

**REFLECTIONS FOR PASSION (PALM) SUNDAY ~ 02 April 2023**  
**The Mount ~ The Residence at Litledale**

Palm and Passion, trust in what is false or trust in an ever-faithful God, the gift of words and story, eco-memory – so many threads are woven through the tapestry that is the Liturgy of the Word for our Holy Week now unfolding. This Sunday is the transition moment to the final steps to transformation which will emerge next Sunday – Easter Sunday.

We begin our liturgy today with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, as the people shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matt 21:9). The people were rejoicing in the coming of the Messiah, but they were placing all their hopes in a Messiah who was a king, a mighty and powerful leader, certainly not a Messiah who was a suffering servant, who would die by the lowest form of death possible – crucifixion. They were right to trust in this Prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. They were mistaken in understanding how this Prophet, this Son of David, this one who was coming in the name of the Lord, would lead them into new life. These same people, when their hopes seem lost, mock Jesus and choose the man Barabbas over him.

The pastor Roddy Hamilton, his prayer-poem "He has left..." speaks to the paradox of this moment:

he has left  
it was just a short moment he was here  
a glimpse only of the messiah  
a shadow of what we had expected

he has left  
and the few palm branches and discarded sandal  
is all that's left of the messianic parade

he has left  
and there is only disappointment to fill the space  
for nothing happened, heaven didn't open  
angelic armies didn't descend, the kingdom of God did not arrive

he has left and all hope with him  
the crowd thought their moment had come but it hadn't  
they'll turn on him for he led them on with nowhere to go

he has left  
and for his own safety and that of his disciples  
that is no bad thing

The paradox continues when the soldiers mock and torture Jesus, using symbols of royalty (the scarlet robe, the crown, the scepter of reeds, the hailing of the King), but the inscription on the cross reads, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt 27:37). It is most poignant when Jesus cries out in suffering and pain, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt 27:46). Jesus is praying the words of Psalm 22 that seem to be words of despair and hopelessness. But Jesus knew his psalms and, as we heard sung in the Liturgy, Psalm 22 ends with the words of complete trust in the fidelity and steadfastness of the God who loves him and us, "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the

congregation, I will praise you: You who fear the *Lord*, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!" (Ps 22:22-23). In Matthew's story of the Passion, these are the last words that we hear Jesus speak, "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last" (Matt 27:50). It is more than likely that the last words Jesus cries were these concluding verses of Psalm 22.

In another hymn, used by Paul in his letter to the Philippians, we see the paradox once again. Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:6-7). The hymn ends with the same steadfast love and fidelity with which Psalm 22 ends, "God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-11).

The first reading from Isaiah begins, "The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he awakens – awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught" (Is 50:4). It is an especially precious verse for Sisters of Mercy because it was the image used by the Sisters from the first community of our founder, Catherine McAuley, to describe her immediately after she died. It expresses so powerfully for all of us the importance of story and memory and passing on the story from generation to generation. The verse comes from one of the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah, directly connecting the suffering one of Isaiah to the suffering one of the passion narrative to the suffering ones today. All suffer, but all are held in the embrace of a steadfast, loving, merciful God.

We know that the passion narratives are the first story of Jesus to be developed and passed on, the core story that led so many from Judea to Egypt to Asia Minor to Greece and Rome to become Christians. They predated the letters of Paul and the four written Gospels. While all four Gospel writers share the same elements of the story, each one adds unique and colorful details, probably those which mattered to the community in which the Gospel writer lived. No matter which passion story we read, each one is told in a way that is intriguing, impressive, and awe-inspiring. The main storyline of Jesus' passion and death is contained in all four Gospels – the betrayal by Judas, the supper shared, the visit to the garden after the supper, the denial by Peter, the trial before the Jewish leaders and before Pilate, the torture by the soldiers, the carrying of the cross, the crucifixion, the death of Jesus, and the burial.

