

Sunday Connection



Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, Cycle A

Sunday, April 5, 2020

Readings & Background

This Sunday's Reading

Gospel at the Procession with Palms

Matthew 21:1-11

Jesus enters Jerusalem as the crowd waves palm branches and shouts, "Hosanna!"

First Reading

Isaiah 50:4-7

The Lord's Servant will stand firm, even when persecuted.

Responsorial Psalm

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

A cry for help to the Lord in the face of evildoers

Second Reading

Philippians 2:6-11

Christ was obedient even to death, and God has exalted him.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Jesus is crucified, and his body is placed in the tomb. (shorter form: Matthew 27:11-54)

Background on the Gospel Reading

Today we begin Holy Week, the days during which we journey with Jesus on his way of the cross and anticipate his Resurrection on Easter. Today's liturgy begins with the procession with palms to remind us of Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem.

The events of Jesus' Passion are proclaimed in their entirety in today's Liturgy of the Word. Those events will be proclaimed again when we celebrate the liturgies of the Triduum—Holy Thursday's Mass of the Lord's Supper, the Good Friday of the Lord's Passion, and the Easter Vigil. In communities that celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation with catechumens, these liturgies take on special importance because they invite the catechumens and the community to enter together into the central mysteries of our faith. These days are indeed profound and holy.

In Cycle A, we read the Passion of Jesus as found in the Gospel of Matthew on Palm, or Passion, Sunday. (On Good Friday, we will read the Passion of Jesus from the Gospel of John). The story of Jesus' Passion and death in Matthew's Gospel focuses particularly on the obedience of Jesus to the will of his Father. As Jesus sends his disciples to prepare for Passover, he indicates that the events to come are the will of the Father (Matthew 26:18). In Jesus' prayer in the garden, he prays three times to the Father to take away the cup of suffering, but each time, Jesus concludes by affirming his obedience to the Father's will (Matthew 26:39-44). Even Matthew's description of Jesus' death shows Jesus' obedience to the Father.

Another theme of Matthew's Gospel is to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture. Throughout the Passion narrative, Matthew cites and alludes to Scripture to show that the events of Jesus' Passion and death are in accordance with all that was foretold. And if the events were foretold, then God is in control. In addition, Matthew is particularly concerned that the reader does not miss the fact that Jesus is the Suffering Servant of the Old Testament.

Jesus acts in obedience to the Father even in death, so that sins may be forgiven. Matthew makes this clear in the story of the Lord's Supper. As Jesus blesses the chalice, he says: ". . . for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:28)

While the Gospels of Matthew and Mark have many parallels in their narrative of the Passion, there are a few details worth noting that are unique to Matthew. Only Matthew indicates the price paid to Judas for betraying Jesus. The story of Judas's death is also found only in Matthew, as is the detail that Pilate's wife received a warning in a dream and that Pilate washed his hands of Jesus' death. Finally, Matthew's Gospel alone mentions the earthquakes and other phenomena that happened after Jesus' death.

Matthew places the responsibility for Jesus' death on the Sanhedrin, the chief priests and elders who were responsible for the Temple. However, the animosity that those Jewish leaders and the Jewish people demonstrate toward Jesus is not to be interpreted in ways that blame the Jewish people for Jesus' death. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the narrative reflects the tension that probably existed between the early Christian community and their Jewish contemporaries. At the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers made clear that all sinners share responsibility for the suffering and death of Jesus and that it is wrong to place blame for Jesus' Passion on the Jewish contemporaries of Jesus or on Jewish people today.

There are many vantage points from which to engage in Jesus' Passion. In the characters of Matthew's Gospel, we find reflections of ourselves and the many ways in which we sometimes respond to Jesus. Sometimes we are like Judas, who betrays Jesus and comes to regret it. We are sometimes like Peter, who denies him, or like the disciples, who fell asleep during Jesus' darkest hour but then act rashly and violently at his arrest. Sometimes we are like Simon, who is pressed into service to help Jesus carry his cross. Sometimes we are like the leaders who fear Jesus or like Pontius Pilate, who washed his hands of the whole affair. Jesus dies so that our sins will be forgiven.

