



Passion [Palm] Sunday (A) – April 5, 2020

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord"

Question of the Week: Have you felt forsaken by God or a friend? How did you work it out?

● **Processional Reading: Matthew 21: 1-11**

“This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

● **First Reading: Isaiah 50: 4-7**

The Lord GOD is my help

● **Responsorial: Psalm 22: 8-9, 17-20, 23-24**

R: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

● **Second Reading: Philippians 2: 6-11**

You are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you

● **Gospel: Matthew 26: 14 to Matthew 27: 66**

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Processional Reading: Beginning of Glory

Q: Have you lived up to your expectations of Lent? Why or why not?

21:5 This passage is a combination of two verses Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. Matthew took a figure of speech literally. The mother and foal were actually a single animal, doubled for dramatic literally effect.

21:9 The acclamation of the crowd may have reflected a liturgical hymn used by the audience of Matthew. The word “hosanna” could be loosely translated “praise.” The first part of the hymn praised the son of David, the one who would come in the “name” (i.e., power) of God. The second part praised God in heaven (“in the highest”).

The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem marked a high point in the earthly ministry of Jesus. The Galilean made a dramatic show, as he made his way down the Mount of Olives into the city of David. The crowds gathered, hailed the coming teacher, and praised God for his presence. Of course, this commotion baffled the locals. After all, how could anyone of importance come from the back country? Image the headline of the fictitious newspaper, the Jerusalem World: Country boy makes big entrance into the Holy City!

The gospels clearly tell us that the leadership found Jesus to be a threat; the amount of the threat was (and still is) open for debate. His trial was a hastily held “kangaroo court;” yet, he was arrested alone, as his followers fled. The mob turned against him, even after many in the blood thirsty mob greeted the Galilean into the city with honors. The Lord entered the city in glory, but left it in shame.



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Yet, the gospels were not written to relate the story of a failed political figure. They were written to engender faith. From a theological perspective, the tension between the earthly glory of Jesus and his shameful death was less important than his mission from the Father. According to the Synoptics, after his Galilean ministry, Jesus made the deliberate decision to go to Jerusalem. There, he would reveal himself as the Messiah. He would not use the image of the righteous high priest that would clean the Temple (as the Essenes hoped for), the great warrior king (as many common people expected), or the great teacher (as many Gentiles desired). No, he would be the Suffering Servant found in Second Isaiah. He would show how earthly glory was fleeting. He would also show how serving the divine will would lead to true glory.

The entry into Jerusalem was not the first step of the mission, but it was the first step of the public revelation.

The King has come! What we expect of him may delight us, but he may disappoint us. Jesus did not come to fulfill our expectations. He came to fulfill the will of the Father. In essence, that is what Holy Week is all about.

It is now time to set aside personal expectations about Lent. It is now time to walk with the Lord toward his death. It is time to prepare for his glorious resurrection. Set aside time this week to reflect, to pray, and to prepare to celebrate.

Reading 1: Shame for Doing God's Will?

These brief words came from Second Isaiah, the unknown prophet who encouraged the despairing exiles in Babylon. Away from their homeland for so long, the exiles wallowed in gloom and self-pity. For the uprooted Jews in the foreign city, the idea of return must have seemed so distant. As distant as their God. Anyone who tried to tell

the people different would be ridiculed, as a dreamer at best, as a cynic at worst.

Yet, God wanted this unknown author to spread the news of immanent release and return. Even if he faced the ire of the people. Despite their condemnation, he would not be shamed. For he did God's will.

Early Christians drew a parallel between the image found in these verses and the death of Jesus. Despite the humiliation of the people's condemnation, the honor of the accused would be vindicated. By God himself!

Q: How do we sustain ourselves for doing good in the face of criticism? How can God help us in those times?

Responsorial: Through Adversity

Q: What tragedies have you faced in your life? How have these experiences changed you?

I've written many times about adversity in this web site and the themes seem to be the same. Tough times can be shared events, like 9/11. They can also be intensely personal, like the loss of a loved one. Tough times can be opportunities to reach out to others or reject them. Tough times can shake, but ultimately define our character. Tough times can present us with a faith challenge and a faith choice: turn to God or turn away from God. Tough times can bring out the best and the worst in us.

Psalm 22 was "snapshot" of life in adversity. It asked the question: Why God? Why do I feel abandoned? Why do my enemies surround and threaten me? Why do I wilt in the face of all this opposition? The psalm didn't try to really answer these questions. Instead, it responded with an act of the will. The psalm ended with an act of faith and a universal song of praise. No matter what my troubles are, my God will save me and I will proclaim his glory before everyone.



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22:1-11 was a dialogue between the question and the act of faith. The psalm began with abandonment (22:1-2) only to be answered with the faith of ancestors (22:3-5). Shame for faithfulness (22:6-8) was answered by the wonder of coming into being (22:9-10). 22:11 ended this section with a simple prayer for help.

22:12-21 was an extended dialogue between failing strength and a prayer for redemption. 22:12-18 described an attack of one's enemies. Like a pack of dogs (a derogatory term among Semites) and a mindless herd of cattle, the enemies surround and "size up" their prey before they attack. They hurl insults and plan the division of spoils even before they pounce. The intended victim goes weak in the face of the opposition. Still, the victim has enough faith for a final prayer, a plea for salvation (22:19-21).

