

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People Palm Sunday – Year A

Introduction. This week in the Church we are remembering – which means more than just calling to mind, rather it means allowing the recollection to change our lives again – the great salvation that our Savior won for us on the cross and the triumph of his resurrection. Let us, also, be aware that the Jewish Community is also remembering the great deliverance that Yahweh accomplished by bringing the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt through the shed blood of the Passover Lamb. Passover this year begins at sundown on Wednesday, April 5th. Jesus deliberately linked the two deliverances by dying on Passover and rising on the Feast of Firstfruits, and by telling them to do this in remembrance of him at the Passover meal that he had with his Jewish disciples “... on the night before he was betrayed”.¹

Most of the Scriptures for Palm Sunday are the same each year, except for the gospel narrative, which is taken from one of the three synoptic Gospels (Mathew, Mark and Luke) on a rotating basis. So I encourage you to check out the Notes from the last two years for more thoughts on the repeated readings. This year - year A - the Narrative is taken from the Gospel according to Matthew.

Common Theme. I don't know about you, but watching the TV Show, *The Chosen* has had quite an impact on how I see many of the events recorded in the Gospels – “a picture is worth a thousand words.”² The character of Matthew *the tax collector* as portrayed in this show has made me consider more deeply the Apostle's record and in particular his use of the Hebrew Scriptures (OT).³ In the show, Matthew is shown as a person who dropped out from learning Torah, but who, having become a follower of Jesus, is very eager to catch up. It is also suggested that Matthew was deliberately chosen by Jesus because, in his tax-collecting work, he was used to keeping accurate records.

Matthew in his Gospel certainly seeks to portray Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and as the prophesied *prophet like Moses* (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15). He quotes from the OT more than twice the number of times any of the other three Gospel writers do (49, compared to Luke's 24)!⁴ An interesting question is: How does he use those Scriptures? I consulted the internet and found a helpful study by Dr. Lee Campbell Ph.D. of Dwell Community Church in Columbus Ohio. His conclusion was: “... (Matthew's) use of interpretative methods consonant with those found in scripture substantially strengthens the confidence of modern interpreters who are committed to the kind of careful exegesis that honors the intent of the ultimate author.”⁵ I take that to mean that Matthew did not take the Hebrew Scriptures out of context when speaking of them as being fulfilled by Jesus or as referring to the Messiah. Thus, the common theme of our Scriptures today is how the events of the salvation

¹ Prayer of Consecration, Anglican Standard Text, ACNA BCP 2019 p. 116.

² Attributed to Fred R. Barnard.

³ It is important to note that *The Chosen* TV series is based upon Scripture with creative license taken. This can be understood as a type of Midrash or for others a use of Holy Imagination.

⁴ Blue Letter Bible: A list of New Testament citations and allusions to the Old Testament.

⁵ Dr. Lee Campbell Ph.D., “Matthew's Use of the Old Testament: A Preliminary Analysis”
<https://dwellcc.org/learning/essays/matthews-use-old-testament-preliminary-analysis>.

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story of Holy Week are what the LORD was preparing for from the creation of the world and throughout the history of his people Israel.

LITURGY OF THE PALMS

RCL Readings – Psalm 118:1-2 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

ACNA Readings – Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:19-29

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29. This is the last of the *Hallel* (= praise) Psalms (113-118) recited (or sung – cf. Matt 26:30) at the Passover Seder before the final cup. Each of them ends with the cry of triumph, “*Hallelujah*” – “Praise the LORD!” Whether or not this Psalm was thought of as Messianic previously, it would have been on the minds of the pilgrims coming into Jerusalem for the Festival. This is especially true given the words in verse 26f: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD, from the House of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.” The Apostles certainly considered the verses from 22 and following as referring to Jesus, and they are frequently quoted in the New Testament (e.g. Matt. 21:42; 1 Pet. 2:7). Verses one and two place the Psalm in the context of thanksgiving.