The events of Jesus' Passion, death, and Resurrection are called the Paschal Mystery. No amount of study will exhaust or explain the depth of love that Jesus showed in offering this sacrifice for us. After we have examined and studied the stories we have received about these events, we are left with one final task—to meditate on these events and on the forgiveness that Jesus' obedience won for us.

Grades 1-3

Gospel Reading

Matthew 26:14–27:66

Jesus is crucified, and his body is placed in the tomb. (shorter form: Matthew 27:11-54)

Making the Connection (Grades 1, 2, and 3)

On the last Sunday of Lent, we remember the sacrifice that Jesus made for us when he accepted the cross. Throughout this week, Holy Week, we remember that Jesus was obedient even unto death so that our sins would be forgiven.

Materials Needed

- Several illustrations of the events of Jesus' Passion, such as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Jesus at the Last Supper, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus on the Cross

Preparation for Sunday Scripture Readings

1. As you tell the children the Gospel for this Sunday, show the illustrations that you have brought.
2. Say: *For six weeks, we've been preparing ourselves for Easter. Who remembers the name of this season of the Church year? (Lent) This Sunday is the last Sunday of Lent. It has a special name. It's called Palm Sunday.*
3. Continue as you show the picture of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem: *First, we hear that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he was greeted like a king. In Jesus' day, kings were greeted with great parades and traveled in chariots or on horses. People bowed before them to show respect. Something like that happened when Jesus came to Jerusalem, but Jesus was riding a humble donkey. People formed a parade, waved palm branches at him, and greeted him with names of great respect. Jesus knew their respect would not last, however, because he had not come as an earthly king.*
4. Continue as you show the picture of Jesus at the Last Supper: *While in Jerusalem, Jesus celebrated a very special Jewish feast called Passover with his disciples. While at supper with the disciples, he told them that there would be difficult times ahead and that they would be very frightened by what would happen. But Jesus also told them that these things would be necessary so that sins would be forgiven.*
5. Continue as you show the picture of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: *After the Passover meal, Jesus and his disciples went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, terrible things began to happen, just as Jesus had said. First, Jesus was arrested. The disciples were frightened, and they ran away. Then Jesus was placed on trial and sentenced to death on the cross.*
6. Continue as you show the picture of Jesus on the cross: *Jesus was crucified and died. But that is not the end of the story. Jesus died so that our sins would be forgiven, and then God raised him from the dead. We will celebrate that event next week at Easter. But this week, which is called Holy Week, we remember the sacrifice that Jesus made for us.*
7. Conclude your time together in prayer, thanking God for the love that Jesus showed us. Pray together the Lord's Prayer or sing together an appropriate song, such as "Jesus, Jesus" or "What Wondrous Love Is This."

Grades 4-6

Gospel Reading

Matthew 26:14–27:66

Jesus is crucified, and his body is placed in the tomb. (shorter form: Matthew 27:11-54)

Making the Connection (Grades 4, 5, and 6)

Holy Week is a time for prayerful meditation on the sacrifice that Jesus made for us when he accepted the cross. Throughout this week, we remember that Jesus was obedient even unto death so that our sins would be forgiven.

Materials Needed

- A crucifix
- Prayer booklets assembled from sheets of paper (one per child)
- Pencils

Preparation for Sunday Scripture Readings

1. Display the crucifix in a prominent place in your gathering space. Distribute one booklet to each member of the group.
2. Say: *The last Sunday in Lent is called Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday. At Mass on this day, we hear the events of Jesus' Passion—the last three days of his life—and his death proclaimed in the Gospel readings.*
3. Ask: *Does anyone know what we call the week that follows Palm Sunday and prepares us for Easter? (Holy Week) During this week, we reflect on and pray about the events of Jesus' last days. Today we're going to start this reflection by hearing the Gospel reading of Jesus' Passion, which is proclaimed on Palm, or Passion, Sunday. During the reading, we will pause periodically so that you can write in your prayer booklets. Write any thoughts, questions, or other responses that you have to the reading. Writing can be a form of prayer. As we pray together in this way, let us ask that God will open our hearts and minds to the love that Jesus showed for us.*
4. Prayerfully read the Passion of Jesus as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, pausing after each passage as indicated to allow the group time to write in their booklets. Read Matthew 27:11-14 (pause); 15-26 (pause); 27-31 (pause); 32-37 (pause); 38-44 (pause); and 45-54 (pause).
5. As you finish this prayerful time of reflection, be attentive to the children. If they want to talk about the reading and their responses, allow time to do so. In your conversation, remind them that Jesus died to save us from our sins and that Jesus' death on the cross is not the end of the story; next week we will celebrate Jesus' Resurrection at Easter.
6. Conclude this time of prayer by praying together the Lord's Prayer and/or singing an appropriate hymn, such as "Lead Me, Guide Me," "Were You There?" or "What Wondrous Love Is This."

