

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Palm Sunday - Year B

Introduction to Holy Week - Palm Sunday marks the first day in Holy Week and the last week in Lent. Holy Week is an eight-day festival similar to the eight-day festivals of Passover, Sukkot (Tabernacles), and Hanukkah. During this eight-day period, many biblical prophecies, hopes and dreams were fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.

Liturgy of the Palms: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11 - The triumphal entry, Jesus' spectacular public entrance into Jerusalem, is recorded in all four Gospels. The action of collecting a foal to enter the city is an intentional fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 by which Jesus makes a messianic claim. The reference to untying the colt in Mark 11:4 might allude to Jacob's prophecy over Judah in Genesis 49:11, which refers to a tethered donkey and colt. There is no indication within the Gospels that the animal has been prearranged.

Rabbinic commentary from a few centuries later says that, should Israel be worthy, messiah will come on the clouds, but if not worthy, then he will appear on a donkey (Sanhedrin 98a:13). Regardless of whether this comment was contemporary with Jesus, the crowd understood the messianic significance of the donkey and responded with palms, cloaks, praise, and prophetic words from the Psalms. The triumphal entry takes place just before the Passover festival, which recalls the redemptive exodus from Egyptian oppression. Many in Jerusalem longed to see the end of Rome's oppression and perhaps saw Jesus as the messianic character to bring about such a redemption. The messianic agenda of Jesus was of much greater significance – the defeat of the greatest of oppressors, the last enemy, Death itself.

The Gospels all record the crowds shouting the blessing from Psalm 118: ברוך הבא בשם יהוה, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." This ancient prayer is part of the six Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118) that are traditionally recited on joyous occasions, including the Passover pilgrim festival. Psalm 118 reminds the worshipper that, even though the world rejects and casts aside hope, hope does not go away. Thankfully, Hope does not reject the world for his love endures forever! The psalm also includes the rejected stone that eventually becomes the capstone. You do not need a degree in masonry to understand that all poorly built foundations will collapse over time. Our faith is not constructed upon poor foundations; instead, our faith and hope are held up by the strongest of stones, the living Rock himself. "Upon this rock I will build my church," says Jesus (Matt 16:18, cf. Deut 32:4). And his kingdom will endure for all generations. Perhaps during this last week of Lent, we should take some time to examine the foundations of our faith, to secure in our hearts the assurance that the resurrected Messiah truly is the source and hope of our faith.

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RCL Liturgy of the Passion: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11;
Mark 14:1-15:47

ACNA Palm Sunday: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:32-15:47

Introduction to the Passion - The Passion of Christ is another name for Holy Week, the final week of Jesus life including the crucifixion under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Passion comes from the Latin root for “suffer or endure.” The word “patience” also comes from the same Latin root. The segments in the Gospels that detail the events of this week are known as the Passion Narratives. Much of the world now lacks patience, with so many of our inventions geared towards immediate gratification. Similarly, segments of Christianity focus only on the immediate joy and enthusiasm of Resurrection Sunday and ignore Good Friday. Yet we disciples of Messiah have much to learn also from his Passion.

First reading: Isaiah 50:4-9 - This passage speaks in detail of the sufferings of the Messiah. While no mention in the Gospels is made of who plucked Jesus’ beard, we do know that he was beaten on the back (Mark 15:10), beaten on the face (Luke 22:63-65), mocked and spat on (Mark 15:19-20). According to Isaiah, God himself would enable the Messiah to succeed where the nation of Israel had not. Where Israel had rebelled against God, the Messiah would be totally obedient. He would obediently offer his back to his persecutors and not hide his face from his oppressors. It was not with passive resignation in the face of abuse that Jesus endured, but with confidence and assurance that set his face “like flint” knowing that God will not put him to shame (Is 50:7). Humbly we should acknowledge our own disobedience and praise the Lord for his unswerving obedience during his passion.

