesus' procession from Bethany to Jerusalem on a donkey. While the procession account for Matthew is read in Year "A," (2023), and Luke in Year "C," (2025), the account from either Mark or John may be proclaimed in Year "B." (2024).

Bethany is now in the modern-day West Bank, located some two miles or so from Jerusalem. Jesus' fame and notoriety was at a fever pitch. News of Lazarus' resurrection was abuzz. Scores of pilgrims would have been gathering as the Passover neared. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9) that the Messiah would enter humbly, on the foal of an ass, people held palm branches, spread their garments before him, and shouted: "Hosanna! (Save or Rescue). Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Mark 11:19). These words are echoed during every Mass just before the consecration.

The readings and procession officially begin "Holy Week." Holy Week starts with Palm Sunday and continues with special readings each day. The mood is solemn, somber, and reverent. The color worn by the presider is red, the color of blood. Liturgies can be long because of the lengthy readings. During the week, daily Mass attendance spikes once again. On Monday through Wednesday, the servant songs from Isaiah are proclaimed. These wise and poetic readings refer to the Messiah and his saving actions.

A little known fact is that Lent concludes not at Easter but with the Mass of the Last Supper on Thursday (or evening prayer if there is no Mass). This celebration is the beginning of the Sacred or Paschal Triduum (meaning three) of the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord. The Triduum continues on Good Friday and culminates with the Easter Vigil and Easter Masses. The fifty day Easter season (and mystagogia) then begins.

In 1969 because of liturgical reforms, the sixth Sunday of Lent began to be termed Passion Sunday. This is because of the long Gospel readings about the Passion are always read, although a shorter, but still lengthy version may be proclaimed. Year "A" always has the Matthean account. Year "B" has Mark read and, in Year "C," the Lukan account of the passion is proclaimed. In the Johannine account of the Gospel is always read on Good Friday instead of on Sunday. The two Prefaces at Mass as well as the prayers have to do with the Passion of the Lord. Everything focuses on this central event of our faith.

The Passion

The word Passion means "suffering." Jesus' torture was abominable. First, there was the human treachery, unjust judgments, and mockery of a trial. An innocent man was proclaimed guilty and condemned to a most shameful death. The scourging was so horrific that many died from shock, pain, and loss of blood. Jesus' scourging was both cruel and merciless. The burly guards taunted him and treated him as less than an animal.

Finally, he was forced to dig his own grave. They made him carry the heavy cross beam. Traditionally, the stations of the cross depict Jesus falling three times under its crushing weight. An innocent bystander, Simon the Cyrene, was forced to help Jesus carry the instrument of his own torture and death to Golgotha.

To humiliate him, Jesus was stripped of his garments. A large crowd had gathered. He would be put to death in front of his mother and the women who had put their trust in him. It was a degrading, demeaning torture. The sign hung over his head was meant to mock Jesus, but proved ironically true: Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews.

The intolerable pain of being nailed to the wood of a tree was unspeakable. The spikes pierced central nerves that would make the nervous system scream with pain. The one crucified would swim in this pain, dying in unimaginable agony. Many crucified would shout out blasphemies because they lost all sense of who they were. For Jesus, the torture lasted from three to six hours depending on which Gospel account you read.

From a medical point of view, what would have happened to Jesus physically when he was crucified? Jesus, weakened by severe trauma and loss of blood, would not have been able to pull himself up to breathe. Therefore, exhausted after hours of unspeakable pain, he suffocated to death.

Many pray the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. Others have crucifixes in their home and around their necks. When participating in the Mass, we are remembering the death of Jesus and coming into communion with him. These are just some of the ways we can participate in remembering Jesus' passion.

Passionate priests meditate on what is referred to as "contemporary passion." The contemporary passion is the sufferings Jesus is going through in his body on earth. There is poverty, unjust imprisonment, sexual abuse, sex trafficking, shaming, bullying, not to mention abortion. Many are in nursing homes, hospitals, and homebound. There is ageism, racism, and sexism. People have to flee governments with unjust regimes. People suffering in a multitude of ways constitute the contemporary passion.

Besides people suffering, there is the passion of the earth. Our environment and homes are being shamefully polluted. We are all obligated to preserve the environment for future generations. Pope Francis addressed this global problem in his encyclical: *Laudato Si*.

On Passion Sunday we specifically focus on remembering the historical Passion of Jesus through the readings and prayers. The Gospel is long but may be somewhat shortened by the choice of the presider. According to the rubrics, a short homily based on the Gospel may follow the readings. Often, to facilitate people paying attention, the people will be allowed to be seated as the Gospel is read.

