**Palm Sunday or the Sunday of Passiontide Year C**

**10th April 2022**

The Palm Sunday readings remain the same for all years, except for the Passion reading, which since 1970, has rotated through the three year cycle. So for the first readings I have simply repeated the notes for last year, with new ones only for Saint Luke’s Passion.

**Isaiah 50;4-7**

The earliest Christians were convinced that everything they had witnessed was part of a divine plan. They therefore looked back through history to dredge up evidence that the events had been predicted. They did not use methods that we would find convincing but there is an important principle that does convince.

That is that the event is primary. The ‘prophecy’ is subordinate thus supporting the event. For example, Matthew (Ch. 2;15) says ‘*I called my son out of Egypt’*. Matthew is quoting the 8th century B.C. prophet, Hosea (Ch. 11;1) who was referring to the Exodus under Moses (1250 B.C.) But Matthew uses the reference to account for the Holy Family returning from Egypt after Herod’s slaughter of the innocents. That is not what Hosea meant, but ***it must have been known that they had been to Egypt for Matthew to have used the saying***.

The writers all quote extensively and with great ingenuity but with disregard to context, but that was common practice in their day. Today we have the first of a series of passages from Isaiah about the Servant of the Lord. It is uncertain as to who the prophet meant but for Christians it is highly descriptive of Jesus in his passion. So, it is not only evidence of what he endured, but also provides us with appropriate words to mark the occasion. The same is true of the readings from the Psalm and from Paul to the Philippians which have all been used on this day from the beginning.

**Psalm 21;8-9, 17-20, 23-24**

In the narrative of the Crucifixion, Jesus is reported as uttering only the opening sentence of the psalm 21, here used as the Refrain. “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*?” (Mark and Matthew) But the whole psalm evokes the right mood and must be taken into account. Note for example, the references to ‘*holes in my hands and feet*’ and ‘*cast lots for my robe*’ which are evidence for the accuracy of the details in the Gospel narratives.

But the most subtle words are those that close the psalm, printed as the last five lines in the Missal. It ends with a triumphant cry of victory, a point not lost on the Gospel writers.

**Philippians 2;6-11**

The second reading is a magnificent six verse hymn which has been used in the Palm Sunday liturgy from the seventh century. It opens with the clearest possible attribution of divinity to Jesus. Then in three verses he voluntarily descends from the highest rank to the lowest conceivable condition i.e., the cross, and in the second three verses is restored to his first state. But now he also has gained the title ‘Lord’ and reigns over creation. It is possible that the composition was not Paul’s who is quoting a known hymn.

**The Passion of Christ according to Luke (22:14-23:56)**

The passion narratives comprise the earliest written elements in the Gospels. They were compiled to record the events from Christ’s entry to Jerusalem to his Resurrection. Later on, other material was prefixed to explain the build-up to Palm Sunday.

Each of the Gospel writers has his own distinctive perspective on the passion. They differ from each other, due partly to their cultural upbringing but also due to the readership they have in mind.

It appears that Mark was a teenager during this last dramatic week and his mother was one of Jesus’ ‘women’ He later became Peter’s ‘clerk’ which accounts for the authority that was associated with his Gospel. Just how much influence Peter had on him we do not know, but he emphasizes the isolation of Christ: betrayed, forsaken and denied by the disciples, mocked and tortured by his enemies, railed at by the brigands crucified with him, and, finally, bereft of the presence of his Father.

It may be that one of the reasons for Luke to produce his Gospel is to appeal to a more sophisticated market than that of Mark. Mark’s literacy is poor, while that of Luke is excellent. Luke has adopted Mark's Passion Narrative as a basis, but has made telling alterations. We do not know if Luke knew Jesus in person, but he was a respected, if shy member of the early Church. In his revision of Mark, Luke changed the tone from tragedy to pathos. It became the story of a martyrdom. (Note the striking literal similarity with Stephen's martyrdom in Acts, also by Luke). Jesus appears as one who even in his own trauma, feels for others (for example, the "daughters of Jerusalem"; "Father, forgive them (Jewish leaders)" and "Today you (crucified thief) will be with me").

