

Celebrating the Passion of the Lord

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During Holy Week this year, we hear the Passion narratives from Mark's Gospel, on Palm Sunday, and John's Gospel, on Good Friday. Peter Edmonds SJ compares the portraits of Jesus presented in these accounts, and in the other Good Friday readings. How, through these Scriptures, do we meet Jesus as our Servant, Priest and King?

The busiest afternoon of the year for Catholic churches is that of Good Friday. People throng to participate in a liturgy entitled, 'Celebration of the Passion of the Lord'. The mood for this celebration is set by three readings from Scripture, which invite us to meet the Lord Jesus under three aspects: as Servant, as Priest, and as King. The first text is taken from the prophet Isaiah; it is the long passage known as the Fourth Song of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). The second text, from the Letter to the Hebrews, has as its topic the priesthood of Jesus: he is the Son of God who has entered heaven as the great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9). The third text is the Passion story as given in John's gospel, the one in which Jesus tells Pilate, 'I am a king; I came into the world for this' and in which Pilate writes an inscription fixed to the cross of Jesus, 'Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews'. Let us look at these three texts more closely.

Servant

There are four Servant songs in the Old Testament book of Isaiah: the first three are read on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week; the fourth and longest is kept for Good Friday. It was probably composed around six hundred years before Christ. The Servant might represent an individual, even the prophet himself, but the common view today is that the Servant is a collective figure. He represents the people of Israel, her career and her destiny. This Servant song fits well on Good Friday, because many



echoes of it can be picked up in the Passion accounts of the gospels, reflecting Christian belief that the Servant is a figure of Christ – a belief made explicit in the words of Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 8:34-35). This Servant song also forms a climax to the Old Testament readings read on the Sundays of Lent. What we have heard this year on previous Sundays about Noah, about Abraham, about Moses and the exile, is completed with this account of the suffering Servant. His song begins with his being 'lifted up, exalted, rising to great heights'. It ends with his 'bearing the faults of many and praying for sinners'. Those familiar with Handel's Oratorio, the *Messiah*, know of the great music he makes from Isaiah's text, but for Handel, it is not the Servant but Jesus who heals us; he is the one who was led like a lamb to the slaughter and who kept silent before his oppressors. On Good Friday, we are invited to meet the Jesus whose final days mirrored those of this Servant.

Priest

The unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrews has much to say about the traditional priesthood and temple sacrifices found in the Old Testament, and works hard to contrast with them the priesthood to which Christ was appointed (Hebrews 5:6) and the sacrifice which he offered by suffering outside the city gate to sanctify the people by his own blood (Hebrews 13:12). In the passage we hear on Good Friday, he reminds us how, unlike the priests of the

past and indeed ourselves, Jesus was without sin. But otherwise he was like us in every way. He was tested as we are tested and he had to learn obedience. This came at the cost of suffering and prayer. Sometimes he prayed aloud, sometimes with silent tears. The evangelists situate such prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:35-36). His prayer was heard and now he is at the right hand of God (Hebrews 8:1); he is sitting on a 'throne of grace' and has become for us the source of mercy, grace and eternal salvation. This author gives no detail of how he suffered nor does he blame anyone for it. The story of the Passion, which follows in the Good Friday liturgy, will do this. Last year, Benedict XVI proclaimed a year of Paul; he asks that the coming year be a year devoted to the priesthood. It is time to rediscover what the Letter to the Hebrews has to say about the priesthood of Jesus. On this day, we are invited to meet Christ, the Priest as well as Servant.

King

Thanks to Isaiah and the author of Hebrews, we are well prepared to hear the story of the Passion and Death of the Lord. This is read out twice in Holy Week, on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. This year, we heard Mark's version on Palm Sunday. Each year on Good Friday, we hear John's account; this is the shortest in length, but paradoxically it is the longest in its descriptions of Jesus' encounter with Pilate and of his last moments as he hangs on the cross. In the descriptions in each of these gospels a key word is *king*, and it is on these passages that we want to concentrate.

According to Mark

Trial before Pilate

Jesus' meeting with Pilate is told by Mark in fifteen verses (Mark 15:1-15). Mark presumes that we know who Pilate was. He was the Roman prefect, or governor, of Judaea, the one with supreme power in that world. He asks five questions: two he addresses to Jesus about his being King of the Jews, of which Jesus only answers the first, 'You say so'; and the rest

he asks of the crowd. Did they want him to free 'the king of the Jews?' They answered by asking for the release of a criminal already condemned, Barabbas. What, then, was Pilate to do with the King of the Jews? 'Crucify him!' they replied. He asked them finally, 'What evil has he done?'