Sometimes, the Gospel will be broken into many parts. Various people will take the role of Jesus (usually the priest), a narrator, the religious leaders, and the general crowd (usually the congregation). To some in the congregation who are playing the part of the crowd saying: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" have difficulty saying these words even when they know they are just acting out a part of the Gospel proclamation. Saying "Crucify him!" is strange and awkward.

Do these long liturgies enhance worship? Do the extensive proclamations and standing all that time serve to inspire? Do Masses that last long over an hour work? Maybe for some, but most "put up" with the lengthy liturgies, appreciating the solemnity of the occasion. How do young people handle what is happening. Many get bored, distracted, and quite frankly turned off. Do we need to rethink long liturgies?

Most people avoid the Easter Vigil because of how long it lasts. (Some for up to three hours). We must remember, that no matter how long, we must celebrate liturgies that are engaging with reverence.

Kenosis

No matter whether we are in the liturgical cycle year "A," "B," or "C," the second reading is always from Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:6–11). This selection was most likely an early Church liturgical hymn lauding Christ's sacrifice. It presents the crux of what the Passion and Lent are all about: "Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of people."

The word in the Greek for "emptied himself" is kenosis. This is what the journey of life is all about. We have all met people who are opinionated, have an exaggerated self-importance, and are "full" of themselves. Jesus was the total opposite. The journey of our lifetime is to go from selfishness to selflessness. Life gives us ample opportunities to grow. There are self giving parents who share all with their children. There are children who sacrifice for elderly parents. We also see it in doctors and nurses, police officers and firefighters, and those in the service industries.

Regarding selflessness, remember the words of St. Paul: "I do not consider my life as my own." (Acts 20:24). In the culture of the United States, we are taught that we have rights and are entitled. However we are not entitled to usurp possessions and comfort for ourselves. Remember we do not belong to ourselves but we are a slave of Christ. Instead of feeling entitled or that we deserve wealth or comfort, we must understand that we are not our own. We belong to Christ. "None of us lives as his own master and none of us dies in charge of themselves. Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:8).

Love is not selfish, irritable, or rude. Love is other centered, not self-centered. Charity is a giving thing. More than an emotion, love is always a choice that demands sacrifice. God so loved us that he gave (his Son and all things besides). We are most like God when we give. The journey of Lent should lead us to self-giving in a variety of ways.

Self-Surrender

The heart of an authentic Christian disciple is self-surrender. We surrender our wants and desires and, in a progressive journey, embrace God's will in every area of our life: morally, mentally, attitudinally, and behaviorally. Self-surrender is how we become more and more Christ-like.

An excerpt from Alcohol Anonymous Big Book gives us a great insight into our human nature: "Selfishness – self-centeredness. This is the root of our troubles. Driven by hundreds of forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows, and they retaliate. Our troubles are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and for an alcoholic it is an extreme example of self that will run riot, though the individual does not think so. An alcoholic must rid himself of this selfishness. Only God makes this possible. Often there seems no other way of entirely getting rid of self without his aid. Many alcoholics have moral and philosophical convictions, but they cannot live up to them even though they would have liked to. Neither can they reduce their self-centeredness to any extent simply by wishing or trying on their own power. Everybody needs God's help. This is the how and why of it. First, we have to quit playing God." (Big Book, Chapter 5).

To come into recovery from any addiction, an individual must realize that they need help beyond themselves. They must surrender their self and will to the care of God, who has the power. A crucial step in recovery is self surrender. To overcome sin and to deepen our relationship with God, we must concentrate less on ourselves. Humility may be defined as "not thinking less about yourself, but thinking about yourself less." John the Baptist had it right when speaking of Jesus: "He must increase and I must decrease." (John 3:30).

The Meaning of Suffering

All throughout Lent we have been striving to allow Jesus to become the Lord of our lives in a progressive journey. This pilgrimage of faith will continue long past Lent for the rest of our lives. We are being purged from the attractions of this world and the allure of our false egocentric self.

One major way our self-aggrandizement (the action or process of promoting oneself) is diminished is through suffering. Sufferings are eye-opening. It was only when the prodigal son suffered that he "came to his senses."

Sufferings puts us in touch with our mortality. At first, we may joke about getting gray hair. Next we might suffer with arthritis in our knees and hips and we become aware that the end is near. Sometimes we forget about our mortality and think we will live forever. Our physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational sufferings should deepen us from being superficial to the supernatural.

