

## Commentary on Matthew's Gospel, Palm Sunday 2020

You were asked to pray over the text in Matthew that describes Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem. The Gospels see Jesus as entering Jerusalem at what will be the end of his ministry and thus it serves as a climax in all he has been offering Israel. It's one last chance, during Jesus' ministry, for Israel to open itself to the inbreaking reign of God, which is happening in Jesus' person and activity. Jesus chooses to live out the prophecy of Zechariah, according to which a just king will enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey, as was the Middle Eastern custom for royalty, but not as a triumphal and powerful victor. He enters as the non-violent ruler.

Matthew portrays many people who are living in Jerusalem or who are visiting the city for the Passover celebration as hailing Jesus with a kind of messianic fervor. This is all meant ironically, of course, because soon the people of Jerusalem will turn against Jesus.

You were also invited to pray over the entire Passion in Matthew's Gospel and not just the shorter version that is offered in tomorrow's liturgy as an alternative to the full narrative.

My brief commentary will focus on this shortened version of the Passion.

Matthew pictures the arrested Jesus as being brought before Pilate and then the chief priests and elders. When the Gentile Pilate asks Jesus whether he is the king of the Jews (a Gentile version of Messiah), Jesus ambiguously answers: "You say so." When leaders of his own people ask him, he remains silent. If he answers "yes," he will be misunderstood. If he says "no," he will also be misunderstood.

Pilate shows that he wants to avoid finding Jesus guilty and then having him executed. He takes advantage of the custom of releasing a

condemned criminal at Passover time. The terrible irony is that a convicted violent revolutionary and threat to the Roman empire is released instead of Jesus. Jesus was no violent revolutionary but he was, in his own way, a revolutionary and a threat to the Roman empire, if people accepted his message and lived it out.

The Roman governor dramatically washes his hands of Jesus, declaring that he is innocent of this man's blood. He wants all the guilt to rest on the chief priests and elders, who have cried for Jesus' execution.

We know from history that Pilate could be a vicious ruler, so this portrayal needs interpretation. Some scholars believe it represents an effort to soften the Gentile involvement in Jesus's execution, given the later mission to the Gentiles. (But it remains a fact that it was Gentiles tortured and crucified him, and they were the only ones allowed to do this in Jesus' day.)

Then the whole people shouted: “His blood be upon us and our children.”

We need to pause and reflect on this fateful statement. For centuries it has been used to justify persecution of the Jews.

What they are saying is that they accept responsibility for Jesus’s being put to death, and that this responsibility—and its consequences—will affect the present generation and the next generation, that is, literally, the children of those who are shouting this. Not their children’s children, or their children’s children’s children. For Matthew the consequences of the execution of Jesus will come down on the heads of the present crowd and their children because they will suffer the Roman destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, which was viewed by Christians as the punishment, the working out of the harmful consequences, of rejecting Jesus, the true Messiah of God.

There is another level to what they are saying, I believe, which not all commentators pick up. The crowd doesn't know it, but they are asking that Jesus' blood—Jesus' life-- be poured out on them, analogous to the way blood was poured on the altar in the Temple at the Day of Atonement. It's possible to read the text as having a deeper, and more salutary, meaning than that intended by the crowd. Jesus' death represents the pouring out, as offer, divine mercy and forgiveness for sinners, and that includes those who are killing Jesus.

Matthew next recounts how the soldiers mock and scorn Jesus, by pretending to treat him as king. This is fulfillment of verses in Psalm 69. A horrific aspect of the way Jesus was being treated was the utter mockery involved. The soldiers and their superiors were engaging in a vicious shaming of Jesus, in a society deeply marked by concern for acquiring honor and avoiding shame. They are trying to turn Jesus into a non-person, a sub-person, but their victory would be assured only if

Jesus were brought to the point where he agreed with how they were treating him.

On the cross Jesus cries out, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachhani,” (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”)

This is another verse that needs to be approached carefully. We can’t determine in final way whether Jesus uttered these words on the cross, but a strong argument for its historicity is that it would have been very unlikely for the early church to place this on his lips, given their resurrection faith in him as Son of God and Messiah. It is too shocking an utterance.

One thing we can say is that this is not a cry of despair, because (1) Jesus is turning to God and (2) he is telling God what his honest experience is: these are two marks of authentic prayer.

I believe that Jesus, as he was dying on the cross, had a profound experience of dereliction, a deep sense of having lost his habitual experience of God as present to him and loving him and supporting him. This condition of being stripped of his ordinary religious experience when he most needed it, had to be the occasion for excruciating suffering, added to his physical and psychological pain.

Jesus dies in the deepest solidarity with all those who experience the loss of God, the loss of their sense of God, because of what they are going through. The resurrection will reveal that God has been with Jesus throughout his Passion, but he is bereft of any awareness of that presence as he hangs on the cross.

The splitting of the veil in the Temple and the natural phenomena Matthew describes when Jesus dies are not to be interpreted literally but as standard signals that something of world-historical significance is happening on the cross.

The story of the resurrection of just persons, which we find only in Matthew's Gospel, is told in an interesting way. Matthew begins to narrate this but then corrects the narrative to make sure that their being resurrected occurs after Jesus's resurrection. Again, we are being told something about the theological significance of Jesus death (and resurrection); it's unlikely that these were events that occurred in a public way when Jesus died.

Our text concludes with some Gentile soldiers recognizing Jesus' identity as Son of God. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is revealed as Son of God at his baptism and at his transfiguration. This time the revelation is to Gentiles, pointing ahead to the resurrected Jesus' command to his followers, later in this Gospel, to "go forth and make disciples of all nations."

Matthew offers us a portrait of Jesus as someone lives and dies in the most profound solidarity with all innocent victims. And the community



of believers which will rise after Easter will forever be founded on the forgiveness of this Victim.