Matthew 21:1-11. From chapter 20, verse 29, we see that Jesus arrives at Bethpage (‘place of young figs’ cf. Matt. 21:15-23), a village near Bethany on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives, having made the steep ascent of some 2,000 ft up from Jericho. He likely would have been tired and weary. Obviously, Jesus had made prior arrangements for this event. He was in charge of everything that happened during this week, even when he died (cf. Matt 27:50: “gave up” = “surrendered”). Jesus was not an unfortunate victim, killed by an angry Father! He willingly offered himself as “... the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29)

It is clear from Matthew’s account that the crowd cried out to Jesus, “Hosannah” (*LORD save us*), were Galilean pilgrims travelling with Jesus who had avoided going through Samaria by crossing over the Jordan south of the Sea of Galilee, travelled down the eastern side of the river, and recrossed near Jericho. They were praising their *hometown hero* and anticipating that he was coming to remove the Romans and restore the Davidic Kingdom – palm branches were a symbol of freedom at that time! But they ignored the humility of the rider on a donkey! The crowd was not Jerusalemites and pilgrims from outside Israel who had little or no idea who Jesus was! (cf. 21:10)

Matthew mentions two animals – a donkey and her colt – whereas the other three Evangelists mention only the colt. Matthew is emphasizing the precise fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. While admittedly the mention of two animals in Zechariah is an example of Hebrew poetic parallelism. It is not unlikely that, since the colt had never been ridden, its mother would have been with it. The point is that Jesus rode the unbroken colt, without its panicking in the stressful situation on a steep slope. Some say that the second “them” in verse seven refers to the ‘cloaks’ rather than the animals. It would certainly have been awkward for Jesus to sit on both animals!

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Apparently, Alexander the Great rode a tall, black horse named Bucephalus, which he had tamed while in his early teens. He deliberately set himself up as an imposing figure on the battlefield.⁶ In contrast, King Jesus as he rode into his capital that day would have looked more like a weary peasant. Both these Kings achieved much, but only King Jesus’s accomplishments have universal and eternal consequences.

THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

RCL Readings – Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14 – 27:66.

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22:1-21; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew (26:36-75) 27:1-54 (55-66).

Introduction. Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are from the passages from the ‘Servant Songs’ of Isaiah, and from the Psalms that speak of sufferings such as Jesus endured during his passion. The Epistle is from the passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians that reflects the humiliation of Jesus and his ultimate victory.

The full narrative of the Passion is very long – although the congregation is not asked to stand until Jesus is about to be crucified. Some congregations overcome this by creating a dramatic reading and giving the spoken words of the drama to different readers, and *the crowd’s* part is usually assigned to the whole congregation. The compilers of the lectionaries recognize this problem also and suggest options for shortening the reading.

Isaiah 50:4-9a. This is the third of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah (42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-9a; 52:13-53:12). While the LORD does identify Israel as “my Servant” in Isaiah 41:8ff, 44:1&2 and even 49:3, the description of the servant in the four songs mentioned – especially the fourth one – goes beyond what could be said of the nation of Israel (e.g. 42:4, 49:6, 50:5, 52:15 and 53:5, 8, 11 &12). The meaning of the word servant in these songs when they were written was something like *trusted envoy, confidential representative, or one who is chosen*. All four songs also speak of the servant as accomplishing his mission – 42:4, 49:6f, 50:7f, 53:10-12. In this song, there are predictions of suffering that Jesus did in fact endure (v.6).

Psalm 31:9-16. This Psalm assigned to David describes a man who is in deep distress like Jesus was as he endured the passion. He sought deliverance from his God, asking Him, as did Jesus in Gethsemane, “Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your unfailing love.” (16 cf. Matt. 26:42) The Psalm ends with a note of assurance that God has heard the cry of his servant and will deliver him (22-24).

Philippians 2:5-11. Many scholars believe this passage to be an early Christian hymn. Scholars disagree as to whether Paul himself wrote it, or whether it was already circulating in the Christian

⁶I am indebted to the Rev. Cn. James L. Beavers for the reference to Alexander the Great in the Trinity School for Ministry 2023 Lenten Devotions on p. 24.

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community. Whatever the truth of that is, it is certainly very early evidence of the belief that God – the Son – had become a man, humbled himself to die on a cross, rose victorious over death, and had been exalted to sit at God's right hand in heaven. There are many questions about the meaning of parts of this hymn, such as the meaning of "did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped" (v. 6 NIV) or "made himself nothing" (v.7), but what is clear is that the horrific suffering and death of Messiah Ben Yoseph – Jesus – was, in the plan of God, the pivotal event of history and that through it salvation came to *all men* – cf. Romans 5:18f.

Matthew 26:14-27:66.