While no one likes to suffer, pain can awaken us and bring us much wisdom. If we are going to have to suffer, we should not waste our sufferings. They have meaning. Physical sufferings can slow us down and deepen us. Relationship problems can teach us wisdom. Through our afflictions, we can go from the superficial to the supernatural. As we age, wrinkles and scars develop. Hair grays and falls out. It is easy to gain weight as our metabolism slows. Our eyes and ears are less proficient. Don't waste your pain – we can learn from it all. Sufferings have much to teach us. We rely less on our skills and abilities and more on God and his care for us. Paul wrote about his sufferings and afflictions: "We were unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. We felt we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:8–9).

Into the Mystic

Sufferings deepens us, converts us, causes growth, and can lead us to trust God. In addition, hardships can do something mysterious and even mystical.

When the Hebrews were journeying through the desert (a metaphor for our Lenten pilgrimage), Moses would take a tent and pitch it outside the camp. He called this tent the tent of meeting. (The tent would be the precursor of the temple in Jerusalem.) When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the door of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses (Exodus 33:7–11). The glorious Shekinah (Hebrew word meaning "dwelling" or "settling" and denotes the presence of God) cloud of God's presence would envelope Moses. Moses "met" with God and actually spoke with God "face-to-face" as a man speaks to his friend.

There is a new place to meet face-to-face with God: the tent of suffering. They plucked Jesus' beard and spat upon his face. They put a crown of thorns upon his forehead. Our face time with God comes in suffering.

We can call suffering the "meeting tent" of God. We can meet God not only on the mountaintop but also in the valley. "Even though I walk through the valley of death, you are with me." (Psalm 23:4). Our omnipresent God mixes with us in our afflictions. God is in the breathtaking vistas and stirring events of life as well as in the hardships and low points. Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop, and his face shone. But he also took these same three to Gethsemane. It was there that his face was disfigured. He is present to us in our ecstasies and our agonies, in our stars as well as our scars.

Job was a man who suffered greatly. He struggled with the injustice of his troubles. He felt he was suffering innocently. Even though he believed in God and was just, he experienced physical suffering and lost his family, livestock, and wealth. Yet, in his devastation, God did not abandon him. In fact, Job made this statement: "God speaks because of the affliction." (Job 36:15). Job's dialogue with God and the greater intimacy he gained all came about because of his troubles.

C.S. Lewis affirmed Job's statement when he said: "God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pain." We can hear the voice of God in our sufferings. God's voice is present in the pain. God assures us of his abiding, faithful presence: "I will never fail or forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5). We may wonder to ourselves: "Why doesn't God take away the pain? After all, God has the power. Why doesn't he heal us?"

God would rather us find him in the meeting tent of suffering, for now. A mystical union can occur. While we do not understand fully now, when we die, we will know even as we are known. God promises to wipe away our every tear. But for now, all our tears are kept in his bottle. (Psalm 56:8). All the many questions we have will melt away in the face of God's glory. Our death will be the final healing we seek. Suffering in all its forms is not pleasant. Yet, in the long term, we are in the hands of God and not one hair of our head will be harmed. (Luke 21:18).

When God revealed himself to Moses, he said about himself: "The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate and gracious." (Exodus 34:6). In Psalm 78:38, we read we are forgiven because of God's compassion. The word compassion means to "suffer with." God is not some distant deity who stands at a distance. The Scriptures tell us he is one with us in our pain. When God became flesh in the person of Jesus, he was like us in all things but sin. We have a great high priest who can sympathize with our sufferings.

Paul wrote: "I want to share in Jesus' sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:10–11). In Lent we identify with Jesus and his fasting in the desert. When our stomachs growl and we know hunger, we enter into the very same feelings Jesus experienced. Even more than having solidarity with him, we enter into communion with him through our pain and sufferings. The scope of the totality of Jesus' sufferings (humanness, betrayal, crucifixion) was so comprehensive that they extend past anything we may go through. Therefore, however we suffer, whether spiritually, emotionally, or physically, we can mix with Jesus in it. As the Good Shepherd, his compassion is so great, He is with us in any dark valley.

We may not always "feel" Jesus in physical sufferings and desolation, but this is where faith and trust are stretched and grow. The desolation itself is the fabric of communion. The feelings may not come, but Jesus is one with us in it.

