

Sixth Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday

Year C, 2025

Is 50:4-7

Phil 2:6-11

Ps 22

Lk 22:14-23:56

Shame and suffering

The first three readings for Palm Sunday are the same year after year. Only the Gospel changes, as each year we read the Passion as presented in Matthew, then Mark, then Luke.

In the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, the promised suffering servant speaks of the insults and violence that he will have to bear for speaking the word that God has given him to speak, a word that is meant to rouse the weary and comfort the lowly. And yet, because of his determination and fidelity – he has set his face like flint and keeps God alone before his eyes – his suffering brings him no disgrace, no shame.

And this makes sense. For what does the just one, the righteous one, the one who has done no wrong, in whom no evil can be found, have to be ashamed about? The one with a clear conscience – *who walks without blame, does what is right, speaks the truth from the heart, does not slander with the tongue, does no harm to a friend, never defames a neighbor, who disdains the wicked, but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps an oath despite the cost, lends at no interest, and accepts no bribe against the innocent* – such a one has nothing to be ashamed about (Ps 15). The righteous can be made to suffer terribly, as if they were guilty, when in fact, they are innocent. But the shameful treatment forced upon the just one does not attach to him, does not sully him.

No, it is the wicked, those who scoff and mock and knowingly perpetrate injustice, these are the ones who are tarnished, defiled, dishonored by what they have conspired to do and have done. The shame is theirs. They have shown themselves to be venal, petty, corrupt. Theirs is the dishonor. Theirs is the shame. But let's not focus on them. Rather, let us dare to examine our own conduct and motives and expose to the light of truth our own venality, pettiness, and corruption. This is to my own shame. It is enough for me to bear. It is unbearable. How could I find the time or space to consider the shame of another?

The just one – and here we are talking about Jesus – though blameless and without shame, is nonetheless made to suffer in a shameful way. And his innocence, his goodness, his blamelessness only makes his suffering more incomprehensible, more painful.

It is one thing to suffer for the wrong you have done. When the guilty are made to suffer for their wickedness they call out for mercy, like in Psalm 51: *“Have mercy on me, God, in your merciful love; in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions. Thoroughly wash away my guilt and from my sin cleanse me.”*

But the innocent, made to suffer as if guilty, cry out in different words, in a different timbre, like in Psalm 22, not for mercy, but for deliverance: *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? ... Lord, do not stay far off; my strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the grip of the dog. Save me from the lion's mouth, my poor life from the horns of wild bulls.”*

The prayer of Jesus on the cross, *Eloi, eloi lama sabachthani?* “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” given to us in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, is the prayer of the innocent one who is being made to suffer unjustly. It is a prayer for deliverance that Jesus speaks for himself, but also for every person who has ever been made to suffer unjustly at the hands of the sinful. It is a cry that arises from his suffering humanity, a plea made before the Father, who hears his prayer and answers.

The sinner prays for mercy. This is my prayer and yours. The innocent prays for deliverance from his unjust suffering. This is Jesus’s prayer for himself.

But what about praying for those who persecute you, loving your enemies? (Mt 5:44) Who can do such a thing? Hard to imagine doing on a fair, spring day such as today. Unthinkable and out of the question when your body is racked with pain, your mind wrecked by the wanton cruelty you are unjustly suffering. And yet “*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.*”

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus had taught that those who wished to be children of their heavenly Father had to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect and that this meant loving their enemies and praying for those who persecuted them. What Jesus taught in word, he lived in deed. And so, on the cross, loving his enemies, he prayed for his persecutors, asking for them what they would not and could not ask for themselves, enslaved as they were by their pride and their sin. “*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.*”

Humanly speaking, the moral and spiritual strength that Jesus exhibits in that moment is hard to fathom. Most anyone else would be consumed with understandable self-pity or burning with justifiable outrage. But in that moment of crisis, Jesus showed who he was: the Son of God. Mercy was his answer, not judgment. Forgiveness, not condemnation.

When, as we heard in our second reading from Philippians, Paul speaks about Jesus “emptying himself,” “humbling himself,” we now see something of what that humbling self-emptying looks like. Setting aside his own suffering, excruciating as it was physically, emotionally, and spiritually, Jesus showed himself to be a child of the heavenly Father – loving perfectly, praying perfectly, perfect as the Father is perfect – prompting the centurion to declare him guiltless, “This man was innocent beyond doubt” and to proclaim, “Truly, this was the Son of God!” (Mt 27:54).

We will now pause for a time in which we will be still in silence, to reflect on what we have heard today in the Scriptures, each of us according to how the Spirit may move us. Wherever the Spirit may lead us in prayer, may it be to imitate Jesus ever more fully in our words, in our desires, and in our actions: “Father ... not my will but yours be done. Father, into my hands I commend my spirit.”

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.