- **26:14-16: Judas agrees to betray Jesus.** We have now moved further into this *week that changed the world*, and Judas – stimulated in some way by the extravagant act of devotion by a woman at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany – decides to betray Jesus to the chief priests, who in Matthew's account are clearly the ringleaders of those wanting to destroy Jesus. Matthew is the only one of the Gospel writers who mentions the price – 30 pieces of silver – that was paid for the betrayal. Verse 15 is almost an exact quote from Zechariah 11:12, where 30 pieces of silver were the derisory wages paid to the prophet for shepherding the flock of Israel. It was also the price fixed in Israel's earliest law code as compensation to the owner of a slave who has been gored to death by someone else's ox (Exod. 21:32).
- **26:17-30: The Passover Meal.** Jesus knew there was a traitor among the disciples so he kept the arrangements for this Seder as secret as possible. Again, as with the donkey earlier, Jesus had made arrangements previously.

There is a debate as to whether this was a Passover meal or a Sabbath Eve meal. Both have the elements of bread and wine, but in the Sabbath Kiddush, the wine is drunk first, and then the bread is shared. But at Passover, a special part of the unleavened bread called the *Affikomen* is eaten first, then followed by the third cup of wine – the cup of Blessing (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16f.). I am convinced that these were the elements of the sacrament that the Lord instituted. Some think that it was the fourth cup – the Cup of Completion – since Jesus said he wouldn't drink of the fruit of the vine till he drank it new with the disciples in his Father's Kingdom (26:29). But since the *Hallel* was sung before the 4th cup and verse 30 says they left the room after singing the hymn (26:30), that cup was not drunk then. Some suggest that Jesus drank the Cup of Completion on the cross. In verse 25, Judas asks if he is the one to betray him whom Jesus has just spoken of. Jesus' answer tells Judas that he knows that it is, while at the same time encouraging him to change his mind. His words mean something like, "That's what you have decided." (Cf. 26:64 & 27:11)

- **26:36-46 Jesus in Gethsemane.** Gethsemane means 'the garden of the oil press'. In order to produce the olive oil, the olives have to be crushed and pressed. This was the moment that the victory was won. The outcome was decided! Those *bold* disciples couldn't even keep their eyes open! How would you and I have done?
- **26:47-56 Jesus is arrested.** The word used for *kiss* in verse 49 is much more intense than in verse 48. Judas put energy into his act! Judas never gets further in his relationship with Jesus than calling him *Rabbi*. Matthew does not mention that the disciple who struck out with a

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sword was Peter, nor that the man's name who was struck was Malchus (cf. John 18:10), nor that Jesus healed Malchus. (cf. Luke – the doctor – 22:51). Jesus shows that he is in command of events, but makes clear the irony of their coming at night here to arrest him when he had been right there in the Temple for days!

Now that their violent resistance has been rebuked by Jesus, the disciples' courage evaporates. Subsequent events show, however, that some of the disciples, and especially the women, do have some courage.

- **26:57-68 Jesus on trial before the Sanhedrin.** Caiaphas – High Priest from AD 18-36 – was not the legitimate High Priest. That was Annas, Caiaphas's father-in-law. Caiaphas had purchased the office with a bribe to the Roman Governor. His concern was maintaining his power. The sanctity of the Temple was protected by Roman authority, so a threat to its safety would have been an offense against Rome. Jesus' misinterpreted claim that he would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days was a perfect crime to accuse him of. But Caiaphas could not get the necessary three witnesses to validate the charge (Cf. Deuteronomy 19:15). So, using his privileged position under God he forced Jesus to assert his claim to be the Son of God. But after accepting that title, Jesus immediately returned to the appellation *Son of Man*, which actually is a greater implication of being divine in the light of Daniel 7:13. Jesus here is referring more to his resurrection and exaltation after his humiliation and death than he is to his second advent.

Although in Leviticus 21:10 the High Priest was forbidden to tear his robes, the Teachers of the Law made an exception when the High Priest rendered a judgement of blasphemy, as an expression of horror. This dramatic act by Caiaphas was intended to persuade the whole Council to condemn Jesus. It succeeded! Those carrying out the actions in verse 67f. were probably the Temple police who had arrested Jesus in the Garden, and were closely guarding him in the Council chamber.

- **26:68-75 Peter denies Jesus.** *Rock-like* Peter fails in the face of a couple of servant girls! However, his repentance is sincere as evidenced by his weeping. Cf. "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death." 2 Corinthians 7:10

In order to understand the reasoning of the priests in the Temple when dealing with the 30 pieces of silver that Judas returned, it is necessary to understand that there are two variant readings of Zechariah 11:13: *oser* meaning *treasury* or *yoser* meaning *potter*. One commentator suggests that it is almost as if the priests debated which of the alternatives they should fulfil!⁷ And since it was blood money they could not put it in the treasury, and they bought *the potter's field* as a burial

⁷ F.F. Bruce: SU Bible Study Books: Matthew 1970, 89.