We can become like Jesus in his death (sufferings) and grow into mystical union with him. Look at the lives of the saints. Every canonized saint has suffered greatly. For example, St. Francis of Assisi, was short and not very good-looking. He went through many tribulations and physical pains, dying at the early age of 44. St. Paul of the Cross, suffered spiritual desolation for many years of his life. This suffering gave him a supernatural knowing with God because of the emptiness. It also made him a compassionate spiritual director. St. Teresa of Calcutta also went through a similar desert in her life. Yet she stayed faithful and determined. She still spent hours before the Blessed Sacrament, devoid of feelings but full of trust. No matter who is your favorite saint, you will find one commonality: Union with God through suffering.

Look at the individuals who have borne the stigmata. The stigmata are the actual wounds of Christ appearing on the bodies of various people. Such stigmatists are Padre Pio, St. Francis of Assisi, Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, Gemma Galgani, St. Catherine of Siena, and even Paul the apostle. In Galatians 6:17 he writes: "Let no one trouble me for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." Some think this means that those were the marks of his being scourged and other wounds from shipwrecks and harsh conditions. But others think he was referring to the stigmata, the very wounds of Christ mystically imprinted on his body.

In a divine, supernatural way, Paul had literally been "crucified with Christ." (Galatians 2:20). These wounds and scars can appear on the forehead of some where the crown of thorns was worn. The marks can appear on the hands, wrists, and ankles/feet. The stigmata are a transcendent truth showing Jesus so identifies himself with us and that his wounds literally become ours. As Paul wrote, we are one with him in his dying. The reality is God now sees us "in Christ." Because we died and rose in Christ, we are seeing as upright.

Just as we are one with Christ in his sufferings, he identifies with us in our sufferings. He is a great high priest who can sympathize with everything we are going through because he has been through it. He knows what it is to have a body, to feel pain, and to experience difficulties in relationships. He knows anxiety, fear, and the anguish of having to die. He appreciates and understands the human experience. Because of his incarnation, we can find a deep communion with him in our sufferings. The saints found a deep mysticism through their afflictions, and so can we. Finding Christ in our pain is what gives significance to our tribulations. Only we as individuals can give meaning to our own sufferings.

When we suffer, this is an opportunity to allow our pain to bring us into remembrance of the Passion of Jesus. In experiencing pain, consciously remember Jesus who went through even more. As we reflect in faith, will find an intensity and depth with Jesus in our desolation, loneliness, and pain that otherwise we would have never known. It is easy to find Jesus on the mountaintop, but few ever look for him in the valley, where he is especially there too.

Offer It Up

One other aspect of human suffering is the notion of redemptive suffering. In Catholic theology, this is when a person unites their suffering to the Passion of Christ on behalf of someone else. The Scriptural warrant for this is Paul's statement in Colossians 1:24: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church..."

Many questions emerge from this statement. Weren't Christ's sufferings on the cross enough/sufficient for our salvation? Yes, they certainly were. But as the body of Christ on earth, we extend his salvation through our sufferings. Our sufferings, united with Christ's in faith, makes our proclamations evermore efficacious. Hearts can be moved and people can come to Christ as grace abounds. The sacrifice of ourselves to God and his people bears fruit. God accepts our "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1) and makes it fruitful by pouring out his grace on others through our commitment and prayers.

Paul was not saying his sufferings redeemed people. But, as the living body of Christ on earth, he was extending in his generation and beyond, the victory one by Jesus on the cross. When we pray for others, that act of generosity is an act of redemptive suffering. We believe the time and generous effort of our prayers, when we could be doing other things, will result in people's hearts being touched. We believe that our sacrifices of commitment and the proclamation of the Gospel will impact many.

Summary

Redemptive suffering is a profound mystery. When we suffer there can be a purpose and deep meaning to our sufferings. First, our afflictions can make us turn toward God. Instead of being superficial, we can become supernatural. Then, sufferings can make us learn and develop in virtue. We grow in compassion. Moreover, we can sympathize and come to an intense mystical union with Christ. In addition, as the living body of Christ, we can even extend the victory of the cross to others as we unite our prayers and pain to that of Jesus' in faith.

The Passion of Jesus proclaims Jesus' self emptying and invites us to selflessness. He sympathizes with us in our sufferings and gives new purpose and meaning to our human experience of pain. Through our afflictions, a new communion and union with Jesus can occur. But the obvious meaning of Jesus' passion is the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation he won for us on the cross. This has always been the key message of the Church from its inception.