The Lucan Jesus is never distraught or agitated. Instead of feeling forsaken, the Lucan Jesus is serenely in communion with his Father throughout, to the very end as expressed in the child’s last prayer before sleep 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (23:46).

Here is a positive aspect of the passion not found in Mark. And, as a medical doctor, it is not surprising to find emphasis on the healing and forgiving power of God mediated through Jesus, even in the passion. See, for instance, the healing of the ear of a slave who was of the opposition party. (22;51)

Other deviations from Mark are also due to Luke’s different circumstances. Being a Gentile, he promotes the universal nature of the Gospel, while at the same time including as important those on the edge of society. These included, naturally, women and Luke always has them in prominent positions.

A key word in Greek was Kyrios, or Lord. It was used of judges, pilots, referees, heads of households, and supremely, Caesar. But Luke uses it solely of Jesus as the leader of his followers and his leadership has a graciousness that belies the uncompromising nature of his claims.

Running through all the above is an emphasis on prayer, especially before any major event. Sharing with his Father every aspect of his life, Luke, alone, tells us that it was the sight of Jesus at prayer that prompted the twelve to ask him to teach them to pray. (Luke 11;1)

Contemporary events had their inevitable influence on Luke’s work. Hostility to Christians was on the rise and so Jesus’ Passion is portrayed as a model for Christian sufferers and martyrs.

Hostility was partly due to Jewish trouble-makers, so Luke is at pains to stress the reconciliation that Jesus brings, even between Herod and Pilate, both enemies to Christians. (23;6-16) For Luke, the significance of the episode is that Herod emerges as an important witness to the innocence of Jesus - a point made explicitly by Pilate in 23:15. Unique also is Luke’s observation, 'That same day Herod and Pilate became friends' (v. 11). This illustrates Luke's theme of universal forgiveness and healing throughout the passion. (v. 12).

At the date of writing, Roman soldiers were levelling Jerusalem to the ground, scattering Jewish and Christian refugees throughout the Empire, the latter taking the Gospel with them. The oracle to the Daughters of Jerusalem (23;28) as it stands reflects a widespread Christian interpretation of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. They viewed it as divine judgment on those responsible for the death of God's Son, a punishment reaching to the next generation. It is the gentler alternative to Matthew's 'His blood be on us and on our children!' (Matthew 27:25).

Through the saying to the Daughters of Jerusalem Jesus warns the city’s inhabitants thereby showing that nothing is accidental. The enigmatic sentence, 'For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (23:3 1) seems to mean that if the Jewish leaders and people treat Jesus as they did in a time of peace how much the worse will they fare when the Romans declare war on them.

In this section of the passion narrative, Luke is at his most individualistic. One of the crucified thieves, the Roman centurion and the distraught sightseers, together show that no segment of society is completely excluded. Thus Luke, alone among the Gospel authors, portrays representatives of humanity who are not disciples of Jesus yet touched by his anguish and death.

A sign of goodness is evoked even from the heart of the Sanhedrin, as Joseph of Arimathea, a saintly member of that body who had not consented to the purpose or the deed of crucifying Jesus, asks for his body in order to render the required burial rites.

It has often been suggested that the significance of the Cross in Luke does not have the same weight of the atoning value that it had for Paul. Nevertheless, the Lucan crucifixion is clearly the climactic moment of God’s forgiveness and of healing grace through and by Jesus.

It should be realised that Crucifixion was a calculated deterrent to subdue the population and was not uncommon. For this reason it was not reported in the sensational language we would use if it occurred to-day. Casual violence was at a higher level than that which shocks us and the language may not be as strong, but the reconciliation flowing from the Cross is just as widespread and just as successful.