22:22-26 was a promise of faithfulness when the Lord acted. Praise would be public and universal. The salvation of the petitioner would be an example to the people of what God can do. The petitioner would offer sacrifice (a thanksgiving offering) to fulfill a vow to God. The petitioner would be so thankful, he would share the communion meal of the sacrifice with the poor of Jerusalem (in other words, the petitioner was most likely the king or high priest; only they were rich enough to afford such a magnanimous gift).

The psalm ended with a call for universal praise (22:27-31). All peoples, the dead, and those to be born were to praise God for his faithfulness and activity.

Many psalms have a tension between the spirituality of the individual and the liturgy of the assembly. The individual can apply psalms to his or her life; the psalm can also represent the condition of the community. Psalm 22 is the paradigm of this tension. A personal song became a psalm of the assembly. But, with the Passion

Narratives, the liturgical chant became intensely personal for Jesus of Nazareth. In nine different ways, images or lines from the psalm appear in the Passion. While Jews still apply the psalm to the entire nation, Christians apply it to one person.

For Christians, Psalm 22 will forever be linked with Jesus on the cross. When we recite this psalm, we can identify our adversity with travails of our Savior. If he could remain faithful in the midst of his suffering, we, too, can face our trials with some hope. The tough times won't last forever. There is life after the experience of death. Despite despair, shame, and attack, we can look to Christ on the cross and gain strength.

Q: Reflect on the trials you've faced this week. How have they encouraged or discouraged you? How has God used them to strengthen your faith?

Reading 2: Empty Himself

For over the past 60 years, most biblical scholars have seen this passage as a hymn sung in early Christian communities. Paul adopted (even adapted) the song for his letter to the Philippians. The original form is hotly debated; some group the verses into two stanzas (6-8 & 9-11); others group the verses into three stanzas (6-7a, 7b-8, & 9-11). Whether Paul made additions or subtractions to the hymn is unknown. The author, influences, and background are speculative. But, the verses do reflect the early Christian belief that identified the Christ as Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

Notice hymn began with the divine (2:6) and returned to the divine (2:9-11). But, the focus was on Jesus. He existed in God and did not "seize" Godhood. Instead, Jesus descended to the level of humanity. 2:7b-8 used two phrases built around the verb "becoming." In 2:7c, "becoming in the likeness of men" referred back to Jesus emptying himself into the form of a servant (2:7b). In 2:8b, "becoming obedient until death" referred back to the humiliation of Jesus (2:8a). The core of the hymn used "emptying" for the



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Incarnation and "humbling" for the Passion, the two pillars of our faith in Christ. God responded with the resurrection (2:9a) and glorification (2:9b) of Christ. The response of the follower is worship (2:10) and profession of faith (2:11).

So, why did the Christians sing this hymn? They worshiped and professed faith in Christ because of the self-giving nature of their Savior and because of God's activity. The divine Son of God was humble in his birth and death. God was faithful to his Son and his followers. He gave both eternal life.

Q: How does Christ serve you? How does his service inspire you to worship God? How do you honor the name of Jesus?

Gospel: The Passion of The Lord

Passion 1: You Say ...

Modern technology facilitates instant communication. One of the side benefits of this instantaneous connection is feedback. Do you want to know what others think of you? Use social media software and you'll find out quickly. Facebook, MySpace and their ilk provide a sense of community, but they can also establish one's place in the social pecking order. One's importance can be defined by a simple phrase "You say..."

What do you say about me? You say so. It is you that says it.

These questions and/or statements places the speak in the social context. One could claim that social media software is only an extension of the phrase "you say..." This simple phrase was used by Jesus three times in his Passion as a means to define his place WITH HIS ENEMIES. It is the flip side to the question he asked his followers: "Who do you say I am?" In both the phrase to his opponents and the question to his followers, Jesus places the onus of his identity in the lap of his listener. For Matthew, the responsibility of

applying the title of "Christ" to Jesus lay with others; he does not claim the title for himself.

As we make our way through the Last Supper and the scene at the Garden of Gethsemane, let us remember keep that responsibility in mind. "You say.." defines only who Jesus is for us, it also defines who we are as disciples.

26:17-19 "Pascha" is an ancient name for Passover; it is the root for the word "Paschal."

26:18 "My time is near." This was a clear reference to the impending death of Jesus, what the John the Evangelist called his "hour."

26:20 "Becoming late" meant after sunset.

26:22, 25 "It is not I?" This question is literally "Not I am?" The use of "I" ("ego" Greek) made the question emphatic. Matthew used the question to turn the scene dark. In the mouth of the apostles, the question was genuine, even surprising. But, in the mouth of Judas, the question was rhetorical.

26:23 "The one dipping his hand with me into the bowl, he will betray ME." The act of simultaneous action indicates common action and, hence, a common destiny. Both men would meet their end, but one would be guilty and the other would be innocent. The act had a deeper significance. The innocent man would take on the guilt of the evil man. In other words, the unclean (Judas) would make Jesus unclean, in order to cleanse the world of evil.

The act of betrayal in 26:23 reflected Psalm 41:9,

Yes, my own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, who ate bread with me, has lifted up his heel against me.

The narrative for the Last Supper can be divided into three parts: 1) preparation/denial, 2) the meal with the words of Institution and 3) the prediction of Peter's denial. In Matthew, first two



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parts are straight forward, with little detail. Matthew does not mention the detail that the other evangelists mention: the man carrying a water jar for a signal or the flow of the Seder supper from the breaking of the bread to the blessing of the cup. Does Matthew assume familiarity of those details by the reader? We don't know the answer to that question.

