



Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord March 24, 2013 C

REFLECTIONS ON LUKE'S PASSION

While Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have a lot of material in common in their account of Jesus' Passion, each evangelist has his own unique recounting of events. Luke's distinctive narrative of the Passion is illustrated below:

- Luke repeatedly speaks of Jesus' *innocence*, suffering unjustly for his beliefs and lifestyle (23:4, 14, 15, 22, 41, 47). This emphasis on the innocence of Jesus is aimed at connecting him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, whose innocent suffering was redemptive. The innocent martyrdom of Jesus would also have been an important motive for the early Christians who themselves faced persecution and death for their belief in Jesus.
- Luke presents Jesus as the Savior of *all* people—Jew and Gentile, outcast and sinner. We see this when Jesus reaches out to the good thief who is a total outcast (23:39-43) and to the servant whose ear he heals (22:51).
- Luke depicts Jesus as filled with God's mercy, as evidenced by his forgiveness of his executioners ("*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*" [23:34]), and of the repentant criminal.
- The devil that departed from Jesus after the temptations now returns, "*entering Judas*" (22:3).
- Luke features women more than all the rest. In 23:27-32, he speaks of Jesus comforting the weeping women of Jerusalem.
- Like the Old Testament prophets who suffered and died for righteousness, Jesus is portrayed by Luke as a model for the disciples who will also suffer and die because of their faith in him.
- Luke shows Jesus often in prayer and recommending prayer as the only sure defense against temptation and trouble (22:22, 32, 34, 40, 46).
- Luke paints the disciples in a more positive light. Unlike the other evangelists, he does not mention that the disciples fled from Jesus.

- For Luke, Jesus' final words, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (23:46), epitomize his complete trust in God.
- Writing primarily for people with a Greek background, Luke presents Jesus as a heroic figure. The ideal of the Greek hero confronting death is embodied by Socrates who, though innocent, is condemned to death. Though he could have avoided death by renouncing his teaching, he chooses not to. Up to the very moment of his death, he is shown teaching his disciples. He faces his execution (death by hemlock) with courage and serenity, willingly taking the cup, drinking the poison, lying down and dying peacefully.
- Luke stresses *discipleship* as following the way of the Master who freely takes up his cross (9:23, 14:27), just as Simon the Cyrenean does.

Jesus dies as he has lived—healing, reconciling, forgiving, reaching out to the outcast, and trusting totally in his Father.

AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON THE VARIOUS SCENES IN LUKE'S PASSION

21:14-20 The Last Supper, Institution of the Eucharist, The Passover Meal

It is the night before Jesus will sacrifice himself for humanity, the night before his body will be broken and his blood poured out. During the Passover Meal on this holy evening, now called Holy Thursday, Jesus dramatizes what will happen the next day—the offering of himself as the new Paschal Lamb. During the meal, Jesus interrupts the ritual to offer himself to his disciples in the form of bread and wine. This signifies the making of the New Covenant between God and humanity. The old covenant was sealed with the sprinkling of a lamb (Ex. 24:5-8); the New Covenant is sealed with the blood of the one John called the Lamb of God. The old covenant was based on the law and keeping it; the New Covenant is based on faith in Christ, which empowers us to keep his law of love.

22:21-38 Unseemly Behavior at Eucharist

We sometimes say today: “How can people say and do unseemly things and partake of the Eucharist?” Well, it may console us to know that behavior very contrary to the spirit of the Eucharist has been going on since its institution. In verses 21-38, we hear about Judas partaking of the Eucharist even as he plots to betray Jesus. We hear the other Apostles engage in a conversation as to who is going to be ‘top dog’ in Jesus’ new kingdom. We hear of Peter’s denial of the Master and using the sword. Bottom line: one can sit at the table with Jesus and yet betray him in some big or small way. In verses 35-37, Jesus seeks to prepare his Apostles for the rough days ahead.

When Jesus alludes to taking up a sword, he is speaking figuratively to alert them to the seriousness of the struggle ahead. But they take him literally and produce two swords. In the difficult times ahead, the sword will be of no use but prayer will, as we shall see in the next scene.

