

Sermon for the Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Liturgy of the Palms, Procession & Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: Mark 11:1–11a; Isaiah 45:21–25; Psalm 22:1–11; Philippians 2:5–11;

Mark 14:32–15:47

Mark's narrative of Jesus' arrest and death has no moment of human compassion. Jesus already knows who has betrayed him.¹ He knows his disciples will desert him, and despite Peter's denial, Jesus knows and says to Peter, "This very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."² Jesus knows he will suffer and die,³ but he does not know he will be abandoned by his Father on the cross.⁴

In his commentary on Mark, Professor Joel Marcus notes that there are almost no "detailed descriptions" of crucifixions from the classical world.⁵ The gospel accounts are among the most accurate descriptions we

¹ Mark 14:20.

² Mark 14:27–31.

³ Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33–34.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (Doubleday: New York, 1994), II:1045–47.

⁵ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 1131.

have.⁶ It was a very cruel form of execution—people often took more than a night and a day to die.⁷

At Gethsemane Jesus' body and mind are in agony—the Greek verb used here by Mark suggests that his whole being, physical and emotional, is consumed with terror, horror, suffering.⁸ Mark's Jesus is truly human.

At Gethsemane, Jesus seems to accept the Father's silence as his Father's answer. But I don't think Mark's Jesus expected to die separated from his Father. His disciples; his people—yes. But not from his Father. There is no astronomical record of an eclipse darkening the earth at Passover in any of the years when Jesus would have suffered.⁹ If there is any intervention from the Father, perhaps it was that his suffering was not prolonged. Mark's Jesus is unaware of anything from his Father as he dies. Yet in death he will be proclaimed, “Son of God.”¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Brown, II:1222.

⁸ Ibid., I:153.

⁹ Ibid., II:1041–42.

¹⁰ Mark 15:39.

Matthew will blame the Jewish leaders and people for Jesus' death;¹¹ Jesus saves a sinner as he dies in Luke.¹² In John, Jesus is not alone at the cross, and he himself hands over his spirit as he lays down his life.¹³ Father Raymond Brown suggests that in Mark we not forget Jesus' ministry has been a struggle with Satan and his demons.¹⁴

I pray that none of us and no one we know will suffer a violent death, a cruel death, or an evil death. I hope that none of us will die, in the words of the Prayer Book, “suddenly and unprepared”¹⁵—or without care from those who know us and love us.

Forsaken is, of course, not the end of Jesus' story. His resurrection that we will proclaim in the rest of our prayers today and with the bread and wine we will share is the rest of the story of “the truth that comes from above.”¹⁶

¹¹ Matthew 27:25.

¹² Luke 23:43.

¹³ John 19:25–30.

¹⁴ Brown, II:1045.

¹⁵ The Book of Common Prayer (1979), 149.

¹⁶ <https://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/this-is-the-truth-sent-from-above-print-g6140>, (accessed 25 March 2018).

I don't yet foresee a great revival in our culture of Christian faith and practice, but I hope and pray for one. The number of persons with no faith community of any kind keeps growing. I would love to preside again as a parish priest in the enrollment of a half-dozen or more adults for baptism. There's a ceremony for this kind of group enrollment that begins by asking, "What is your name?" and "What do you ask of God's church?" The answer to that second question is one word: "Faith." The next question is this, "What does faith offer you?" The response is, "Eternal life."¹⁷

On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, when the gospel is the story of Jesus' transfiguration, I said something in way that I'm sure I've never said or written before: "This is a recurring theme of the gospels: the dead live." Again, the dead live.

I feel separation from those who have died whom I knew and especially those I loved. But I no longer believe they feel separation from us. They live in Christ. Whatever burdens, sins, heartache, and even evil they may have endured in this world are no

¹⁷ *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), I:54–55.

more—as the Revelation to John says, “the former things have passed away.”¹⁸

We know God destroyed death in the moment he seemed to have abandoned his Son. We are here today, even on this day when we recall Christ’s suffering and death, to celebrate Christ’s resurrection and his gift to us of faith.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁸ Revelation 21:4.