

Lesson 6

Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 27:11–66

The Three-Year Lectionary brought a shift to this Sunday. Formerly it was simply Palm Sunday. Now it is suggested that Palm Sunday be a preliminary theme and move then to the Sunday of the Passion—fitting for the first day of Holy Week as we look ahead to the death of our Lord. The assigned Holy Gospel is all of chapters 26 and 27 of Matthew—too lengthy for our detailed study. Even the alternate is a challenge, but we must at least note the dramatic chain of events that led to our study:

- Jesus again predicted His crucifixion; the Council (Sanhedrin) plotted to get rid of Him.
- Mary anointed Jesus' feet at Bethany—"to prepare Me for burial" (26:12), said Jesus.
- Judas agreed to betray Jesus to the chief priests.
- Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as He and His disciples ate the Passover in the Upper Room.
- Jesus predicted that Peter would deny Him.
- Jesus agonized and prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- Jesus was arrested and tried by the Council and was condemned for blasphemy.
- Peter, under pressure, disowned Jesus.
- Judas, in remorse and despair, hanged himself.

The trial of Jesus by the Council was an illegal night session. Having condemned Him, the leaders arranged a show of legality with an early morning meeting to confirm their judgment. The Romans granted the Jews some self-government but reserved the death penalty to their own authority, so the Council had to bring their charges against Jesus before Procurator Pilate. It is that trial and the subsequent crucifixion of Jesus on which we focus. It was early morning—six o'clock. Palestine's heat encouraged an early start at work to allow time for rest and refreshment at midday.

91. What charge did the Jewish leaders bring against Jesus in Pilate's court? (See Luke 23:1–2.) Why didn't they just tell Pilate, "We find He deserves death because He blasphemed God, claiming to be the Christ, God's Son"?

Jesus responded to Pilate's direct questioning but not to the charges of the priests and elders. In *Follow Me*, Martin Franzmann says, "Nowhere is the quiet majesty of Jesus more apparent than in His Passion. Of all the men who figure in that turbulent story He is the only poised and self-possessed one. He was the Victim, His disciples noted, and yet He was somehow in control" (p. 208).

92. Why did Pilate offer the release of a prisoner and make it a specific choice between Barabbas and Jesus?

93. Only Matthew recorded the dream and warning of Pilate's wife. What was he emphasizing by including this behind-the-scenes incident in his account?

Throughout the events that led to Jesus' death, the Jewish religious leaders are shown to be the ones determined to get rid of Jesus. Pilate's offer to the crowd of a choice between Barabbas and Jesus gave them the opportunity to make the death of Jesus a demand of the people, so they influenced the crowd and orchestrated their persistent yelling for Jesus' crucifixion.

94. How did the crowd reaction bring pressure on Pilate? Who constituted this crowd that was ready to say, "His blood be on us and on our children!" when Pilate washed his hands of responsibility?

"Having scourged Jesus" reads so easily in the story that we don't give much thought to that dreadful experience. Josephus, a first-century historian, says that scourging involved two whips applied with full force from either side, with bits of bone or lead attached to the tips of the multiple lashes so that they tore the skin and mutilated the flesh, laying the back and the sides open. The victims sometimes died during the scourging. The scourging of Jesus and His mistreatment by rough soldiers was all part of Pilate's ploy to show that this poor "king" was hardly worth crucifying.

By Roman law, the conquered peoples could be pressed into service, as was Simon of Cyrene. Mark identified him as "the father of Rufus and Alexander." Evidently, he and his sons became Christians and were well-known in the Church.

95. Why did Jesus refuse the sour wine mixed with gall that would have numbed His senses to the suffering He would experience?

Matthew just mentioned some things that other evangelists recorded in detail—as if he was hurrying to the crucial point of Jesus' suffering: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Only this one of the seven words from the cross was recorded by Matthew.

