

MARCH 25TH, 2018: PALM SUNDAY

Isaiah 50:4-7 Philippians 2:6-11 Mark 14:1-15:47

Every Palm Sunday I recall the old joke (I first heard it in high school) of the Hispanic man who attends his first major league baseball game. Returning home, his family, anxious to hear about his experience, asks, “How did they treat you?” “They couldn’t have been nicer,” he replies. “For instance, before the game started everyone stood up and asked, ‘Jose, can you see?’”

In some sense, that’s exactly what happened to Jesus on the original Palm Sunday.

Historically, it’s the Sunday before Passover; pilgrims by the thousands are coming into Jerusalem. To assure an instant, panoramic view of the Holy City, many enter by coming into town over the Mount of Olives, singing pilgrimage psalms as they process. One of the most popular songs is Psalm 118, with the refrain, “Blessings on the one who comes in the name of Yahweh.” Some might tear off olive branches, even throw down and walk on their cloaks to transform a simple rural road into a “via sacra.” (My old St. Louis U. prof., Dr. Irvin Arkin, once claimed there were actual records of ancient lawsuits filed by the Mount’s olive growers against the temple priests because their groves were being devastated by pilgrims every high holy day.)

With or without a donkey, Jesus’ pilgrimage group could have been one of at least two dozen coming into Jerusalem on that particular Sunday, all in the same way. The only difference, his followers eventually realized that this time someone actually was coming in Yahweh’s name. When it originally took place, Jesus was just an indistinguishable pilgrim; one of thousands. Few noticed any uniqueness in his arrival; certainly wouldn’t have interpreted the event as our evangelists later did.

But adding the donkey leads Jesus’ followers to zero in on something many of us miss. Those Jerusalemites who at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah, were anticipating a very distinctive Messiah; a military leader who would liberate Israel from Roman occupation. That Messiah would ride a horse, not a donkey. Jesus’ mode of transportation during his pilgrimage entrance into the city gave a message most Israelites would have rejected. It might have been good news that the Messiah’s arriving; bad news that he’s riding a donkey. Only after his resurrection would his followers put the pieces together.

In the meantime, we presume this itinerant preacher from Capernaum identifies with Deutero-Isaiah, the author of today’s first reading. He, like the prophet, is determined to wake up each morning, listening for Yahweh’s word that day, even if that word brings him “buffets and spitting.” He hears things other people ignore. Yet, as Paul reminds the Philippians, that word always demands he “empty” himself, that he become completely one with those around him.

That’s why there’s so little physical suffering in Mark’s Passion Narrative. I have no doubt Jesus encountered great physical pain on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. Yet the evangelist writes his Passion/Resurrection Narrative with his readers in mind – those with whom Jesus becomes one - people who aren’t going to encounter much physical suffering in their lives. As Jesus became one with us, we’re to become one with him, to suffer and die with him so we can also live with him.

But, almost always, our suffering is more psychological than physical. We, like Jesus, are frequently misunderstood, friends desert, even “betray” us. In those painful moments, we’re still called to imitate Jesus and give ourselves by constantly becoming one with those who hurt us.

If a gospel Passion Narrative doesn’t even mention that Jesus was actually nailed to the cross, the author must be looking at Jesus’ crucifixion from a unique perspective; a perspective which demands we look at him and ourselves as unique, even in a crowd.

MARCH 29TH, 2018: EUCHARIST OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 I Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

That some Catholics still insist on receiving communion on their tongues creates problems for me. It's obvious they don't understand what we're celebrating tonight.

I clearly remember my 1947 first communion. Some of our religion teachers back then still considered us part of the "experiment" Pius X started in 1910 when he lowered the first communion age from 12 to 7. This controversial pope – who, if reigning today, certainly would condemn how I teach Scripture – removed almost all the "educational requirements" for first communicants, and demanded only that they distinguish Eucharistic bread from table bread. Since our parish employed flat, unleavened wafers, I passed that test every time. Jesus was only in that special kind of bread – the bread we never ate at supper.

Everything was directed toward the bread. We didn't dare look around, lest we break our concentration on it. When the decisive moment arrived for us to receive Jesus' body, we reverently folded our hands, put them under the communion rail cloth, stuck out our tongues, and swallowed the sacred wafer. It was debatable whether we should chew it or wait for it to dissolve. (Of course, the authentically pious – like myself – waited for it to dissolve.) We eventually returned to our place, heads down, and made our thanksgiving, never once diverting our eyes right or left.

Had Paul of Tarsus showed up at St. Mary's church on that overcast April morning, he would have turned to the person next to him and asked, "What's going on?" He couldn't have possibly recognized the Eucharistic action he refers to in today's I Corinthians pericope. The passage is highly significant; it's the earliest narrative of the Lord's Supper we have, predating the first gospel account by at least ten years.

If we start that Corinthian passage just a few verses before our liturgical reading, and end it a few verses beyond, the context will be evident. Paul isn't worried about some in his community disrespecting the risen Jesus in the bread and wine; he's concerned about them being disrespectful to the risen Jesus in one another. Those people who we were once warned – under pain of venial sin - to ignore as we received communion are precisely the people on whom the Apostle expects us to concentrate. Pius X wanted us to distinguish one kind of bread from another; Paul wants us to distinguish one community from another. One is just an ordinary gathering of people, like passengers on a plane; the other, during the Eucharist, is the Body of Christ.

Jesus refers to the agreement his Jewish ancestors made with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai when he says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Just as those runaway slaves were sprinkled with blood to show they'd made the covenant with Yahweh, so Jesus' followers will drink his blood to show they've made a covenant with him to carry on his ministry. They've actually become other Christs.

Blood, as we hear in tonight's first reading, is the biblical symbol of life. Just as the Israelites are saved by the lamb's blood on the doorpost, so we're saved by the life-giving blood of Jesus. But we don't sprinkle it; we drink it. Taking from the cup is the outward sign - instituted by Jesus - that we're determined to carry on Jesus' ministry. Just as married couples wear wedding rings as signs they're committed to one another, so we drink from the cup as a sign we're committed to the risen Jesus.

Of course, as tonight's Gospel shows, that commitment revolves around giving ourselves to others, even to the point of becoming their foot washers. After all, when we wash their feet, we're actually washing Jesus' feet. Not bad for amateur foot washers!