The core for the first part of the Last Supper focused on the identity of the betrayer. Jesus made the same statement to the Twelve: One of you will betray me. Their answers were the same "It's not me," but the title they gave defined their place in relation to Jesus. The Eleven addressed Jesus as "Lord," but Judas called him "Rabbi." Notice the Eleven were disciples, for they used the word "Lord" in the sense we use it; Jesus is our Master. But, Judas used a respectful, but neutral term for Jesus; "Rabbi" simply meant "teacher." With this simple word, Judas defined his place outside the circle of believers.

Jesus responded in kind. To the Eleven, Jesus gave a prediction, but to Judas he said "You say..." This is the same answer Jesus will give to Caiaphas (in 26:64) and Pilate (in 27:11). In all three cases, Jesus flips the responsibility of identity back on the non-believer. Who are you, Jesus? The Rabbi, the so-called "Messiah," the King of the Jews? You say...

26:26 "having blessed (God for it)" Unlike Christians, Jews bless God for their gifts. Blessing is synonymous with praise, not with thanksgiving.

26:29 "I (definitely) will not drink..." is literally "I will not never drink..." The double negative makes the phrase emphatic.

"I MYSELF drink it anew..." The word "anew" in Greek is ambiguous; it can either be an adverb (meaning "drink in a new way") or an adjective (drink "new wine"). In either case, the context placed the sharing of wine in the Kingdom.

26:30 "Singing the Psalms..." The psalms in question were the "Hallel" Psalms: Psalms 113-114 and 115-118."

The second part of the Last Supper focused upon the words of institution. Since Matthew's audience was Jewish-Christian, we can assume they knew the purpose for the Passover as a remembrance of liberation from slavery in Egypt and the Exodus. Understood to Matthew's audience would have been the place of the Paschal Lamb at the Passover Supper in Jerusalem. Each family would bring their unblemished lamb to the Temple to be sacrificed and prepared for the Passover; then, the family would take the meat for the meal and some of the blood to mark the doorpost, just as Exodus 12:7, 22-23 instructed them to do. A Seder meal with the meat of the sacrifice would be a communion meal with YHWH. Marking the doorposts with the blood of the lamb would designate an exchange of life, since blood signified the life offered to God; in other words, at the original Passover, the life offered to YHWH in the lamb substituted for the life taken in Egypt.

The Words of Institution changed the meaning of the Passover, for they changed the meaning of the communion meal and the substitution of life represented by the blood. The focus shifted from a celebration of remembrance to a celebration of personal presence. No longer did the followers remember a past event in the meal and the use of the blood; now, they would celebrate the presence of the Christ and what he did to free God's people. His body became the meal, his blood became the sign of liberation. More important, the meal became a sign, not of God's action that gave birth to a people, but of the Kingdom. The focus shifted to the future. That is why Jesus would not drink from the cup again until the Kingdom would be realized (26:29).

One last item should be mentioned. The notion of the "new covenant" in Matthew did not mean a split from the Mosaic covenant, or an abrogation



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of that covenant. Instead, it was a clear reference to Jeremiah 31:

Behold, the days come, says YHWH, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they broke, although I was a husband to them, says YHWH. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says YHWH: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people: and they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know YHWH; for they shall all know me, from their least to their greatest, says YHWH: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (World English Bible)

Jeremiah's prophecy stressed intimacy with God. Jesus' declaration of the new covenant placed the focus of intimacy squarely on his sacrifice on the cross. Faith in Jesus and what he did would bring his followers closer to the Father in heaven.

The cup of his Blood would become the subject of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

C. Prediction of Peter's Denial

26:31 "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." This is from Zechariah 13:7.

26:32 "before the cock crows" In the Roman sense of time (four watch periods during the night), this is between midnight (the second watch) and three o'clock in the morning (the third watch).

The third part of the Last Supper acts as a bookend to the first. Betrayal and denial are cousins; both leave the betrayed/denied aban-

doned. Both are sins that in some sense depend on pride; betrayal presumes that the act will lead to something better; denial is cowardice shrouded in bravado. Both heighten the sacrifice Jesus inferred in the Words of Institution.

So the first part and the third part makes the actual meal/sacrifice of the Last Supper all the more important. Jesus will serve the sinners, even when those sinners are his closest followers. Despite their brags and denial, they will abandon him, but he will never abandon them. The prophecy of stumbling acts as a transition from the Last Supper to the Agony and arrest in the Garden.

Part 2: The Agony in the Garden and the Arrest of Jesus

A. The Agony in the Garden

26:36 "Gethsemane" was an olive grove at the base of the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. The word, meaning "olive press," was transliterated from the Hebrew into the Greek.

26:39 "HE prostrated (himself) face down" is literally "He fell down on his face." Prostration was a proper prayer position, since it was the position of a loyal citizen in the court of the king (see Genesis 17:3, 17; Numbers 14:5, 16:4; Joshua 7:6).

"(allow) this cup to pass by ME" In the Hebrew prophets, the cup was a symbol for punishment and revenge (Isaiah 51:17, Jeremiah 49:12, Ezekiel 23:32). So, by extension, the cup became a symbol of suffering by the victim of unjust punishment and vengeance.

