

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Mar 20th 2016

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

Passion Sunday is full of doorways to grace. I can feel it in me and in the community gathering, with palms in our hands. There's something special to this first day of a holy week.

If I am alert, I'll remember that the palms from last year were burnt to form the ashes I wore on my forehead, in the form of a cross, to begin this Lent's journey. I usually become aware right away, at the beginning, that there is tremendous irony, and a discomfort, in joining in the waving of palms and singing "Hosanna!" - just like the people in Jerusalem that day. I can become aware that in a brief moment, I'll be in the same crowd, shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Passion Sunday always has us reading the Passion story. This year, it is from Luke. But, it is set up by the marvelous reading from Isaiah and from Paul's letter to the Philippians. The passion story is not a tragedy. Jesus accepted his role, his mission. He humbled himself, obediently accepting his life and his death. And, this is all for me, for us all.

It is hard to get deeply moved by a story so familiar. I have to prepare ahead of time to get myself into a space where the reading of the passion, whether I'm reading Jesus' lines, as a presider, or whether I'm in the congregation. I have to prepare to pray through it, in the sense that I'm talking with myself, and with the Lord, during it, just as we are hearing it.

Lord, I'm so familiar with this Last Supper story, but today I want to especially listen so that I'm more deeply grateful at this Eucharist, and can say at a deeper level, "It is right to give him thanks and praise." Dear Lord, how do I thank you for what you did at that supper with your disciples?! Let me feel deeper gratitude as I hear the story again. You are giving us your body and blood as food for our journey, even today at this Mass.

This garden scene moves me. You really did wrestle with this surrender, didn't you, Lord. Thank you so much for saying "yes," for me. The betrayal by Judas is horrible until I remember the many times I betrayed you, while still trying to do what I thought was "good" by some definition. And, even there, being betrayed and arrested, you heal and you turned your disciples' response from violence.

Peter's denial must have stung you, Lord, even though you knew it would happen. It stings me as I think of the times and ways I've refused to stand up to be your disciple.

The trials - back and forth between Pilot and Herod - are so sad and such an indignity for you, Lord, and for me experiencing it with you, whom I love. I can never say you don't understand the minor indignities that trouble me so much.

When we, the crowd, shout, "Away with him ..." I feel the sting of it again. How much you have loved me/us in our fickle attachments and infidelities, or wandering loyalties and misplaced kinds of attachments!

Simon carried your cross. Let me carry your cross in the ways you place it on my shoulders, Lord. I so

often do it with resentment and with grumbling. I so want to learn to do it with you. I love that you stopped to be with the women, grieving along the way.

In one simple sentence the story says they crucified you. They nailed your wrists and feet to a cross and hoisted you up to hang there until you could no longer lift yourself up for air. You were executed with torture. And, it is for me/us. And, I'm hearing the story and asking you for the grace to let it come into my heart. So that I might be more grateful for the gift of this complete love.

Jesus, how could you have said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do"? How? Oh, how I want to ask you, beg you, to make my heart like yours. Mercy from the cross! Mercy, as you are unjustly condemned, by religious fanatics, to pay the price for my sin! Mercy that challenges every hardness in my heart for everyone that I regard as a sinner, for everyone who drives me crazy, everyone that I judge as not very good. Make my heart like yours, sharing mercy from the cross.

Oh, how I want to be like the good criminal on the cross who asks you to remember him when you come into your kingdom, and to hear you promise me, "You will be with me in Paradise." Please let me desire that communion with you more than anything else that crowds my complicated heart!

In the end you teach me how to surrender: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Let me put my life in your/our Father's hands, Lord, Jesus. Every day. Throughout my day. Even while hanging on the crosses I have to face.

I know that if I prepare to hear this passion this way, or in a similar way, it will move me. And, perhaps this year, I'll do what I've done before: cut a small piece of palm and put it in my pocket and put another small piece near my computer at work, so that I have a reminder with me of what this Palm Sunday of our Lord's Passion meant for me today and for the days ahead.

Andy Alexander, S.J.-Creighton University's Collaborative Ministry Office