



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Palm Sunday (C)**

#### **The Man of Sorrows**

**[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 23:1-49**

There are times when the enormity of the Passion Story, in all its stark simplicity, pushes us to our knees and breaks our hearts anew. Yes, we do read portions of this drama whenever we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, but hearing it whole, from the somber moments of the Last Supper to the burial, becomes almost unbearable. This is a retelling that uses no adjectives and only a scarce number of adverbs; it doesn't need them. The unfolding of the story of God's tragic love revealed in the Son needs no embellishments. This is a story of inclusion and abandonment, of trust and rejection. Listen to the power of the verbs:

They brought Jesus before Pilate...

Pilate sent Jesus to Herod...

He questioned him...

They mocked him...

They blindfolded him...

They kept heaping insults on him...

The Lord of the Universe allows himself to be moved from place to place, to be questioned by corrupt politicians, to be mocked by a fickle mob. Just a few days ago, they were praising him as he entered Jerusalem. How quickly praise turns into abuse and celebration into tragedy when human beings regard as valid only the triumph of the military and the victory of armies instead of the truth of God. Now the mob, urged on by lies, spit on him and slap him on the face. Isaiah's words find their painful realization: "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." We are horrified. "Why did God allow this?" we cry from the distance of the 21st century as we have done through the ages.

And then we remember Paul's words to the Philippians: "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." Paul has understood the promise and the tragedy in the heart of creation. He writes of Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross."

We now watch as the evangelist continues his stark description of Jesus who is not responding to the mockery, not calling on his followers to defend him, but allowing the evildoers to continue their gruesome march as they push him to the cross. Up to the point of his arrest, he has been in charge of the drama; now he relinquishes his power. We watch the abandonment, the utter loneliness of the Lord of life as he is being led to his death. Throughout the long, terrible night of Thursday, we feel his profound love for his friends at their last supper together, we weep at the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and hear his painful question at his arrest: "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!" We too enter with him into the darkness that seems to triumph throughout the night and the day that follows. All hope has departed from those who loved him best and from us. The power of darkness has engulfed us.

And so, we enter Holy Week, as participants, not observers. Let us watch and let us listen. We too are feeling the weight of darkness in a world torn by strife and hatred. We wait. We hear his words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." But we also hear the words of utter faith as he dies: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

In November 1940, Coventry Cathedral in England was bombed to destruction. The city has allowed the bombed frame to remain as it was found on the days that followed, while the new cathedral stands next to it, rebuilt. After the bombing, the faithful found two charred beams of wood as they had fallen in the shape of the cross. They tied them together and the cross stands today at the altar. Behind it, these words are engraved, words that stand unto eternity as a testimony to the events of the Passion:

"Father, forgive."

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