Grades 7-8

Gospel Reading

Matthew 26:14–27:66

Jesus is crucified, and his body is placed in the tomb. (shorter form: Matthew 27:11-54)

Making the Connection (Grades 7 and 8)

To be holy means to be set apart for God's purposes. Holy Week is the time set apart to focus on the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Materials Needed

- A trophy

- Paper
- Drawing/coloring materials
- A crucifix

Preparation for Sunday Scripture Readings

1. Bring in a trophy to show to the young people and ask them to describe the purpose of a trophy. (a symbol of victory, a reward)
2. Ask for a few volunteers to describe trophies that they have won.
3. Tell the young people to imagine that they have been hired to design trophies and that they can begin by designing one for a sport or activity that they themselves wish they could win.
4. Distribute paper and drawing/coloring materials and have them draw pictures of their trophies.
5. When they are done, invite each of the young people to show his or her drawing and to describe what sport or activity he or she chose.
6. When all are finished, remind them that a trophy is a symbol of victory.
7. Then ask them what the Christian symbol of victory is. (the cross of Jesus) Show them a crucifix.
8. Explain how unusual it is for a symbol of victory to depict someone in defeat and how Jesus' Resurrection transformed a symbol of shame into a means of reconciliation with God.
9. Say: *This Sunday, we begin Holy Week, a time set apart to reflect on Jesus' death on the cross and his Resurrection.*
10. Prayerfully read the Passion of Jesus as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, pausing after each passage as indicated to allow the group time to reflect silently. Read Matthew 27:11-14 (pause); 15-26 (pause); 27-31 (pause); 32-37 (pause); 38-44 (pause); and 45-54 (pause).
11. As you finish this prayerful time of reflection, be attentive to the young people. If they want to talk about the reading and their reflections, allow time to do so. In your conversation, remind them that Jesus died to save us from our sins and that Jesus' death on the cross is not the end of the story; next week we will celebrate Jesus' Resurrection at Easter.
12. Conclude this time of prayer by praying together the Lord's Prayer and/or singing an appropriate hymn, such as "Lead Me, Guide Me," "Were You There?" or "What Wondrous Love Is This."

Family

Gospel Reading

Matthew 26:14–27:66

Jesus is crucified, and his body is placed in the tomb. (shorter form: Matthew 27:11-54)

Family Connection

Palm, or Passion, Sunday begins the most sacred week of the Church year—Holy Week. During these days, we prepare ourselves for Easter by prayerful reflection upon the events of Jesus' Passion and death. You might display a crucifix in a prominent place this week, as reminder of the salvation Christ won for us. The crucifix can also be the focal point for family prayer during Holy Week.

Because of the length and complexity of the Passion narrative, young children have difficulty remaining attentive when it is proclaimed in its entirety. Families can choose to read a portion of this Sunday's Gospel each day of Holy Week, providing ample opportunity for children to ask questions and respond to the events described there. In this way, the entire week can become a "way of the cross."

Each day during Holy Week, the family can gather in a prayerful space with a crucifix as the focal point. The Passion as found in Matthew's Gospel might be read as follows throughout the week:

Sunday: Matthew 21:1-11 (Gospel at the Procession with Palms)

Monday: Matthew 26:14-25

Tuesday: Matthew 26:26-35

Wednesday: Matthew 26:36-56

Thursday: Matthew 26:57-27:14

Friday: Matthew 27:15-54

After reading from the Gospel each night, the family might reflect on the reading together. Conclude your prayer time together by praying the Lord's Prayer and/or singing an appropriate hymn, such as "Jesus, Jesus," "Were You There?" or "What Wondrous Love Is This."