

Sunday, April 14, 2019

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7

2nd Reading: Philippians 2:6-11

Responsorial: Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24

Gospel: Luke 22:14-23:56

Journeying with Jesus in His Passion

When the hour came . . . (Luke 22:14)

One of the best ways to read the story of Jesus' passion is to put ourselves in his shoes. First, Jesus watched one of his own apostles betray him with a kiss. Have you ever had someone smile at you on the surface but then do something to intentionally hurt you? If so, you have had a taste of the passion. Have you ever had your best friends abandon you in a dark time? If so, you have had a taste of the passion. If you ever had people make up lies and false accusations about you in an effort to destroy your reputation, then you have had a taste of the passion. If you have ever been the brunt of terrible jokes and pranks that hurt, then you have had a taste of the passion.

Was any of this fun? No. Did it hurt you deeply? Probably. Did you get angry, feel humiliated, harbor resentment? Likely. Did you want to get even? Maybe.

At the passion, if Jesus fell prey to one split second of resentment or one moment of anger, he would not have been able to save us. Everything would have been lost. But he didn't. Throughout this ordeal, as unjust as it was, Jesus acted like a lamb led to slaughter. He didn't defend himself. He didn't fight back. Instead, all Jesus did was say, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

All of us will face false accusation or abuse or betrayal at some point in our lives. It's likely that most of us already have. As we hear the passion today, let's resolve to be as merciful as we can to everyone who has hurt us, ridiculed us, betrayed us, or tarnished our reputations. Let's also agree never again to undermine someone or hurt someone.

Reflecting on Jesus' passion naturally creates a moment of sorrow in us. It saddens us to see Jesus suffer and be mistreated so much. But it can also help us. We can look at the cross and ask God to help us be more forgiving—just as Jesus was.

"Lord, help me to be like you."

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. The first reading from Isaiah is a powerful prophecy of Jesus' ministry: *The Lord GOD has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning he opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.* It ends with these words of trust in the Lord: *The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.*
 - In what ways are the opening and ending words a testimony to Jesus' total trust in the Father's love and call for his life, especially through his passion and death on the Cross?
 - During difficult circumstances, do you believe that, "The Lord God is my help, therefore, I am not disgraced"? Are you able to say, "I have set my face like flint, knowing that I will not be put to shame"? When was this true and when was it a struggle for you?
2. The responsorial psalm is also a prophetic description of Jesus' passion, as well as his crucifixion: *All who see me scoff at me; they mock me with parted lips, they wag their heads: "He relied on the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, if he loves him." They divide my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots.* Like the first reading, the responsorial psalm also ends with words of hope and trust in the Lord: *But you, O LORD, be not far from me; O my help, hasten to aid me. I will proclaim your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you: "You who fear the LORD, praise him; all you descendants of Jacob, give glory to him; revere him."*
 - Out of gratitude for what the Lord suffered for you, what are some ways you can "keep watch" with Jesus through his Holy Week of suffering and death on the cross?
 - What do the ending words of the psalm mean to you? In what way can they be applied to your life?
 - The response we say are the words that Jesus cried out from the Cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How do they describe how Jesus took upon himself the penalty for our sins?
3. The second reading begins with these words: *Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* The reading ends with these words: *Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*
 - In what ways, do the opening and ending verses of the reading demonstrate Jesus' divinity, humility, and obedience?
 - What steps can you take to reflect more of the humility and obedience of Jesus?
4. The Gospel reading describes Jesus' fulfillment of what was prophesied in the previous readings regarding his passion and death. In Luke's version of the passion narrative there are many "contrasts" in his description of the Passover celebration, the last supper, the argument among the apostles regarding who was the greatest, Peter's profession of faith and later denial, the apostles sleeping during his passion, Judas' betrayal, Jesus' crucifixion, the profession of faith by the "good thief" and the gentile Roman centurion at the cross, and the burial of Jesus by Joseph, a member of the Jewish council.
 - How would you describe the many contrasts in the Gospel reading? Which one(s) stand out for you?
 - How would you describe the contrasts in your life? Which ones need more of the Lord's grace to overcome them?
 - What do you think led to the profession of faith by the "good thief" and the Roman centurion?
5. The meditation ends with these words: "All of us will face false accusation or abuse or betrayal at some point in our lives. It's likely that most of us already have. As we hear the passion today, let's resolve to be as merciful as we can to everyone who has hurt us, ridiculed us, betrayed us, or tarnished our reputations. Let's also agree never again to undermine someone or hurt someone. Reflecting on Jesus' passion naturally creates a moment of sorrow in us. It saddens us to see Jesus suffer and be mistreated so much. But it can also help us. We can look at the cross and ask God to help us be more forgiving—just as Jesus was."
 - How can reflecting on Jesus passion and death on the cross "help us be more forgiving—just as Jesus was"?
 - What steps can you take to open yourself more to God's grace during this grace-filled season, especially in your prayers and at Mass, and "resolve to be as merciful as we can to everyone who has hurt us, ridiculed us, betrayed us, or tarnished our reputations. Let's also agree never again to undermine someone or hurt someone"?

Take some time now to pray and ask the Lord for the grace to fix your eyes on Jesus, and let his example of self-sacrifice and compassion move you to be more like him. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as a starting point.

"Lord, help me to be like you."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]