



A LENTEN RETREAT: Holy Week

As our Lenten retreat takes us into Holy Week, we might continue to reflect on the Passion of Jesus as found in Matthew's Gospel that we heard today in the reading of the Passion (Good Friday is always the Passion from John's Gospel). This year is one in which we will continue to read from Matthew's Gospel. Sometimes we need to remember that the Passion of Jesus is connected to the whole Gospel. We might remember that Matthew's Gospel opens with Herod the king, the chief priests, and the scribes seeking the death of the child Jesus; as Matthew comes to an end Pilate the governor, the chief priests, and the scribes are the primary forces in putting Jesus to death. In fact, these two scenes contain Matthew's only references to Jesus as the "King of the Jews."

We might also remember the roles that some people had in the ministry of Jesus and the role they play now in the Passion of Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel the disciples have clearly professed that Jesus is the Son of God (14:33) (unlike Mark's disciples), and so their failure and flight from Gethsemane is all the more shocking. Peter has been rescued by Jesus from sinking into the sea (14:30-31) and has confessed Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God."; this makes truly striking his repeated denial of Jesus, "I do not know the man" (27:72,74). Matthew's critique of the Pharisees is quite severe. He only mentions them once in the Passion to highlight that the (Sadducees) chief priests were the principal Jewish agents in the death of Jesus. Just to mention a few.

We might continue to reflect on the Passion of Jesus this week by looking at pieces of the whole Passion story.

Gethsemane: This scene takes place in a garden on the Mount of Olives. We might refer back to 2Samuel 15:30-31 and the story of David who fleeing for his life from Absalom's revolt goes to the Mount of Olives and weeps there, discovering that he has been betrayed by Ahitophel, his trusted advisor. The Mount of Olives is the place where Matthew has Jesus predicting the desertion by his disciples, denial by Peter, and where he is arrested through the treason of Judas. The story of David and the Davidic Messiah, Jesus, echo one another.

The prayer that Jesus makes here is the subject of much discussion among scholars since the disciples were at a distance from him and had fallen asleep, so how do they know what Jesus said in prayer. The words that Jesus uses with his disciples and the prayer to his Father all seem to have been derived from the Our Father that Jesus taught his disciples in his ministry: "My Father"; "Pray that you may not enter into temptation"; "your will be done." Matthew seems to be

"Not my will but your will be done."

demonstrating that Jesus' relationship with his Father remained consistent through life and death.

The prayer of Jesus is not without effect. He begins sorrowful, troubled, and prostrate; it ends with him on his feet resolutely facing the hour that has approached: "Rise, let us be going; see my betrayer is at hand."

Judas is identified as "one of the Twelve." He was one who had shared this intimate circle of Jesus' closest followers. Jesus even addresses him at "Friend," or "Companion."

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR THE WEEK

**The Passion of Jesus
according to
Matthew**

Gethsemane

Matthew 26:30-56

Sanhedrin Trial

Matthew 26:57-27:10

Roman Trial

Matthew 27:11-31

Crucifixion and Death

Matthew 27: 32-66

Psalm 22

Use one of the forms of praying with Scripture from last week's bulletin or simply read the above passages and hear God speaking to you of his love.

Sanhedrin Trial: We might need to remember that Matthew's Gospel was written in the 80s and that the Temple had already been destroyed. So the false testimony of witnesses that Jesus said he would destroy the Temple and in three days rebuild it, creates an irony that Matthew's audience would have clearly recognized - the Temple really was destroyed.

At the same time that Jesus is being put on trial, we find Peter in the courtyard being interrogated by the maids and bystanders. Jesus remains strong in being silent before the false witnesses but is careful in the wording of his response to the high priest, while Peter avoids the issue, lies, and swears that he doesn't know Jesus. The words that Jesus speaks before the Sanhedrin are given strength by the fact that as he utters them his prediction about Peter denying him has just come true.

“From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The Roman Trial: Jesus is silent during his questioning and puts Pilate on the defensive. Pilate's wife, a Gentile, has a dream that recognizes Jesus' innocence and at the same time the Jewish leaders work through the crowd to have the notorious criminal Barabbas released and Jesus crucified. Pilate must then ask the question which they want to be released, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus called Christ? If Barabbas is translated as “Son of the Father,” there is an interesting irony to think that Pilate stood with two men faced with a crime both named Jesus, one “Son of the Father” and the other “Son of God.”

Pilate washes his hands as a statement of the innocence of Jesus, in keeping with his wife's dream. The people shout that “his blood be on us and our children.”

Crucifixion, Death, and Burial: The events of Calvary are often mingled with references to Old Testament statements. Matthew tries to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament hoped for.

There are three groups that pass by the cross and mock Jesus (another pattern of “three” in the Passion.” Do you see the others?). There are those who mock Jesus for saying he would destroy and rebuild the temple but doesn't seem to be able to save himself. The chief priests and the scribes mock Jesus for saying he was the Son of God and yet God is not coming to his rescue. And even the criminals crucified with him mock him. Matthew might call to mind for us Psalm 22:8-9, “All who see me scoff at me; they deride me.... ‘He trusted in the Lord, let him deliver him.’”

Jesus' last words on the cross are “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Again Matthew must have had Psalm 22 in mind as these are the words of the beginning of the Psalm. These words highlight the abandonment Jesus felt in this moment, but the end of the Psalm highlights the deliverance God will render to him. Psalm 22 might be an important read during this week.

Some other interesting notes: Matthew reports that there was an earthquake after the death of Jesus. As his birth was marked by the rising of a star, so his death is marked by an event of nature that is earth shaking. Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus in a tomb, which only the rich could afford. Most likely this tomb is the one that belongs to Joseph of Arimathea. The chief priests and the Pharisees get permission from Pilate to put guards at the tomb so no one steals the body. In the words of our retreat master, Fr. Raymond Brown, “men do all they can to make certain that Jesus is finished and his memory is buried; they even seal and guard his tomb. Yet the God who shook the earth when Jesus died will shake it again on Sunday morning; the guards will grovel in fear; and the tomb will be opened to stand as an eloquent witness that God has verified the last promise made by His Son: Jesus sits at the right hand of the Power (26:64).”