Salvation and Redemption

The early Church had a basic proclamation message called its kerygma (a Greek word meaning "proclamation"). The core message can be seen in Peter's Pentecost proclamation in the Acts of the Apostles: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38). This is Lent: remember your baptism into Christ. Turn away from sin. Receive God's love.

The kerygma of the Church always has been and always will be the forgiveness of our sins leading to salvation. The Church puts before us the Passion readings so that we will be saved. She wants her children to know the foundation of our faith and reflect upon its core message. This message brings blessed assurance to all who will believe and receive.

The early church was faced with a dilemma. Its founder was put to death on a cross and executed as a criminal. This fact makes for bad marketing. We would think that the early church would have tried to hide or discount the crucifixion. Rather than trying to cover it up or making excuses for the Passion, the Church made it the center of its proclamation!

The profound meaning they attached to the Passion was that Jesus' sufferings and death was for us. They personally experienced cleansing from their sins and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit because of the Passion. Rather than trying to hide Jesus' death, his execution became the crux of their message. The proof was in the pudding. Because of this man's death by humiliation and torture, they were given new life. The message spread like wildfire as others experienced mercy and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit too.

Who would have ever thought that the execution of some controversial carpenter from a small town in Galilee could result in the transformation of the world? Yet people who believed experienced rushes of grace. Far from trying to cover up the message of the cross, its radiant truth snowballed as more and more people experienced grace. Paul learned that, for his message to be effective, he had to preach Christ and him crucified. Scholars tell us that the Gospels themselves were first written beginning with the Passion narratives. As one scholar put it, the Gospels are the Passion narratives with a long introduction.

Those who believe in Jesus' death and resurrection will receive forgiveness of their sins. They come to understand that Jesus redeemed us. Our wayward lives of unbelief was ransomed, and a whole new path unfolds for us. We realize that we are saved from eternal death and condemnation. These truths are not in any book, although the Bible identifies what is going on in our hearts.

The general sentiment most Catholics have is to do your best and hopefully God will judge you mercifully and let you into heaven at the end of your life. This is the way of thinking that those in our culture have: "I am a good person. I do not hurt anyone. God will let me into heaven."

Our faith in the cross of Christ brings much more than such a nebulous notion of trusting in our own goodness. Trusting in the cross of Jesus brings blessed assurance and the certainty of salvation whether you are Catholic or a member of any other denomination.

It has been said that if you think you are saved, that is presumption. Actually, presumption is a sin against hope. Presumption is believing you can be saved on your own without help from on high. This means that the general notion of "I am a good person and God will let me into heaven" is actually presumptive. You recognize the difference? We need God's grace to saves us. Presumption is also thinking God will save us without our own repentance and conversion. (Catechism #2092).

Are You Saved?

In 2019, Pope Francis wrote an apostolic exhortation to the youth and to the whole people of God called *Christ Lives*. In chapter four he writes about three great truths: First, God loves you. Secondly, God saves you. And thirdly, Christ is alive. In #118 he writes: "Christ out of love sacrificed himself completely in order to save you." In #119 he writes: "Look to his cross, cling to him, let him save you, for 'those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, and inner emptiness and loneliness.'" The Pope is telling us that the message of the early Church: salvation comes through the cross. Let Jesus save you.

During the celebrations of Passion Sunday and Holy Week, we hear about Jesus' sufferings. It is astounding that anyone would go through this, especially since he was innocent. Jesus tells us why when he taught: "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13). The Passion accounts reveal a love that shows itself through suffering. Love is sacrificial. God's love is limitless.

The liturgies of these days should move us to thanksgiving, praise, and worship. Jesus gave everything so that we could have abundant life. Jesus performed many mystifying acts throughout the Gospels but none so sublime and profound as his willingness to die for us. None of us deserve such grace. This verse from Romans should make us pause and wonder: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8).

Lent is a penitential season, but also a season of grace. Lent is meant to put us in touch with what really matters: forgiveness, mercy, and salvation. Grace is God's initiative as well as God's free gift. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. He sent his only Son to save us. All our self denials, surrenders, and sacrifices during Lent prepares us for Holy Week. Now our hearts can be wide open and full of faith to embrace salvation and receive all that God wants to give us. As we journey through the days of Holy Week, we unite ourselves to Jesus ever more fully.

Lenten Lessons:

- At the cross we are loved and saved
- Salvation comes through the crucified Christ
- Our sufferings have meaning
- Mystical communion with Jesus is possible

Lenten Action:

- St. Paul of the Cross taught: meditate on a crucifix and let it preach you a sermon