But the details vary across the four stories: cutting off the ear of the servant in the garden, Judas' committing suicide (unique to Matthew), Pilate washing his hands of guilt for Jesus' death (unique to Matthew), Pilate's wife warning her husband (unique to Matthew), Simon of Cyrene compelled to carry the cross, the attitude of the two criminals dying with Jesus, the tearing of the temple curtain, the earthquake as Jesus dies (unique to Matthew), the women who stayed by the cross, the conversion of the Roman centurion, the women who watched the burial, the burial by Joseph of Arimathea with Nicodemus (the latter only in John), and the securing the tomb with soldiers. Each one of these stories holds a Gospel message of its own. Together all the stories create the passion narratives which are at the heart of Christianity.

One dimension of the passion narratives which we are discovering anew in our time is **eco-memory**, a new term that I learned from Byron Wratee, writing in *Earthbeat*. He says,

The Gospel stories present us with the apostles' eco-memories of Jesus' eco-stories. Jesus paid close attention to the world around him, and he connected his moral life and God's kinship with creation to the parts of creation that go unnoticed. . . We remember his

last supper where he celebrated "the bond of live things everywhere" with his disciples. . . In Jesus' hands, the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands becomes spiritual food that awakens our awareness of the interconnectedness of life and salvation. . . Our particular eco-memories and those from Jesus' life shared with us through Gospel stories ask us to think about how our homes, workplaces and neighborhoods affect how we think, act and live.

What are some of the eco-memories that are embedded in the passion narratives? Remember from today's passion story in Matthew: the donkey that brought Jesus into Jerusalem, the branches from the trees that covered the pathway (the palms), the upper room, the bread and the wine (the fruits of the Earth), the Mount of Olives, the parable of the scattered sheep, Gethsemane, the cock that crowed, the potter's field, the thorns for the crown, the reed for the scepter, the wooden cross, the road to Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, the wine, the earthquake, the linen cloth, the new tomb, and the stone at the door of the tomb. Each one has its place in the memory of the paschal mystery which grounds our entire faith tradition. This week choose just one of these other-than-human Earth beings, reflect on its place in the passion story, and thank God for this eco-memory that the first disciples, the first Christian communities, and the Gospel writers have preserved for us.

And so, we begin this Holy Week. For eight days, we will remember, we will mourn, and we will rejoice. Unlike Jesus and the disciples as they experienced these events for the first time, we have the privilege place of knowing the ending. Sadly, our knowing the ending does not always ensure our fidelity to the One who suffered, died, and rose for us. There are times when we respond as Peter and Judas did, as Pilate and Caiaphas did, as the people who cheered Jesus and then demanded that he be crucified. But more times we are faithful as Simon was, as Pilate's wife was, as the women who stood by the cross and sat by the tomb were, and as Joseph of Arimathea was. Let us end with this challenging and consoling prayer of Rev. Christine Sobania Johnson for Holy Week:

Today we have cheered you on as our champion and hailed you as our hero.  
    Forgive us tomorrow when our enthusiasm wanes.  
Today we have entrusted you to rescue us from our pitiful circumstances.  
    Forgive us on Tuesday when we decide we can take care of ourselves.  
    Today we have made you the centerpiece of our very existence.  
    Forgive us on Wednesday when we forget to remember who you are.  
    Today we have called out to you loudly by name.  
    Forgive us on Thursday when we pretend that we've never met you.  
Today we have stared at you with the star struck eyes of fans and groupies.  
    Forgive us on Friday when we avert our eyes  
    because it is too painful to see you on the cross.  
    Today we have expressed our unsuppressed hopefulness  
    in the future you have in store for us.  
    Forgive us on Saturday when we believe all is lost.  
Today we have been boldly certain of the earthly ways you will redeem us.  
    Restore us on Sunday when we are startled and awed by your rising.

Instead of a number of images for our reflection to accompany the words of my reflection, I share with you a set of modern Stations of the Cross, *The Footsteps of Christ*, painted by the Benedictine Sisters of Turvey Abbey in Bedfordshire, UK. They have added two new Stations: Mary and John at the Foot of the Cross (the 12<sup>th</sup>), and the Resurrection (the 16<sup>th</sup>).



**Modern Stations of the Cross, *The Footsteps of Christ*  
Painted by the Benedictine Sisters of Turvey Abbey in Bedfordshire, UK**