The Agony in the Garden was a time of prayer and testing for Jesus. Like the Transfiguration, Jesus took Peter, James and John aside with him for a time of intimacy with the Father. Like the Transfiguration, the friends of Jesus were sleepy. But, unlike the Transfiguration, Jesus would not



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be bathed in glory. His glory would be his agony; his time with the Father would be a time of testing.

Three times he goes off to pray, three times he sees his followers taking their rest. His prayer has sacramental and eschatological overtones. The cup he prays to avoid was the same cup he shared with his disciples at the Seder; it is the same cup he challenged James and John with when they requested prime seats in his Kingdom ("Are you able to drink from the cup that I drink or be dunked in the baptism I am dunked in?" Mark 10:38). Unlike Jesus, the disciples could not drink from the cup until they receive the Spirit ("The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"). This cup of suffering would be the cup that opened the doors to the Kingdom.

B. Arrest of Jesus

26:49 "Rejoice, Rabbi." The term "rejoice" was the standard greeting in Greek; the Latin equivalent was "Hail."

26:52 "twelve legions of angels" In the time of Jesus, a Roman legion numbered 6000 soldiers and 6000 support personnel.

26:55 Jesus' rhetorical question and corollary were meant as insults. The same forces used by the religious leadership to keep order in the Temple came in the dark (the time of evil) to arrest him. If Jesus was really such a threat, they should have acknowledged such and arrested him in broad daylight before everyone he taught.

Judas' betrayal was complete with a simple greeting. The "hello" ("Rejoice" in Greek), the title "Rabbi," and the customary kiss were cynical signs of a former believer. Judas now stood with those who would condemn him.

The arrest would meet with shallow resistance. The wound of the high priests assistant (servant) was meant to be an insult toward the high priest,

and not an attempt at a moral blow. In addition, Jesus challenged the leadership in the Temple over his arrest ("Daily, I sat in the Temple teaching and you did not arrest me"); Jesus insinuated the immorality of leadership in the means of the arrest ("You come out in this way with swords and clubs to take control of me like a thief?"). These points will highlight the rift between Jesus and the high priest that will become apparent in the next study on Matthew's Passion.

Jesus urged restraint on the part of his followers, for he would exercise restraint his powers ("do you think I am not able..."). He was the one the arresting party sought. The rest of the followers ran away; as they fled, they implicitly abandoned their status as disciples. If they addressed Jesus at this point, would he respond "You say...?"

"You say..." Jesus is Lord by who he is and what he does. But, it requires faith to see Jesus as Lord and Savior. While faith is a gift from God, it is freely given, so freely received. And that reception is a responsibility that requires us to call him "Lord."

"You say..." I say you are Lord, no matter the cost.

Q: Jesus is Lord. What do those words mean to you?

Passion 2: Why Was Jesus Condemned by the Sanhedrin?

Among scholars, one of the lasting controversies about the death of Jesus can be summed up in one sentence: Why did Jesus have to die? This question cuts to the heart of faith in Christ as the Savior of the world. But set aside the theological implications for a moment and place the question in a historical context. Why did the Jewish and Roman officials feel compelled to execute a wandering preacher from the back water village of Nazareth?



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One popular answer is actually a logical trap. According to this argument, since Jesus declared he was the “Son of God,” he was either truthful, or he was a fraud or insane (first premise). Since Scripture states Jesus was innocent and sane (second premise), we have only one conclusion: he is the Son of God. The first premise fails since it is insensitive to historical context; it assumes the meaning of the phrase “Son of God” in a Christian context (second person of the Trinity), not in a Jewish context (Davidic king or apocalyptic prophet or rival High Priest). It assumes the unity of the Scriptural canon and does not address each gospel on its own merits. In addition, it does not consider the possibility Jesus died for a number of reasons, not just his claims.

In Matthew, Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah before the Sanhedrin; this admission is only made in Mark 14:61. While he never denied the title, he didn't insist on it, either. When Caiaphas asked him the question, Jesus answered, “You say...” Then Jesus went on to loosely quote Daniel 7:13: “...behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.” (World English Bible) So, where did he commit blasphemy? Why was he condemned?

The answer for Matthew can be found in his own gospel. Two statements from Jesus in 26:55 give us a key: “Jesus said to the crowd, “You come out in this way with swords and clubs to take control of ME like a thief? Daily, I sat in the Temple teaching and you did not seize ME.” In other words, Jesus charged the Temple leadership with immorality. And he so far as to preach against that leadership in the Temple itself! So, the leadership made the decision to arrest this popular in secret (not to cause a riot in the Temple), condemn him, then execute him in a way to bring shame on him, his teachings and his followers.

To make this point clear, the study will be out of order, beginning with Judas' repentance, return of the blood money and suicide.

27:5 “he hung himself.” The means of Judas death in 27:5 does not agree with the detail found in Acts 1:18:

Now this man obtained a field with the reward for his wickedness, and falling headlong, his body burst open, and all his intestines gushed out.

World English Bible

27:7 “a cemetery for foreigners.” Morally unclean moneys was used for ritually unclean purpose (burying) of ritually unclean people (Gentiles).