Apart from his questions, we learn three other things about Pilate. First, he was amazed at Jesus' refusal to answer him. Mark has used this word 'amaze' before to describe the reaction of the onlookers to Jesus' expulsion of the legion of demons from the possessed man in the country of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:20). Secondly, Pilate 'knew' that the authorities had delivered Jesus up to him out of envy, but he did not confront them with this. He was a poor representative of the proud Roman legal system. Thirdly, we learn that Pilate wanted to 'satisfy the crowd', so he released Barabbas. Pilate sacrificed his own integrity by treating Jesus, whom he had not yet tried, on the same level as Barabbas, who had committed murder. He handed Jesus over for crucifixion. Each time Pilate referred to Jesus, it was as 'King of the Jews'. In the original Greek, Jesus speaks just two words, 'You say', and is otherwise silent. What sort of King have we here?

Jesus Crucified

The word 'king' occurs again in the fifteen verses in which Mark describes the scene of crucifixion (Mark 15:24-39): there is the inscription on the cross which reads, 'The king of the Jews'. There is plenty of activity around the cross. The passers-by jeer, the high priests mock and his fellow victims taunt Jesus. Here Jesus is being tested, as we have read already in the Letter to the Hebrews. Someone runs to find sour wine and offer it to Jesus. Jesus himself is silent apart from the final words he speaks in this gospel, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', and the loud cry with which he died. Otherwise he is as silent as the Servant of Isaiah. Four times the terrible word crucified is repeated. Jesus, so respected for his authority at the beginning of his ministry and so active by the lake and in the desert, in house and synagogue (Mark 1:21-39), comes across as crushed and powerless. What sort of King have we here?

According to John

Such is the picture of the kingship of Jesus given to us in the passion story of Mark. It is worthwhile to compare the portrait of Jesus as king that comes across in the Passion narrative of John. First, there is remote preparation through John's use of a phrase to which we have already referred in discussing Isaiah.

In all the gospels, Jesus predicts the events of his Passion: in Mark, Matthew and Luke, he refers explicitly three times to his coming death (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34 and parallels); but in John, he refers to his being 'lifted up' in the language of the fourth Servant song – 'he shall be exalted and lifted up, and rise to great heights' (Isaiah 52:13). We read after Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus, 'So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14-15). In confrontation with his opponents, Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I am he' (John 8:28). When Greeks approach him at the end of his public ministry, he told them, 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). Normally we apply this sort of language to what happened after Jesus' death (Philippians 2:9), but John is using the language of exaltation to describe what will happen on Calvary. Many commentators on John have sound grounds for describing the cross as not so much an instrument of suffering but a throne.

Trial before Pilate

John prepares for his account of Jesus being raised on the cross in his description of Jesus' meeting with Pilate. John takes 28 verses, almost twice as many as Mark, to recount this legal process (John 18:28-19:16); his seven paragraphs contrast with Mark's two. He distinguishes each scene by situating it either inside or outside Pilate's headquarters, the praetorium. Two of the scenes take place inside, where Jesus and Pilate enter into private conversation. Jesus has engaged in previous one-to-one conversations in John's gospel: he had spoken with Nicodemus, a leader among the Jews (John 3:1-15); with the woman of Samaria, a person without name and prestige (John 4:7-26); and with a man born blind, whom Jesus led to spiritual as well as physical sight (John 9:1-41). How, we wonder, will this encounter play out, between worldly authority

and the one who has claimed to be the bread of life (John 6:48), the light of the world (John 8:12), the good shepherd (John 10:11)?

Pilate asks Jesus the same question that he asks in Mark: 'Are you the king of the Jews?' This time, Jesus answers by defining his kingship: 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' But Pilate broke off the conversation with the words, 'What is truth?' Pilate did not belong to the truth (John 18:33-38). The reader may remember how this same word was used at the beginning of the gospel: the glory of the Word made flesh was 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

In their second scene together, Pilate asks a question which the world has continued to ask ever since about Jesus: 'Where are you from?' When Jesus gave no answer, Pilate threatened him. Jesus calmly reminded him that all power comes from above. This time we hear that Pilate's reaction was to try to release him; he did not capitulate to demands for his execution as quickly as he did in Mark. These two scenes, with their discussion of the nature of kingship and source of power, provide a mirror in which to view the quality and purpose of earthly authority in every age of humanity. They help to establish our understanding of the kingship of Christ.