Second Reading: Psalm 31:9-16 - This psalm, composed by David, is widely known for its first verse, “In you, Lord, do I put my trust.” Psalm 71, probably also written by David, quotes the first three verses from this psalm. Psalm 31 is a cry for help from God from a faithful person who is hard-pressed by trouble and enemies. It is easy to see why the psalm is attributed to David as he fled from Saul and how apt it is for inclusion in the Passion liturgy. The psalm presents the situation where people are trying to take the life from the author. But his steadfast trust in God concludes that, despite his distress, he can declare, “My times are in your hands” (Ps 31:15). This trust is not only built upon experiences that God delivers but also in his promises of salvation yet unseen. Blessed is he who believes and has not yet seen (John 20:29)! On the cross, Jesus alludes to this psalm when he says, “Into your hands I commend my spirit” (Ps 31:5).

Third Reading: Philippians 2:5-11 - Scholars have argued that Paul is quoting from an early Christian hymn or creed rather than composing something new in these verses. Casting that debate aside, these verses declare the divinity of Jesus and his amazing sacrifice in giving up his former nature to become a man. As part of the Godhead, Jesus would be beyond the reach of death, yet he chose to become subject (obedient) to its power. The Greek uses the term μορφή θεοῦ (*morphe theou*) or the “form of God,” which, despite many arguments to the contrary, does

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imply the preexistence of Messiah. Having never before known death, Jesus willingly takes the cross during his passion. The conjunction “therefore” (διὸ) in verse 9 reminds us that it was precisely this humility of Jesus that is the basis for his exaltation, with the Father giving him the name above all names.

Fourth Reading: Mark 14:1-15:47 - Our long passage opens with the temple leadership, the Sadducees, initiating the plot for the death of Jesus. (Before we assign blame on the whole Jewish nation – which is anti-Semitism – we should recall the ancient creed, “He suffered under Pontius Pilate,” not Israel.) As the scheme is being hatched, we have the anointing of Jesus occurring at Bethany, located on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Anointing is deeply messianic, as even the verb “to anoint” (משח) is the same root as messiah (anointed one). What is interesting about this anointing scene is the scandalous nature of having a woman involved. In the Gospels of Matthew and John, the woman is identified as Mary of Bethany, who is a disciple of Jesus, having learned at his feet in the house of her brother Lazerus. Anointing was usually conferred upon another by the priest or prophets of the community.

This passage affirms the Jewish heritage of Jesus as he and his disciples prepare to observe and celebrate the Passover. The special arrangement for the upper room is intriguing. The Gospels do not indicate any prior organisation in Jerusalem by Jesus. Considering the plot against him, Jesus’ cryptic instructions to his disciples were probably meant to safeguard secrecy and bide time.

Many scholars identify the man who carries water as belonging to the Essene sect, with most saying carrying water was women’s work in Jesus’ time. However, I have not seen a written source confirming such statements. The Jewish historian Josephus claims that the all-male group did indeed have an enclave in Jerusalem. However, the theology of Jesus is not congruent with much of Essene theology, and I would hesitate to declare Jesus practised an Essene Passover.

Jesus continues to teach his disciples even on the eve of his passion. The Synoptic Gospels all record Jesus as reclining at the table once the meal is underway. The action of reclining is a tradition in the Passover liturgy in which Israel now identifies herself as having been freed from slavery. They are no longer required to eat standing and in haste as slaves but reclining in freedom as other nations do at mealtimes. Interestingly, none of the Gospels mention there being a lamb at the meal or that the disciples had purchased one in the city. Instead, Jesus identifies the bread as his body and not the Passover lamb itself.