27:8-9 “ thirty silver coins...for the Field of Potters” There is no direct verse from Jeremiah about 30 silver coins or a potter's field. Jeremiah 32:6-15 described the sale of a field; 18:2-3 described potters. Matthew might have also had Zechariah 11:12-13 in mind:

*12 I said to them, “If you think it best, give me my wages; and if not, keep them.” So they weighed for my wages thirty pieces of silver.
13 YHWH said to me, “Throw it to the potter, the handsome price that I was valued at by them!” I took the thirty pieces of silver, and threw them to the potter, in the house of YHWH.*

World English Bible

The first item that jumps out of this passage is the word “Korban,” a Hebrew word meaning “sacrifice.” The word covered all things offered to YHWH, not simply the slaughter and burning of animals on the altar or the burning of grain on the altar. The prefix “ko” referred to the ritual purity required to offer such sacrifice. The word “kosher” meant items and actions related to such



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purity. The priestly caste who offered worship in the Temple were known as the “kohanim”. Many of the edicts found in the Torah refer to the purity required of the priest to offer sacrifice.

The notion of “korban” cannot be overstated in the life of Judaism. The First Commandment (“I am the Lord your God...”) specified a relationship between YHWH and the believer. He is God. That fact alone required the faithful to worship him. “Korban” was both the substance (animal or plant offering) and vehicle (burnt on an altar by a official designated by the community) of that worship. Korban linked the worshiper to that worshiped.

In the context of Matthew 26, “Korban” meant the Temple treasury. The Temple treasury was a charity dedicated to the poor and homeless in the area of Jerusalem; the monies not used for building or maintenance, as these costs were covered by the generosity of the rulers or the rich. Since the charity was attached to the Temple, the collection was considered an act of individual worship, hence the name “Korban.”

Over time, two schools of thought developed on the notion of “korban,” one prophetic (held by the Pharisees) and the other the priestly (held by the Sadducees). The prophetic notion was explained by Micah the prophet:

How shall I come before YHWH and bow myself before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will YHWH be pleased with thousands of rams? With tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my disobedience? The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good. Do YHWH requires of you; act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:6-8 (World English Bible)

In this understanding, morality and the attitude in worship trumped the act of worship. In other words, true sacrifice was found in a moral life-style and a prayerful disposition. Korban became the responsibility of the individual believer.

The priestly notion of korban stood in stark contrast:

If the High Priest is to [minister to YHWH, whoever] has been ordained to put on the vestments in place of his father, shall offer [a bull fo]r all the people and another for the priests. He shall offer the one for the priests first...[(The elders) shall sprinkle (the blood of the sacrifice) on him and his vestment some of the blood which was on the altar]...[he] shall be [holy] all his days. [He shall not go near any dead body]. He shall [not] render himself unclean [even for his father or mother,] for [he is] h[oly to YHWH, his God]...

Temple Scroll (pp. 195, The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English, translated by Geza Vermes, Penguin Classics, revised edition 2004)

The Temple Scroll was one of the documents found in the Dead Sea Scrolls that, most scholars agree, was revered by the Qumran community. Indeed, this document helped scholars understand that the Essences at Qumran were scribes from the priestly caste that tried to live a highly kosher life, so, when the Apocalypse came, they would be worthy to replace the corrupt priesthood in the Temple and then offer YHWH pure worship. While they were enemies of the Temple leadership, they shared the same viewpoint of the Sadducees: korban focused on the external and, by definition, required the place and function of the priest. Just as the worship of the Holy One was also holy, those who facilitated that worship were also holy, even to the exclusion of one's duty to his parents. Korban, in this sense, was external and lay in the exclusive realm of the priests.



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So, there were two major notions of kosher at play, both in conflict at times. The prophets held moral purity in highest esteem; it focused on the individual, his duty to live according to the Torah and his attitude of piety. The priests held ritual purity as primary; it focused on the matter and extremal form of the sacrifice offered at the Temple, the place where YHWH dwelt. The priestly notion focused on corporate worship, over that of the individual.

Where did Jesus stand viz-a-viz the notion of “korban?” Consider Jesus’ teaching in Mark:

Jesus said to them, “Full well do you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother;’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.’* But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is KORBAN, that is to say, given to God’;’ then you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or his mother, making void the word of God by your tradition, which you have handed down. You do many things like this.*

Mark 7:9-13 (World English Bible)

In the tradition of the prophets, Jesus held moral purity trumped ritual purity and criticized the scribes who held that duty to God could make void one’s duty to parents. According to Jesus’ logic, God gave the commandments, and, so, none were negotiable. Korban was moral in nature and, so, limited the extent of ritual purity.

The Sadducees, however, saw korban as ritual in nature; hence, the ritual trumped the moral, the external trumped the internal. Reread Matthew 27:3-10 (above) and notice the logic of the leadership. Their concern was not with the morality of their actions, but upon the ritual purity of the monies Judas returned to Temple. They could not mingle the blood money given to Judas with the Temple treasury, for that would have made the

treasury (and, by extension, the Temple itself) ritually impure.

So, why did the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin itself want to execute Jesus? He was a bitter critic of the leadership, especially the notion that ritual purity was superior to moral purity. Jesus preached this message in the Temple itself to a receptive, even rabid audience. Clearly, Jesus had to go and go in a way that would discredit him so thoroughly that his movement would not pose a threat to the order of cult.

26:57 “Caiaphas” was one “Joseph, son of Caiaphas,” the son-in-law of Annas and was high priest from 18-37 AD. The longevity of his office indicated he was politically well connected, since the post of high priest was appointed by Rome. Indeed, under Annas the patriarch, that priestly clan controlled the high priesthood for almost 50 years under the Emperors.