96. What was happening in God's saving plan in that "eternal moment" on the cross? (See Hebrews 9:11–14.)

97. What is the significance of the tearing of the temple's curtain? (See Hebrews 10:19–23.)

98. How is the exclamation of the centurion a fitting climax to this record of Jesus' suffering and death?

99. Why was the posting of the Roman guard at the tomb significant enough to be included in the Gospel?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 50:4–9a

This is the third of four Servant Songs in Isaiah II. Some identify the Servant as the nation of Israel, but Hummel, in *The Word Becoming Flesh*, points out that in verses 10 and 11, which are usually included in the Song, “the speaker, the Servant, is clearly distinguished from the rest of Israel.” He adds, “The third Song, then, highlights the Servant’s total faithfulness to his commission, in spite of great suffering under most adverse circumstances. . . . The *vicarious* nature of the suffering is not yet so clear, but plainly we have an anticipation of and preparation for the climactic Song of 52:13–53:12” (p. 221). This third Song is the only one that refers to God as Lord GOD (NIV: “The Sovereign Lord”)—*Adonai Yahweh*—but the title is used elsewhere in Isaiah. It emphasizes Yahweh’s sovereignty over all. He is not just Israel’s Lord.

100. Why is it important that the Servant be given an instructed tongue? (See John 7:16–18.) How was the Servant to use His tongue? (See Matthew 11:1–5, 28–30.)

101. Why is it important that the Servant’s ears be wakened and opened? (See Matthew 3:16–17; 17:5; John 12:23–33.)

Unlike Israel the nation, the Servant, the ideal Israel, was One who spoke the saving Word to the weary and who was fully responsive to the will of God—even in suffering. As we read about the Servant’s experience at the hands of His enemies—the scourging of His back and the mocking and spitting—it is virtually unavoidable that we see it as a prophecy that was fulfilled in the experience of Jesus. As the climax of His saving ministry approached, He set His face like flint to what lay ahead (see Luke 9:51). He was confident that He would not be put to shame (see John 12:23–28). He knew always that the one who would vindicate Him was near and would help Him through His ordeal of suffering (see Luke 22:39–44).

102. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:5–11

This is the Epistle for the Day for this Sunday in all three series of the Three-Year Lectionary. Its lofty words describe the Lord as the Servant and, in turn, the Servant as Lord. Theologians mark this section of Scripture as a “seat of doctrine.” It describes more fully than any other Scripture the humiliation or humbling of the eternal Word according to His human nature and the subsequent exaltation of that Word, Jesus, according to His human nature to God’s right hand. Some think this poem was already in the liturgy of the Early Church as a creedal statement.

103. What is made clear about Christ Jesus from the outset?

While these words say that the One who is in very nature God did “make Himself nothing,” there is no suggestion that He laid aside His essential nature as God. He was still God also in His state of humiliation. But in obedience to the will of God for the salvation of sinners He did not, according to His human nature, fully use or always display the divine majesty He possessed according to His human nature. In His humiliation, He took on the form of a servant and lived, not in an aura of divine glory, but as a common man.

104. How far did His obedient service take the Servant? Why was He then exalted to the highest place?

105. What is significant about the fact that it is now the name *Jesus* that is above every name, the name that will prompt every knee to bow? How is it true that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord?

106. What was Paul encouraging in us by describing the willing humility of our Lord Jesus Christ?

107. How can we work at developing a similarly humble attitude?

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 37:1–14

81. The vision held the promise of the nation of Judah coming to life again by the Lord's power and intervention, just as the Spirit brought new life to the dry bones.

82. The Hebrews did not distinguish between these words and concepts, especially in a literary setting such as this, but understood that the whole thrust was on the Spirit of God being called on to supply new life. In our setting, we understand that we are the dry bones, just as they were, and are dependent on the Spirit for new life in Christ.

83. "And you shall know" is still significant for us. Because we hear the Word of the Lord with hearts as well as ears and experience for ourselves the truth of His promises, our trust in Him to be our Lord and to do what He wills to do for our benefit grows accordingly.

84. Lazarus's body was lifeless and decomposing and becoming dry bones. He was restored to life by God's power just as Judah's restoration would be by God's power.

The Epistle for the Day: Romans 8:1–11

85. Jesus described this radical change in terms of being born again. Just as we are not born physically by our own power but yet birth opens up a whole life to us, so we are not born again by our own power and this birth also opens up a whole new life in Christ to us.