In the Exodus narrative, there is no mention that Israel partook of wine on the night of Passover. The tradition of drinking four cups of wine during the Passover meal (called the Seder) is a later addition to the Passover liturgy (called the Haggadah). Jesus does not dismiss tradition but instead uses it as a teachable moment, giving new meaning to something already very meaningful. Everything eaten at the Passover meal has a symbolic meaning. The bread is known

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as the Bread of Affliction, and each cup of wine has a name and a meaning. Luke records that the cup Jesus spoke of was the cup after the meal, which is known as the Cup of Redemption. Jesus proceeds to give deeper meanings to these elements. The new covenant which God is making with his people (Jer 31:31), first for the Jewish people and then for Gentiles (Romans 1:16), must come through the Passion of the Messiah – his body afflicted and his blood redeeming. We can get so caught up in the symbolism and the meaning that we forget the simple command of Jesus to “Take and eat. Take and drink!” We must also “partake in his sufferings,” even as we know the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10). We should also note the confidence Jesus has that his impending death will not be final as he declares that he will again drink of the vine in the Kingdom of God (Mark 14:25). Dare I say that Passover continues in the world to come.

Unfortunately, the passion of Jesus begins with desertion by his friends and followers. Loneliness is more than an unpleasant emotion. Facing a burden alone more than doubles the weight of that burden. Like the first man, Adam, alone before the creation of Eve, Jesus finds himself alone to face an illegal trial. Jesus had prayed to his Father for this burden to have been taken away. Instead, the Father strengthened him for this task.

The witnesses brought to testify against Jesus are false, and their testimonies do not agree. Much of this trial occurs in the darkness of night when most of the city is sleeping. Thus, according to the rules of the Sanhedrin, trials cannot be performed at night nor on the eve of a Passover, nor can a judgement be confirmed on the same day as the trial itself. Everything about this trial is wrong. The Sadducees had preferred this clandestine behaviour for fear of provoking a riot among the populace (Mark 14:2). We should note the enthusiastic crowd at the triumphal entry are not the same crowd that cries “Crucify him!” The palace of King Herod, the scene for much of the trial, has a limited capacity, and the crowd have been hand-selected by the chief priests.

Charged with blasphemy, Jesus is beaten, humiliated and taken to Golgotha, which is Aramaic for the “Place of the Skull.” Whose skull? The New Testament does not invent the name of the place but rather records its existence. One interesting Jewish exegetical tradition said that Adam was buried in Jerusalem and that the site was well known and even labelled as such.¹ Pictorially, then we see the last Adam (Jesus) dying and taking death out of the world at the same site where the first Adam brought death into the world. Whether or not this tradition contains historical truth, the theological implications are indeed eternal truth. The Passion of Christ brings redemption to the world. The darkness that shrouded Jesus at his death is dispersed by the light of his resurrection. Only for a brief moment, Jesus went to a place he had never been to before, the realm of the dead. That is a humbling thought indeed.

¹ Ginzberg, Louis. “The Death of Adam.” *The Legends of the Jews — Volume 1*. Translated by Henrietta Szold, 1913. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1493>.

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ACNA Addendum

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 - This is the fourth and final Servant Song. The Servant Songs are poems that appear in Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11 and 52:12-53:12. They reveal a royal figure who is also gentle and meek. He is a servant who will faithfully bring about the true witness of God to the world, remove the sins of the people, and bring blessing to the nations. In this last poem, the servant is disfigured, marred and smitten by God. Yet it is this seeming defeat that actually ends in victory as the servant intercedes for transgressors. The New Testament is not the only Jewish text that links the Suffering Servant with the Messiah. The Dead Sea Scrolls community likewise saw the images in this prophetic portion to be representative of a suffering messianic figure. Fragments of a hymn (4QHe) link the images seen in Isaiah to a divine-like messiah who suffers and at the same time is “reckoned with the angels.”

Psalm 22 - This Psalm of David has been used in the Lenten lectionary before, during the second week of Lent. It is used poignantly here again as an anguished lament for Jesus on the cross. The opening verse expresses the deep distress felt when a person receives no relief or respite from pain nor obvious answers to prayers. This psalm is a prayer of innocent suffering, which should not solely be attributed to Jesus but also to ourselves when we are unjustly persecuted, for we all need to share in the sufferings of Messiah. We all need to take and drink so that in dying with him we might also rise with him.

About the author - The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master’s program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.