Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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March 24, 2018

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As we enter the sacred time we call Holy Week, the church overwhelms us with liturgy, Scripture and symbols. Each day has its own particular theme until we reach the climax of the liturgical year in the three-day liturgy we call the Easter triduum. Today's celebration, commonly called Palm Sunday, invites us to contemplate Jesus' last week on Earth, anticipating all that we will relive symbolically Thursday and Friday. Our readings from the Gospel of Mark begin with the crowds' exuberant but shallow adulation and end with Jesus' death on the cross.

Palm Sunday

March 25, 2018

Isaiah 50:4-7

Psalms 22

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1-15:47

Unlike many other Christians, Catholics have cherished the crucifix, the image of Christ on the cross, as a "sacramental," a rich and challenging symbol of our faith. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, sacramentals are an extension of our liturgical life. For many, the sacramental, and especially depictions of Jesus' passion, are tangible reminders of their relationship with Christ.

Some crucifixes seem almost bland, portraying a nearly emotionless Jesus. Others show him with an expression of immense sadness or in terrible suffering. The Eastern church, which favors stylized icons over lifelike representations, maintains a practice of iconography carried out according to a carefully disciplined and well-developed theology. Every crucifix or depiction of the Passion is an interpretation of this mystery and communicates a theology, often all the more powerful for being visual rather than verbal.

Latin American churches are famous for depictions that emphasize Jesus' awful and bloody suffering. These images, like some famous Peruvian ones that portray Jesus with hands and feet distorted by unrelenting toil, emphasize Christ's union with

those who suffer. People can gaze on him and know that God sympathizes with every human pain.

Another related image, often called "The Just Judge," depicts Jesus after he was flogged, crowned with thorns and seated with a wooden staff for a scepter. He looks at the observer as a judge who has experienced the height of injustice. "The Just Judge" reveals that God knows the same feelings as those who have been treated wrongly and that God will not forget them.

These images make the truth of the Incarnation palpable by showing the depth of God's identification with those who suffer. Often people's response to those images is to touch or even kiss them in gratitude and solidarity.

Then, we have crucifixes that present Christ in some variety of priestly garments and/or wearing a crown. The icon called "The Great High Priest" depicts the victorious Christ garbed in a chasuble. This proclaims that Christ is, indeed, the high priest chosen by God to speak to humanity on God's behalf. He reigns over all things, including death. The message here is just what the Letter to the Hebrews says of Christ: He shared in humanity so "that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death … and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life" (Hebrews 2:14-15).



(Mark Bartholomew)

In much less formal language, James Alison, in his book *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*, describes this image as akin to Evel Knievel's extraordinary motorcycle stunts. Only after Knievel rode his bike over an abyss and through fire could other bikers think it was possible and eventually try it themselves. Similarly, Christ's victory on the cross, his ability to accept the cruelest sort of death with all its shame and abandonment, allows his followers to believe that, like Jesus, they can trust completely in God's love.

Christ crucified reveals that nothing, not even death, is more powerful or more vital than God's love. In Alison's words, "Jesus' death and resurrection is God's way of proving that he is able and willing to hold humans in being through death ... so that we can, already, start to live as if death were not."

One typical crucifixion icon depicts Jesus at the moment of death. His blood, flowing into the opened earth, symbolizes that the redemption reaches all who have died. Four women are grouped at his right, comforting one another; all they can do is be

present to him and to one another. On the other side, John hides his face while the centurion looks up, declaring what no one else could say in the face of this scene: "Truly, this man was the Son of God."

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Holy Week is overwhelming. It bursts with liturgy and symbols to lead us ever deeper into the mystery of our faith. One way to take that in is to contemplate different depictions of Christ's passion. We can allow the art to interpret what we have heard. As we gaze upon these scenes, they will lead us to reinterpret our own lives as well.

[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is writing the history of the St. Joseph sisters in the U.S.]

Editor's note: This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic resource. Request a sample issue at CelebrationPublications.org. Sign up to receive email newsletters every time Spiritual Reflections is posted.

A version of this story appeared in the **March 9-22, 2018** print issue under the headline: Interpreting the Passion.