

Passion (Palm) Sunday (A)

"Truly this Man was God's Son!" [Mt. 27:54] My brothers and sisters in Christ, unless we are prudent, we can be blinded by our pride, only to discover the truth when it is too late. Today's Gospel Reading proves it to us! It was only after Jesus had been crucified that the eyes of some were opened, they realizing that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the King of kings.

When hearing the Word of God, we must embrace a spiritual approach. We must prayerfully ask the Spirit of God to enlighten our hearts so we may perceive the message that is being delivered to us. Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew has led many in the history of Christianity to take these passages totally out of context, consequently this leading to the persecution of innocent people.

How many times have we heard that "the Jews" were to blame for the death of Jesus? Am I guilty of the sins of my parents? Are you guilty of the sins of your grandparents? Are any of us guilty of the sins of our forefathers? Are we guilty of the sin of disobedience of Adam? Certainly not! Equally, it cannot be said that all the Jewish people of Jesus' time, or any from our time, are responsible for the death of Jesus.

Was Mary, the mother of Jesus, a Jewish maiden, responsible for His death? Was Mary Magdalene responsible for the death of Jesus? How about the disciples who loved Him? Certainly not! Those who were responsible for the death of Jesus consisted of Judas who betrayed the Lord, Pilate who washed his hands, and some members of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a council composed of seventy-two members from the priests, the scribes and the elders. Through the vote of their majority, not all the votes, Jesus was condemned to death. Accordingly, because of the actions of a few dozen, Jesus freely underwent suffering and death because of the sins of all people so that all might attain salvation.

The reason I raise this issue is because as preachers, teachers, parents, we have to guard against the possibility of transmitting prejudice or false interpretation of scripture as we celebrate the important feasts during the Holy Week. We have a responsibility to enlighten the minds of our little children who can easily be influenced into believing something that was not said. Accordingly, this week, I ask all of you who will come in contact with children, and even teenagers, to explore their understanding of who killed Jesus. And if the need be, allocate a moment to explain the truth to them to secure a continued spirit of ecumenism with our Jewish brothers and sisters.

On this last Sunday prior to Easter Sunday, we are celebrating "Passion Sunday" that is also known as "Palm Sunday." Both of the Feasts have one thing in common. They present the Divine Kingship of Jesus.

The First Reading from the Gospel of Matthew [Mt. 21:1-11] provided us with the account of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This event was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah who said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." [Zech. 9:9; Mt. 21:5]

Indeed, during the last week of His ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus was recognized as the promised Messiah and proclaimed as King by many of the Jewish people who had known Him and who seen the power of God manifested through Him. Spreading their cloaks in the path of the Lord, they imitated the red-carpet treatment that was accorded to royalty in the ancient world.

At the same time, the crowd shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" [Mt. 21:9] What was the crowd saying? It was begging the Lord Jesus to save them. For the word "hosanna" (hosi ah-na) in Hebrew means "save, we pray." The crowd was asking to be saved from the dominion and oppression of the Roman Empire.

Summarizing the Gospel Reading [Mt. 26:14-27:66] that gave an account of the Passion of the Lord, we heard of the betrayal of Judas, of Jesus celebrating the Passover with His disciples, of His institution of the Lord's Supper, the foretelling of Peter's denial, the praying of Jesus in Gethsemane and of His arrest. Then there was the appearance of Jesus before the high priest, Peter's denial of the Lord, Jesus appearing before Pilate, the death (suicide) of Judas, Pilate questioning Jesus, the people being given a choice between Barabbas or Jesus, Pilate handing Jesus over to be Crucified, the soldiers mocking Jesus, the crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus and the event surrounding the guards at the tomb.

Regarding this reading, I would like to enlighten you on a few subjects. Some have asked in the past if there was a reason why Judas was paid thirty pieces of silver or thirty silver shekels. The origin of 30 shekels of silver is found in Exodus 21:32 where the law concerning property states that if an ox kills a male or female slave, the slave owner is entitled to be compensated with this amount of money. Therefore it appears that the life of Jesus was appraised to be worth the price of a slave.

When reference was made to Judas dipping his hand into the bowl with Jesus, eating together and sharing the same bowl denoted fellowship. This is symbolic of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. When members of the faith community attend the Holy Mass, they are invited to partake in the Sacrament of the Eucharist to denote their fellowship in full communion with the Church.

When reference was made to Jesus taking the cup, giving thanks and drinking from it, He stated that the cup was "His blood of the covenant..." [Mt. 26:27] Those Words had

a special meaning, their origin being found in the Book of Exodus. There it is read that after offering burnt offerings and sacrificing oxen as offerings of well-being to the Lord, Moses said to the people, "See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." [Ex. 24:4-8] The first blood of the covenant represented a covenant between Yahweh and Israel. The second blood of the covenant concluded the offering of sacrifices because the atoning death of Jesus freed us all from the ongoing necessity to perform rituals for sin and guilt.

Going to the next subject, when Jesus was before the chief priests and the whole council, they were looking for false testimony to condemn Him. They had quite a time because the witnesses that came forward could not agree with each other as was required by law. [Mt. 26:59-60] While Jesus was questioned on His ability to destroy the Temple of God and rebuilding it in three days, [Mt. 26:61] this does not appear to be the reason why He was condemned to death. If you recall Pilate's questioning of Jesus, it was regarding His Messiahship and Kingship of the Jews. To claim to be the King of the Jews was a serious matter. It was viewed as treason against the authority of Rome. Such a claim, usually leading to Jewish uprising, resulted in a severe punishment by the Roman authorities.

The next subject concerns the death of Jesus. When Pilate heard that Jesus was dead, he was surprised. [Mk. 15:44] The reason for this reaction was because crucifixion usually resulted in a slow death that should have lasted from two to three days. Crucifixion was an Oriental form of punishment that was adopted by the Romans to be used against slaves, bandits and rebels, but excluding Romans citizens.

Today's Second Reading from the Book of Isaiah [Is. 50:4-7] prophesied that the Lord Jesus would freely accept His sufferings and death so He would not be put to shame. The Third Reading [Phil. 2:6-11] confirmed this, that Jesus "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." [Phil. 2:8]

In this reading, St. Paul reminds us to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus. We are called to imitate Jesus, His humility and abasement as a model of conduct that should be found in the faith community. Though in the form of God, Jesus having enjoyed Divine pre-existence, He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.

In His Divine incarnation, He humbled Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. Jesus did not empty Himself of His Divinity but He voluntarily gave up the Divine glory to which He was entitled, a glory that would be restored at His exaltation. [Jn. 17:5; Mt. 17:1-8]

Having humbled Himself, even unto death, God super-exalted Jesus, giving Him the Name that is above every name. [Phil. 2:9; Eph. 1:21; Heb. 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:22] At the Name of Jesus, in an act of religious adoration, every knee should bend, in Heaven and

on earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. [Phil. 2:10-11; 1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9; Col. 2:6]

My brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ died and lived again that He might be Lord both of the dead and living. [Rom. 14:9] As the Son of God, He atoned for your sins, my sins, our sins. He is your King, my King, and our King. During the coming week, let us honor Jesus, our Lord and God through our active participation in each and every Holy Day of the Holy Week that will lead us to the celebration of the glorious Resurrection of King Jesus on Easter Sunday.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella