

Homily for Palm Sunday, Year A

April 2, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

Gospel at the Procession: Matthew 21:1-11 (Triumphal entry into Jerusalem.)

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7 (God's suffering servant accepts his fate without shame.)

Responsory: Psalm 22 (My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?)

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11 (Jesus emptied himself, and God greatly exalted him.)

Gospel: Matthew 26:14-27:66 (The Passion according to Matthew.)

Crowds feature prominently in *both* gospel readings today, though their responses to Jesus could not possibly be any more different. Before the opening procession, we heard the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The people gathered here for worship played the part of the rejoicing throng on the Mount of Olives, waving their palm branches and crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Then, later in the very same mass, this assembly found itself in a very different mood, playing the part of an angry mob screaming repeatedly, "Let him be crucified!" The scene shifts from coronation to condemnation in a matter of *minutes!* Even in real time, these scenes occurred only a few days apart. For any eyewitnesses present at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his Way of the Cross, the sudden reversal must have been shocking. But for Jesus, this was not a surprise at all. He predicted that all these things would happen, even that they *must* happen. By the time he mounted that donkey to cries of "Hosanna in the highest," he knew that he would not make it out of the city alive. He had come not to *reign*, but to *die*. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, he had "set his face like flint, knowing that he would not be put to shame."

These two crowd scenes, juxtaposed as they are in the same liturgy, capture the essence of the Paschal Mystery. The depth of human sin is on full display as Pilate offers to release Jesus, but the people call for his crucifixion instead. Look at the hatred, the anger, the jealousy, the ignorance... This is why the world so desperately needed a Savior. This is why the Father sent Jesus into the world. On the other hand, the height of human aspirations is on full display on the Mount of Olives, as the people enthusiastically acclaim Jesus, their Messiah. Look at the hope, the joy, the love, the faith... This is a people that longs for the freedom that only God can give them. Jesus knew that the only way for him to satisfy the longing of the adoring crowd and save the angry crowd from destruction was to hand himself over and be nailed to a cross. He "emptied himself," as St. Paul says, so that his Father might "greatly exalt him."

Let's not pretend that this was easy for Jesus, even though he alone had the advantage of understanding what was really happening and why. He still had to suffer all the anguish of the Passion. We tend to focus mostly on the *physical* suffering – the scourging, the nails pounded through his hands and feet, and the slow suffocation that ultimately caused his death. But let's not forget the *emotional* trauma that added even more weight to Jesus' suffering. The multiple betrayals must have been truly heartbreaking. First, one of his own disciples sets him up to be arrested. Then, when the authorities close in on Jesus, the rest of his disciples flee, leaving him all alone. Later, as he's being tried as a blasphemer, Peter, his closest friend, who

pledged his undying loyalty to Jesus only hours earlier, denies three times that he even knows him. Finally, most heartbreaking of all, Jesus looks down from the cross at his grieving mother and a handful of faithful followers as he feels his life slipping away.

Matthew's version of the Passion also reveals the *spiritual* anguish that Jesus endured, something that is totally absent from John's version, which we always hear on Good Friday. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus is being arrested, he says to his disciples, "Do you think that I cannot call upon the Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled which say that it must come to pass in this way?" Jesus understands that there is only one way to accomplish his mission, but he also realizes that he has the power to say, *at any moment*, "Stop this madness; I've had enough!" Every step of the way, he *chooses to go on*, to let the suffering continue, for our sake. As he is praying in the Garden, as he is being arrested, as he is being interrogated, as he is being mocked by the soldiers, as he is being vilified by the crowd, as he is being scourged and humiliated and crucified, even as he is dying on the cross, *he chooses to keep going*. He puts all his trust in the Father, even as he feels in his very human heart that he is being abandoned to die alone in agony. Jesus hands over *his body* to his executioners, but he hands over *his will* to his Heavenly Father.

It is *this* aspect of Jesus' Passion that all of us Christians are called to imitate. It often seems a bit melodramatic to say that we're, "uniting our sufferings to those of Christ." Our sufferings don't compare with his. His physical pain and mental anguish were much greater than ours. And, unlike him, we don't have a choice to endure our suffering or call upon a legion of angels to stop it. But, we *do* have a choice regarding the attitude with which we confront suffering. We can whine and complain and feel sorry for ourselves, or we can hand over our will to the Father and ponder what graces might emerge from our ordeal. If we truly believe that Jesus' suffering was redemptive for all humankind, then we must also believe that *our* suffering can be redemptive in some way, both for ourselves and for other people. Though Jesus' suffering *appeared* senseless, we know that it was not without *meaning*. Neither is ours. We must believe that all of our Passion narratives, like his, will conclude with some type of resurrection and new life, even if we can't imagine what it might be. Whatever Good Friday we may be experiencing, we must trust in God and believe that Easter will come.