Fill-in Answers:

- "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Only one thing can separate us and bring condemnation: our willful rejection of Christ as Savior and Lord.

- "The law [rule] of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law [rule] of sin and death." Point up the fact that this is an accomplished fact through the work of Christ. The only thing that can change this is our willful return to slavery to sin and death.

- "The righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk . . . according to the Spirit."

86. Jesus summarized the Law by quoting Scripture: "Love God with all your heart; love your neighbor as yourself." Living according to the Spirit first of all means living in faith, justified, declared righteous for Jesus' sake; then the Spirit opens up and enables a willing love for our Savior God and a desire to serve Him in serving others.

Fill-in Answers:

- "Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." They enjoy life and peace.

87. The humanistic outlook of our society looks to itself to develop the values by which life is guided, and its values are almost always relative and situational. Leaders who promote such an outlook are usually even angered when God's Law is quoted and pointed to as an absolute. They see the law as repressive, stifling the human spirit which yearns to be free and determine for itself what is good and what is evil in the given situation. But this really repeats the original sin. The result is that God is replaced by human psychology, His Law is replaced by permissiveness and self-determination, and the lasting values that give a stable foundation are eroded. Broken homes, disturbed and abused children, increased crime, pervasive drug use, unethical behavior by leaders, rampant sexually transmitted diseases, etc., are evidences that surround us.

Fill-in Answers:

- We have the ability to please God because the Spirit of Christ dwells in us.

88. As the Spirit makes Jesus personally meaningful to us as our Savior, we are led to love Him who loved us first and to do our best to please Him as our Lord by loving and serving those around us.

89. We cannot belong to Christ without the Spirit because Christian faith and life are the results of His saving work. When the Spirit of Christ lives in us, we have the living hope that He will give life also to our mortal bodies—the promise of eternal life as who we are, in glorified bodies fully equipped for life in the new heaven and new earth in which righteousness dwells.

90. We can work at having our lives controlled by the Spirit by conscientiously using Word and Sacrament and maintaining communication with Christ in prayer.

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Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 27:11–66

91. Matthew began with Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus. Luke provided the information that the charges brought against Jesus in Pilate’s court was political subversion, claiming to be the king of the Jews. Pilate would not have responded to their religious concerns; one more “religious crackpot” making wild religious claims would have meant little to this pagan official, but political charges that threatened insurrection would get his attention.

The formal questioning of the governmental authority required Jesus’ answer—just as the formal question of the religious authority had (see Matthew 26:59–66). The false charges of the priests neither required nor deserved an answer. John provided more details of this exchange between Pilate and Jesus (see John 18:33–38).

92. The release of a prisoner at the time of the feast was a long-standing custom. Pilate’s specific offer of a choice between Barabbas, a known insurrectionist and murderer, and Jesus was an attempt to get himself off the hook by having them choose Jesus.

93. The dream and the warning by Pilate’s wife point up Pilate’s dilemma and his weakness in not dealing justly with one falsely accused. Does it suggest that Pilate and his wife had already talked together about this popular rabbi? Surely the attitude and actions of the Council against Jesus had not escaped his notice (see John 9:18–23). Some early traditions say Pilate’s wife became a Christian. The Greek Church even canonized her.

94. The Greek *ekrazon*, “shouted,” is imperfect tense, indicating continuing action, “they kept on shouting.” This pressured Pilate because his position demanded that he maintain the *Pax Romana*. It would not sit well with the powers in Rome if a riot broke out in his court. He surely thought it was better for him to eliminate one insignificant Jew, though innocent, than to go against the wishes of the influential chief priests, who held their positions with Rome’s approval. The crowd was no doubt made up of servants and functionaries of the Council and other hangers-on that such events attract. Other Jews, in Jerusalem for the Passover, surely also joined the crowd. At the instigation of the religious leaders, a mob psychology took over. It would not be hard to influence newly arriving spectators to join in. After all, Jesus had not lived up to their expectations of the Messiah—and they loved making trouble for Roman officials.