26:59 The Sanhedrin was the ruling council for the Temple and religious matters in Jerusalem. It consisted of both Sadducees (the party of the high priests and the city fathers in Jerusalem) and Pharisees (civic leaders in local neighborhoods throughout Judea and the Diaspora). The Sadducees were focused on Temple cult while the Pharisees were oriented toward study of the Torah; both camps had their scribes, but the number within the Pharisees far out-numbered those associated with the Temple. At full strength, the Sanhedrin numbered 71 members, but as few as 23 could declare a quorum for business. A gathering of the Sanhedrin at night was highly unusual and, so, highly suspect. (Matthew’s note on “seeking false testimony” only heightened the suspicion; the trial would be prejudicial and, so, illegal according to the Law.) We do not know what Matthew meant by the phrase “entire Sanhedrin.” Did he mean all 71 or just enough to create a quorum?



“they might condemn him to death” is literally “they could execute him.”

26:60 “two, stepping forward...” According to the Law, two witnesses were required for a court to condemn a person to death on a serious charge.

26:64 “...you will see the SON OF MAN sitting at the right (hand) of the Almighty and coming on the clouds of heaven.” This passage referred to Daniel 7:13, where the prophet saw the definitive sign of the end times, the coming of the Son of Man figure. In 26:64, the Son of Man sat on the divine judgment throne (usually associated with the Final Judgment) and his coming appearance. While Jesus did not directly answer the question of Caiaphas about his identity (his answer could be seen as ambiguous), he did declare the judgment of the Sanhedrin against him as the turning point for the end times. Once he was condemned in Matthew, the council would see signs of the eschaton.

26:65 According to the Misnah, a Jewish chronicle of Law rulings written in the third century AD, a blasphemer needed to utter the divine name (YHWH) in order to be condemned. The use of the phrase “the Power” (also called “the Almighty”) could have been interpreted as such an utterance. Again, according to the Misnah, the judge in a case of blasphemy was to stand and rend his clothes as a sign of a guilty verdict; the clothes were to never be worn again.

26:66 “...(they) spat on HIS face, (they) punched HIM, and some slapped (HIM)...” These were meant as insults.

26:67 “Prophecy for us, Christ...” This statement was meant to be ironic, since it was the prophecy of 26:64 that was the basis for the condemnation of Jesus.

The stage was set for the trial. Witnesses were produced to testify against Jesus, but, according to the text, their “facts” were contradictory. Finally, two stated, “He will tear down the Temple and in three days rebuild it.” In light of John 2:19, it is clear Jesus used that phrase openly in reference to himself and his mission, but the contradictions came in exactly how the statement was phrased, especially in the question of who would tear down the “temple.”

Jesus remained silent, and that silence forced the High Priest’s hand. “I put you under oath before the Living God, are you the Christ?” Jesus answered with the enigmatic “You say...” (already discussed in the previous study). Then Jesus added the prophecy of the end times based upon Daniel. But, here, Jesus plunges the knife into the role and status of the high priest and, by extension, the Sadducees. “...from this moment on, you will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds...” Notice the place Jesus gave no place for the priesthood in the Kingdom. He, in effect, reduced the role of the priestly caste to that of the observer in the events of the End Times. In the eyes of Jesus, the priests were no better than anyone else; they had no inherent place in the worship of YHWH that the Kingdom would provide. Jesus denied the korban of the priests.

This view was the polar opposite of the Sadducees and the Qumran community. For them, the presence of the divine in the Temple made the role and function of the priesthood not only necessary, but imperative. After all, a large number of the commands from the Torah concerned with the priests and proper worship. They were intimately intertwined in the korban the Law required.

Now we can understand the reaction of Caiaphas, even if it were staged. Jesus was condemned, not because he blasphemed against God; no, he blasphemed against the priesthood. And he represented a clear threat to the status of that priesthood.



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The stage was set for the cynicism of the Temple guards. Jesus was insulted with the same title others gave him and the way he spoke before the judgment. “Prophecy, Christ. Who slapped you?”

Peter Denies Jesus

26:69, 71 “a slave girl...another (slave girl)...” Matthew heightened the shame of Peter through the interrogation of the lowest in society, a slave girl. In a male dominated, gender segregated society, responding to such questioning was a sign of weakness and an implicit admission of guilt.

The die had been cast. The followers deserted the Master, now shame would follow. Matthew framed that shame in the starkest terms possible. Peter, the leader, denied Jesus before the least in Jewish society, a slave girl. As the note above mentioned, his address to such a person of low place, his need to defend himself against her accusations, made his denial an admission of guilt and an act of shame. With the turn of Peter, the male followers in essence stepped off the stage, only to return after the Resurrection. (There would be an exception, Joseph of Arimathea, but he would not appear until after the death of Jesus.) Jesus was now alone.

Stylistically, Matthew could now move to the trial before Pilate.

Jesus Before Pilate

27:2 “Pilate the governor” Pontius Pilate was the fifth prefect of the Roman province called Judea (26-36 AD). While the canonical Gospels describe Pilate as a reluctant judge in the case of Jesus, both the Jewish historian Josephus and the Jewish philosopher Philo (who was a contemporary of Pilate) spoke of governor as a ruthless and corrupt official. Their accounts seem to have some merit; Pilate was recalled to Rome in 36 AD to face trial on cor-

ruption, but escaped judgment when the emperor Tiberius died before he could be tried.