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place for foreigners. The place is traditionally located on the ridge south of the Valley of Hinnom. According to Acts 1:19, it was known in Aramaic as *Akeldama* – Field of Blood.

The prophecy from Zechariah is attributed to Jeremiah, probably because in an early Christian collection of OT 'testimonies' it was attached to a passage like Jeremiah 18:2 or 32:15.

- **27:1&2, 11-26 Jesus before Pilate** Since the Sanhedrin did not have the power to execute under the Roman mandate, they now had to persuade the governor to do the *dirty deed*. Pilate governed Judea from CE 26-36, and had the reputation of being ruthless and obstinate. Rather than raising the charge of blasphemy they used the charge that Jesus was claiming to be a king; a charge of sedition, rebellion against the Emperor. By definition for Jews the Messiah was King of the Jews. When Pilate, the Governor brought that charge against him, Jesus admitted it, but again said that he did not mean that in the same way Pilate probably understood it – i.e. as an earthly rival to the Emperor. Jesus decided to make his kingship the deciding issue. To his accusers, however, Jesus had nothing to say.

Matthew is the only one who tells the story of Pilate's wife's dream. Maybe it is to explain why such a ruthless man would try to acquit Jesus. Pilate then resorted to a custom – which is not attested to anywhere else - to try to get off the hook, but it did not work. *According to Luke's account Pilate also tried to get off the hook by sending Jesus to Herod for trial; but that didn't work either – Luke 23:5-12.*

In verses 16 and 17, some textual authorities have not just 'Barabbas' but 'Jesus Barabbas'. If that is a correct reading then Pilate offers a choice between two men of the same name! One who is a robber – 'a chip off the old block' perhaps! And one who is the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Verse 25:

One Jewish commentator has said of verse 25 "Let his blood be on us and on our children.": "oceans of blood and a ceaseless stream of misery and desolation" have been occasioned by these words. Having the Liturgy of the Palms Gospel reading with the singing of Psalm 118 or an equivalent hymn while processing joyfully and crying out "Hosannah to the Son of David"; and then following it immediately with the Passion Narrative, especially if the same people who were processing are now the crowd calling out "Crucify him!" and shouting out "His blood be on us and on our children", has led to violent anti-Semitic attacks and the accusation against the Jewish People of being *Christ-killers*.

The two crowds are not the same. As I pointed out earlier, the crowd shouting "Hosannah to the Son of David!" were Galileans. The crowd shouting "Crucify him!" were a *rent-a-mob* hired by the chief priests, who probably had little or no knowledge of who Jesus was or what he had done in Galilee and Judea. While it is true that Jesus predicted that that generation would suffer for rejecting their Messiah (Luke 19:41-44), it is inconceivable that the Jesus who prayed on the

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cross, “Father forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34) would condemn the whole people of Israel to suffer for ever for what a few had done.

Please be careful how you tell the story!

- **27:27-31 The soldiers mock Jesus.** These are now Roman soldiers who are mocking Jesus, not the Temple police of 26:67f. There is a lot of evidence of such soldiers mocking those they are about to crucify in the way they do to Jesus here. It was called *the King's Game* and was not only intended to humiliate their victims further, but weaken them before their upcoming crucifixion. There are instances of prisoners dying under the lashes. The thorns may have been from a species of date -palm whose thorns are up to a foot long! The ‘Pavement’ where this likely took place has been discovered under the Convent of the Sisters of Zion where the Antonia Fortress was located.
- **27:32-66 The crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus.** Cyrene was in modern day Libya in north Africa. So Simon was almost certainly black. He and his sons, Alexander and Rufus were know in the early Church (cf. Mark 15:21). So, perhaps carrying Jesus’s cross had a salvation impact on Simon. *Golgotha* is Aramaic. It’s not clear why the place is called *the Place of the Skull*. It is believed that there was a cemetery nearby. Tradition says that Adam’s skull was found there. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is probably the more probable site of the Crucifixion, but the Garden Tomb near the hill that has caves that look like the face of a skull is a more peaceful place to reflect on what happened that first Good Friday.

There have been attempts to explain the darkness at noontime as a solar eclipse, but Passover is celebrated when there has been a new moon, and solar eclipses are only possible when there is a full moon.