95. Jesus refused the drugged wine because He wanted to be in full command of His mind and senses as He, obedient to His Father’s will, faced what lay ahead of Him as He carried our sins in His body on the cross.

96. Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 in crying out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” His cry evidences that He was experiencing the hellish consequences of human sin as the one on whom the Lord

laid the iniquity of us all. In that eternal moment, the eternal Son of God carried humanity's sins in His body and paid the eternal penalty that are their consequences—and still lovingly trusted His Father throughout, so that, His saving work completed, which He attested to with His *Tetelestai*, “It is finished,” He could die commending His spirit into His Father's hand.

97. The large and thick curtain in the temple separated the Holy Place, where the priests ministered daily, from the Most Holy Place, “the dwelling-place of the Lord,” where the ark of the covenant formerly was housed. That this was torn from heaven to earth symbolizes that in Christ God has removed every obstacle that might hinder our relationship with Him (see Romans 5:1–2).

98. Dramatic circumstances attended the crucifixion of Jesus: the darkness from noon to three o'clock, the earthquake, the opening of tombs, and the resurrection of some. That a hardened soldier such as the centurion would be led by Jesus' demeanor and by the dramatic circumstances to say, “Truly this was the Son of God,” speaks to our faith with its own impact as we read the account of the crucifixion. It encourages us to make the same confession of faith.

99. Just as recording the spear thrust into Jesus' chest declared that He had truly died, recording the Roman guard at the tomb established the fact that His body was not stolen or secreted away by His disciples.

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 50:4–9a

100. The Servant needed an instructed tongue because He was to speak the Word of God to God's people. Jesus testified that His teachings were not His own but were given to Him by His Father. The Servant was to “know how” to use His tongue “to sustain with a word him who is weary.” Jesus proclaimed Good News to the poor, inviting the weak and burdened to come to Him for rest.

101. The Servant's ears needed to be wakened and opened so He would hear and understand God's assurance to Him to strengthen Him for His mission. Jesus' ears and spirit were fully open to His Father's assurances as He spoke from heaven to strengthen Jesus for His saving work.

102. This lesson ties in with the Holy Gospel in its detailed description of the suffering and mockery Jesus experienced during His trial.

The Epistle for the Day: Philippians 2:5–11

103. Paul's beautiful statement makes it clear from the outset that Christ Jesus is none other than God Himself—“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,” as the Nicene Creed puts it. In His readiness to carry out the saving will of God, the eternal Word “put His crown on the shelf” to live among us as one of us, representative man.

104. The incarnate Word's commitment to the eternal plan of salvation took Him, as Jesus Christ, all the way to dying for our sins—“even death on a cross.” Jesus, the God-man, was exalted to the highest place because He had obediently and successfully carried out the saving mission.

105. It is significant that it is the name *Jesus* that is the name above every name because this indicates that His identification with us as our brother in the flesh was not temporary. It continues even now. All other names by which God may be known may teach us something about Him, but *Jesus* is the crucial name, without which we really don't know the forgiving love of God and can't live with Him (see 1 John 2:22–23). At the Day of Judgment, as Jesus sits on His glorious throne, surrounded by the hosts of heavenly angels, every tongue will confess that He is Lord. Those who knew Him and trusted Him in their lifetimes will do so joyously. Those who neglected or rejected Him will do so begrudgingly.

106. Paul described the willing humility of our Lord in these lofty words, first of all, to undergird our faith in Him but then also to encourage us to develop attitudes the same as His. This Epistle says to each of us, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

107. We may work at developing a similarly humble attitude as we build our lives on the truth of the Good News that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. We have no basis for boasting about our “merit” before God or for exalting ourselves over others. Instead, Jesus calls us to a determined discipleship in which we learn to follow Him, our Savior, as our Lord, and become more like Him. As we continually remember His servanthood for all, our faith is nourished and His Spirit moves us to

remember that what Christ did for all He did for us. Our trust and confidence that He loves all, and therefore us, compels us to imitate Him in willing humility and lovingly serve Him in serving others (see 1 John 4:7–21).