Jesus Crucified

1. The Inscription (John 19:19-22)

John's description of Jesus on the cross is nearly twice the length as the one given by Mark (John 19:18-37). It takes the form of five tableaux, each a sort of 'station of the cross', which allows the reader to pause, reflect and pray. The first tells of the inscription Pilate put on the cross, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. Mark reported this in one verse (Mark 15:26); John needs four. Pilate reappears in person, and this time he does not dither: 'What I have written, I have written', he says. This representative of authority and power speaks his last word, confirming the kingship of Jesus. The writing of the inscription in three languages – of government (Latin), culture (Greek) and everyday commerce (Hebrew) – suggests that none has an excuse to be ignorant of the royal identity of the figure raised up before them.

2. *The Seamless Tunic (John 19:23-25)*

Mark reported how those who crucified Jesus then divided his clothes among themselves (Mark 15:24). John expands on this by adding the detail of a seamless tunic which the soldiers refused to tear. The high priest on occasions wore a seamless tunic, and so maybe there is a hint here of Christ as priest. But because this is not a Johannine theme, interpreters prefer to concentrate on the words of the soldiers who say, 'Let us not divide it'. Division or schism is a common theme in John: the words of Jesus brought division (John 7:43); while the net containing the 153 fish that Peter caught was not torn (John 21:11). Augustine saw these fish as representing the nations of the world. Cyprian saw the undivided tunic as representing the unity of the church. Here we pray for unity among Christians. The seamless robe our king left behind is its symbol.

3. *The Mother and the Disciple (John 19:25-27)*

The third and central scene of John's account of Jesus raised on the cross, finds him speaking to two who are standing next to it. The first is his mother. She has appeared once before in this gospel at the marriage feast of Cana. There she said, 'Do whatever he tells you', an expression of her faith (John 2:5). The second is the 'disciple whom he loved', who had reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23). Faith and love are qualities demanded of all who give allegiance to this king lifted up on Calvary. He makes of these two a new family to which the multitude of those who will belong to his kingdom in the ages to come will belong. The Church found its beginning beside the cross with the mother of Jesus and this unnamed disciple.

4. *'It is Ended' (John 19:28-30)*

In this fourth scene, John reports the death of Jesus. He records his final words, which he stresses were spoken in knowledge and with intent. Jesus said first, 'I thirst' and then, 'It is ended'. His thirst recalls another sixth hour (John 19:14) when, weary from his journey, having asked the Samaritan woman for water, he had offered her living water (John 4:6-7). His words, 'It is ended', echo John's introduction to the foot washing, and indeed to the whole passion story: 'He loved them to the end' (John 13:1). As for the death of Jesus, John simply wrote, 'He handed

over the Spirit'. This is an expression with two possible meanings, and it probably alludes to both; he gave his own Spirit back to the Father, and he handed over the Holy Spirit to his mother and the disciple standing by the cross. Here was the final gift of the exalted king to his infant church.

5. *Water and Blood (John 19:31-38)*

This final scene is unique to John. Soldiers who were sent to break the legs of the three who were crucified, did not break the legs of Jesus. Instead they pierced his side. The note about not a bone being broken is a quotation from instructions given long ago, on the preparations of the Pascal Lamb for sacrifice (Exodus 12:36). As the Lamb of God whom the Baptist had proclaimed (John 1:29), Jesus had fulfilled the purpose of this Lamb. As for the water and blood which came from his side, these recall the living water which Ezekiel had seen in his vision of the water of life flowing from the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing fruitfulness and new life (Ezekiel 47:1). A quotation from Zechariah indicates the response the evangelist is looking for: we too are to look on the one we have pierced, an indication of our response in repentance to these events (Zechariah 12:10). Water and blood continue to nourish the church through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. The King is now enthroned, not on Calvary, but at the right hand of God where he has gone to prepare a place for us (John 14:2).

The Celebration continues

The reading of scripture over, the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord on Good Friday continues with formal prayers of intercession and petition. We then proceed to the Veneration of the Cross; thanks to what we have heard from Isaiah, Hebrews and John, we are to recognise the figure on it as Servant, Priest and King. We live in hope because he has passed on to us his Spirit and he gives us his life in the Eucharist, the reception of which will conclude this Celebration. There is plenty for us to ponder in the Liturgy of Good Friday.

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