Pilate had the last laugh, putting up the sign over Jesus, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. It is possible that the two criminals crucified either side of Jesus were Barabbas’s lieutenants, and that the middle cross had been intended for Jesus Barabbas, who was replaced by Jesus, the Only Son of the Father. Matthew does not mention the repentance of the one criminal. The scornful shout of verse 42, “He saved others, but he can’t save himself!” might describe the whole event, if “can’t” is replaced by “won’t”.

As I’ve mentioned, it is probable that Psalm 22 was on the lips of Jesus as he hung on the cross. It was popularly believed that Elijah, who himself never died, would come and help those who were in extreme distress. So, it is understandable that the bystanders misunderstood Jesus’s cry.

There are reports that the curtain – that separated the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the Temple – was torn on other occasions than the one recorded here, but this time it was torn completely from top to bottom. This signifies that God has now opened the way into his Holy Presence for all through the sacrifice of the blood of Jesus on our behalf!

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The events of verses 51bff are unique to Matthew, and strange. Though bodies broke out of their tombs, they could not go to the city till after Jesus rose from the dead, since, as Paul tells us, Jesus is the firstfruits from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Women are prominent again both at the cross and at the tomb. More about them can be found Matt. 20:20, Luke 8:2, John 19:25 and Mark 15:40.

It is sobering to think that Jesus' enemies remembered his prediction that he would rise again after three days, while his disciples did not! Once it was confirmed to Pilate that Jesus was dead, he had no more interest in him. But he was not willing to waste the time of Roman soldiers on such a pointless exercise, and encourages the use of Temple guards instead. Matthew is the only Evangelist to mention the posting of a guard.

If the "Preparation Day" (the day before the Sabbath of Passover) was that Friday, then it is possible that the tomb was left unguarded that first night.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In this, the last of the songs, the picture of the *Suffering Servant* reaches its fullest extent. The substitutionary sacrifice of the servant is at the heart of God's redemptive plan. It is an interesting coincidence that – according to those who count such things – verse 5 is the middle verse of the whole Bible!

The rabbis identified two types of Messiah, Mashiach Ben David, the warrior king who would deliver his people from their oppressors as in Isaiah 9:2-7, and Mashiach Ben Yoseph, the suffering servant of Yahweh who would make atonement for the sins of his people as in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. It was difficult to hold these two images together. Some said there would be two Messiahs with complementary roles. Some said they are alternative Messiahs. If Israel was faithful to Yahweh, Mashiach Ben David would come; and if Israel was unfaithful then Yahweh would send Mashiach Ben Yoseph to bring Israel back to himself. Jesus' answer to the problem was that he would fulfill both roles, first that of Mashiach Ben Yoseph, and then he would return as Mashiach Ben David.

It is noteworthy that this fourth song is omitted from the regular Sabbath Lectionary from the Prophets. The reading on one Sabbath ends at Isaiah 52:12, and on the next Sabbath commences at Isaiah 54:1. So, many Jewish people are unaware of the song's existence. In the synagogue, just as in the church lectionaries not every verse in the Bible is assigned, so not every part of the 39 books of the TANAKH are read. But it would seem that this song so clearly and precisely foretells what Jesus suffered, that the omission would appear to be a deliberate attempt to hide the identification of the *Suffering Servant* with Jesus. However, rather than judging, let us ask ourselves why that would be done, and pray that the Lord would open the eyes of the blind... including our own!

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Psalm 22:1-21. As I drew attention to last year, the Rev. Canon David Roseberry following Dr. Charles H. Spurgeon believes that the whole of this Psalm was in the mind of, and probably on the lips of Jesus as he hung on the cross.⁸ One amazing note that I learned from Roseberry in his Devotional is that the word for *worm* in verse 6 is not the usual Hebrew word for worm (*rimma*), but *‘tola’at*.⁹ This word denotes a grub known as a crimson worm because it has scarlet red blood. When ready to lay her eggs, the female climbs a tree and exudes her blood forming a hard shell cocoon affixed to the tree. When the eggs hatch, she sprays the grubs with her blood making them crimson too. They then feed from her body. When she dies, she exudes a white flaky substance. What an illustration of what Jesus did for us, his offspring: how, “though our sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (cf. Is. 1:18).

As with the rest of our Scriptures today, the Psalm ends in triumph. The Servant endures through appalling suffering and accomplishes his mission to reconcile a holy God with sinful people – **“for he has done it!”** (v. 31)

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⁸ David Roseberry, *The Psalm on the Cross: A Journey to the Heart of Jesus through Psalm 22* (Plano, TX: RMLBooks, 2021).

⁹ Roseberry, 44.