The Roman justice system had no place (or even concept) of a district attorney, a state office to present the accused to justice. Private citizens would present defendants before the rulers for judgment. Guilt was assumed, but there was the chance for the defendant to “talk his way out of” the charges. In other words, the justice system depended upon the rhetorical skills of the accusers and the accused; a trial was a debate between two parties in which life could hang in the balance.

So, the chief priests and elders of the people took Jesus to Pilate. The charge would be the political ramifications of the title “Christ.” The leaders wanted Jesus condemned as the “King of the Jews.”

Q: Reflect on your place and your attitude in worship. Do you focus on the place of the community and the presider? Or do you focus on your prayer and disposition? While, most of the time, these don't conflict, how would you respond if they did?

Passion 3: Condemnation, Crucifixion, Burial

Matthew's Passion has shifted from the place of Jesus with his followers to the place (or, lack of place) the leadership gave him. To the disciples, he was the Christ. To outsiders, he was an enigma and a challenge; as such, he was rejected. The leadership condemned him in a way that would sweep him and his movement off the social landscape. In short order he would be judged and executed, but that would not be the end. No, not the end...

27:11 “You say (so)” This response is common to all four gospels. Biblical scholars are uncertain as to the tone of the comment. (Was it an acknowledgment of Jesus to the title? Or, was it a sarcastic rejection of Pilate's taunt?) See



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the first part of the Passion study for more information on Jesus' response.

Why did Jesus endure such suffering in silence? To prove he was the Messiah? Contemporaries of Jesus believed suffering could be heroic. Silent endurance demonstrated the true strength character. In other words, the silence of Jesus before Pilate shouted: "Take your best shot. I'll still be standing." [27:11-13]

More than a proof for strength of character, the endurance of suffering could lead to a greater good. In silence, Jesus would suffer for others. As Isaiah 53:7-8 stated:

He was painfully abused, but he did not complain. He was silent like a lamb being led to the butcher, as quiet as a sheep having its wool cut off.

He was condemned to death without a fair trial. Who could have imagined what would happen to him? His life was taken away because of the sinful things my people had done. (RSV)

We must remember the Suffering Servant image from Isaiah connected the Passion with the Prophets. The image of the Messiah as one who suffered for the nation was a uniquely Christian concept; this image for God's Chosen did not exist before the emergence of the Jesus movement.

The term Barabbas (Aramaic, meaning "son of the father") addressed this theme. While the revolutionary may have used the title to hide his identity and to communicate solidarity with the common person, Matthew used the title to show Jesus suffered for all people. [15-18] We, as "sons (and daughters) of fathers," were released through suffering of the One condemned for being the Messiah.

Against Pilate's better judgment, he entertained the Jewish leaders' demand for blood. These leaders created a crowd atmosphere to crying out for kangaroo court justice. [11:20-25] The audi-

ence of Matthew's gospel saw both Pilate and the Jewish leaders as symbols for their concerns.

On the one hand, the Roman Empire (represented by Pilate) initially faced Christianity with an open mind. Most converts came from a non-Jewish general population. On the other hand, Jewish leadership within the area of Palestine (where Matthew probably penned his Gospel) and in the Diaspora had already excommunicated Jewish Christians. They rejected Jesus as the Messiah. In doing so, Matthew held, they who rejected Jesus refused his life-giving death. They would take the consequences of their actions upon themselves. [11:25]

Mob justice won the day. [11:26] In the time of Jesus, the one who controlled the mob ruled. To this end, the religious leaders sent their henchmen to manipulate and bully, so they could catch Pilate off guard. The Romans, too, played the mob game. Even Pilate once ordered his troops to don civilian clothes, run into the streets, physically harass the populace; this led to the death of hundreds in Jerusalem. In the psychology of terror tactics, both sides played the mob card to their advantage.

While Christians viewed the suffering of Jesus as salvific, non-believers could not understand the death of a common Jewish criminal as anything more than a humiliating end to a pointless life. Indeed, one of the earliest known Roman images of the crucifixion was a piece of graffiti. In the image, a slave prostrated himself before a crucified man with the head of an ass. The caption for the image read: "Alexander worships his god."

The Roman punishment of crucifixion meant to belittle the condemned so much that no one else would dare commit such an atrocity. By the time of death, the prisoner had no honor or good reputation to call his own. Romans calculated every step of the execution drama to clearly communicate utter disdain. Pilate executed Jesus as a revolutionary, a self-declared "King of the Jews." When they beat and insulted Jesus, the



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soldiers played their part in the drama. [11:27-31] They so weakened Jesus, they had to press a stranger into service for the execution (which was their right under Roman law). [11:32]

Finally, they executed Jesus in full view of the city. The clothes and possessions of the executed became the property of the soldiers, as payment for the service. To determine the ownership of the property, the soldiers gambled for the clothes before the still-living prisoner to heighten the sense of humiliation. [11:35] (Normally, Romans crucified prisoners without clothes, but they allowed Jewish prisoners to have loin cloths for sake of the modest Jewish populace.) The comments of the crowd, soldiers, and fellow prisoners only added to the disdain. As the only act of mercy in the scene, someone offered Jesus a drug-laced wine to dull the pain [11:34, 11:48].