22:39-53 Agony in the Garden and Jesus’ Arrest

The main emphasis in Luke’s Gethsemane scene is Jesus *praying*. Repeatedly, Luke presents Jesus as a man of prayer and as a teacher of prayer. Now his prayer to his Father sustains him in the face of a satanic attack in his hour of severe darkness. In contrast, the Twelve fall asleep. But we should note that the struggle is not easy. Jesus prays that the imminent cup of suffering would pass, but not if it would mean not following God’s will.

Then the betrayer, soldiers, chief priests (the clergy) and temple guards come to get Jesus. Their arrival at night symbolizes the darkness of their actions. Jesus rejects violence as a way to stop what is about to happen. He heals the servant’s ear.

22:24-62 Peter’s Threefold Denial of Jesus

In verse 31, Jesus tells Peter that Satan will attack him. It now happens in the courtyard. Peter shows a mixture of courage and cowardice. It takes courage to follow Jesus into the courtyard. Peter is the only disciple there but then he loses courage when two women and a man accuse him of being an associate of Jesus. After his third denial, Peter encounters Christ who looks upon him with mercy. Peter is immediately remorseful and “weeps bitterly.”

22:66 - 23:25 Trial of Jesus and Sentence of Death

Jesus is brought before the Jewish authorities, Herod and Pilate. Various accusations are made. One important thing to note in these verses is Luke’s emphasis on the *innocence* of Jesus. Pilate pronounces Jesus innocent three times, but his fear of the people blocks him from setting Jesus free. The people cry out for the blood of Jesus. They say he is dangerous, but ironically they choose to set Barabbas free even though he is an insurrectionist and a murderer. In all this, Satan has his hour of triumph. In emphasizing Jesus’ innocence, Luke is telling his audience several decades later that they too, though innocent, may also be interrogated, persecuted, jailed and executed. During such times of trial, prayer against the temptation to lapse will be their strength.

23:26-49 Journey to Calvary, Crucifixion and Death of Jesus

- Simon carrying the cross “*behind*” Jesus comes to be seen as the symbol of true discipleship—one walking behind the Master and sharing his sufferings.
- When Jesus encounters the weeping women, he tells them that they should be weeping for their city and their children who will have to suffer through the destruction of Jerusalem.
- The taunting and mockery of Jesus by those at the foot of the cross and by one of the criminals crucified with Jesus, are sometimes seen as the “last temptation” of Jesus, namely, to come down from the cross, the temptation to use his divine power for his own self-preservation. “*He saved others, let him save himself*” (v.35). “*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself*” (v.37).
- Darkness covering the earth symbolizes the cosmic struggle between light and darkness, between the forces of good and evil.
- The curtain of the temple torn in two denotes that the way of access to God through Jesus’ work of redemption is now available to all.
- The repentant thief and the centurion believe Jesus’ innocence (vv 40-42; v.47); the crowd beats their breasts (v.48).
- Jesus forgives his executioners (v.34) as well as the repentant criminal (v.43).

- Jesus obeys and totally surrenders to God's will: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (v. 46). Scripture scholar Charles Talbert writes: "In his horizontal relations with others, Jesus' *innocence* is accepted. In his vertical relationship with the Father, Jesus' *obedience* is highlighted." Jesus dies quietly, full of trust, a model for Christian martyrs to follow (Acts 7:59).

23:50-56 Burial of Jesus

- Joseph of Arimathea, though a member of the Sanhedrin, is an upright man like Simeon who looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. He also believes in the *innocence* of Jesus.
- Luke wants all to know that Jesus' body was buried. (Our Creed states: "He died and was buried.") Jesus' death is real.

Reflection Questions

1. What verse or incident spoke to you most in Luke's Passion story?
2. Holy Week is the holiest week of the Church year. Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil are the most important celebrations of the entire liturgical year. If you normally don't attend these ceremonies, why don't you attend?

Have a blessed Holy Week,

Fr. Sarah

Prayer

*Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself
to take on the form of a human person,
humbling yourself even to death
on the cross.*

*May this cross be a sign for all
generations of your triumph over evil,
suffering, sin and death.*

*Unite us with your passion that
we might truly recognize you
in our own suffering,*

Amen.