The sign posted for the execution added irony to the scene. [11:37] Both Christians and non-Christians would agree the sign was appropriate. Jesus was, indeed, “King of the Jews,” the Messiah. For non-Christians, the sign made Jesus a laughing stock. For Christians, the sign revealed the purpose of Jesus’ mission.

27:39-44 The three groups surrounded Jesus in concentric circles. In the outside circle, travelers blasphemed Jesus. In the center circle, the leadership mocked him. In the inner circle, the robbers reviled him. As Matthew moved from the outside in, the reaction to the crucified Jesus became harsher (blasphemy to mocking to revulsion).

27:45-46 “sixth hour...ninth hour” In the Greek tradition, time was counted from dawn. So the sixth hour was noon, and the ninth hour was 3:00 P.M.

Despite the best efforts of the soldiers, Jesus would not give up. For his last words in Matthew’s passion, Jesus shouted out the first line to Psalm 22. [11:46] Like popular recordings of today, Jews knew the psalms by title (not by num-

ber which biblical scholars established in the 1600’s). Psalm 22 began with a lament but ends with a defiant statement of hope. Compare Psalm 22:1 (“My God, my God, why have you deserted me? Why are you so far away? Won’t you listen to my groans and come to my rescue?”) to Psalm 22:23 (“The Lord doesn’t hate or despise the helpless in all of their troubles. When I cried out, he listened and did not turn away.”). For this reason, people in the crowd wondered if God would help him. Since Jews believed Elijah would come to announce the coming of the Messiah, those in the crowd would have expected the first of the prophets to appear. [11:47-49]

27:50 “...gave up his spirit.” Jesus died.

27:51-52 The emphatic “Look!” introduced a series of events that, taken together, described what would happen in the end times (violence against the Temple, earthquakes, and the resurrection of the just). Notice the passive voice of the verbs. The person who caused these events was God himself.

For Matthew, the death of Jesus marked the beginning of God’s Kingdom. The curtain in the Temple which separated the sanctuary area (with the altar of sacrifice) from the Holy of Holies (a room that contained the Ark of the Covenant). Jews pointed to the Temple (particularly the Holy of Holies) as a definitive dwelling for the presence of God. Now, with the curtain spilt, God’s presence spilled from the Temple over the city.

Other cosmic signs of the Kingdom appeared. Earthquakes and resurrections marked the shift away from a time of despair to an era of hope. The signs cumulated in the soldiers’ confession of faith. Stuck with holy fear from God’s revelation in the death of Jesus, they proclaimed Jesus God’s true Son.

The split in the sanctuary curtain, the signs and the act of faith by the Roman guard mirrored the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas. Here, instead of



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the high priest, God tore his garments and raged at the sight of the blasphemy. Here, instead of denying and mocking the Christ, the soldiers proclaimed their faith in “the Son of God.”

27:26: “Mary, mother of James and John, mother of the sons of Zebedee.” Since James and John were the sons of Zebedee, the mention of Mary’s motherhood twice was redundant.

The mention of the women had a two-fold purpose for Matthew. First, it reinforced the abandonment of the disciples to their shame. Only the women were faithful; no male could brag of his fidelity after this point. Second, the women would be the first witnesses to the Resurrection. Their word would be the first to proclaim the Good News; men could only evangelize from this starting point of human weakness and humility. This would be God’s work, not man’s. The presence of the women linked the death of Jesus to his risen glory.

27:59 “his new tomb which had been carved from rock.” Excavations in and near Jerusalem indicate that the tombs from the time of Jesus were family burial plots. With this in mind, the burial place for Joseph within the family tomb could have been freshly hewed. As an act of charity for Jesus and as a means to keep the Sabbath from being violated, Joseph buried Jesus in his place within the family “crypt.”

As the disciples abandoned Jesus before his death, it would only be natural for Matthew that a disciple would enter the scene to care for the remains of Jesus after his death. Some scholars believe Joseph requested the body not only as an act of mercy for the remains of one cherished, they hold Joseph, a faithful Jew, wanted to quickly bury the Lord so the Sabbath could be honored. Leaving the dead in full view of Jerusalem defiled the Sabbath, so Joseph wanted to maintain the ritual purity of the city. (Talk about irony!)

Joseph buried Jesus in his family’s crypt. How do we know this? First century burial plots in Jerusalem were caves for the remains of the family; each deceased member had his own “shelf”; a large stone was rolled in front of the tomb after interment. It is interesting to note that surrounding the Tomb of Jesus within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, other burial caves exist in the family plot design described. This is the strongest proof that the Church is the historical place of Jesus’s death and burial.

27:62 “On the morrow, which is after the day of preparation” This was a round-about way to say “on the Sabbath.”

27:63 “Sir” is literally “Lord.” It was used to recognize Pilate’s authority.

27:66 “sealing the stone” Scholars are not sure what this means, whether some sort of official document was placed on the stone, or if some sort of clay was pressed against the stone to prove movement.

As a last act of damage control, the Temple leadership asked Pilate for sentry to secure the tomb. They feared the body would be stolen, then the followers could claim Jesus rose from the dead, as a sign the apocalyptic preaching of the Master was vindicated. (Doesn’t such an act by “loyal disciples” fly in the face of their cowardice?)

In the end, Pilate acquiesced. But was it the end? Not at all.

Take some time this week to reread the Passion, attend Good Friday services or Stations of the Cross. Relive the events that led up to the death of Jesus. Make your journey with the Lord an act of worship.