

April 17, 2011 - Palm/Passion Sunday (A)

Readings for Passion Sunday (Cycle A):

Reading at the Procession with Palms:

Matthew 21.1-11

Readings at the Mass:

1. Isaiah 50.4-7

Psalms 22.8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24 Resp: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

2. Philippians 2.6-11

3. Matthew 26.14-27.66 (longer form); Matthew 27.11-54 (shorter form)

Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading

by Bill Hunt

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The passion/resurrection narrative in Matthew's Gospel is an account of the failed attempt to destroy Jesus' reputation as the Son of God. At all the crucial points in his Gospel Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of God: at his baptism, in the temptation in the desert, at his transfiguration, in Peter's confession of faith, before the high priest Caiphas, when he is mocked on the cross, and by the Centurion after his death.

This is not the same as our trinitarian confession of Jesus as God the Son, even though there is a certain continuity between the two titles. For Matthew there were other Sons of God, notably David, but Jesus was the Son of God *par excellence*. He was the one sent by God who was absolutely faithful to the will of his Father/Patron and who acted on God's behalf, especially by his teaching.

In Matthew's passion/resurrection narrative Jesus' enemies do everything in their power to attack and destroy his honor status as Son of God by a series of degradation rituals. In fact, the narrative seems to be organized around these deadly challenges to Jesus' honor and the divine vindication that follows. Consult the listening guide at the end for details.

Malina and Rohrbaugh describe a status degradation ritual as "a process of publicly recasting, relabeling, humiliating, and thus recategorizing a person as a social deviant." (1992, 159) The intent is to destroy the person's past as well as the person's future. It is not enough that the person is physically maimed, psychologically scarred, or murdered. It is essential that other people, especially companions and followers, remember the person as a criminal, a fool, and a failure.

Thus, in Matthew's account Peter witnesses Jesus' degradation before Caiphas from the courtyard nearby; the women witness Jesus' crucifixion, death, and burial; and the crowds witness the proceeding before Pilate and the public crucifixion of Jesus. The intent was to blot out any memory, public or private, of Jesus as an esteemed teacher and to replace it with the memory of a person dying alone in disgrace and horrible agony, abandoned by friends and followers and even by God.

Lying is another way of destroying one's past. False testimony is a way of revising the official record. Torture is also essential. Brutal physical pain robs a person of any semblance of dignity and takes away hope. Even those who survive torture bear the scars for the rest of their lives. Taunting and mocking complete the picture of public humiliation.

With regard to those who mocked Jesus on the cross, Malina and Rohrbaugh comment: "This is the high point of the revenge and satisfaction sought by Jesus' Jerusalem enemies, who plotted it all from the outset (26.4). There really can be no greater satisfaction for dishonor than what is described here: Jesus is nailed naked to a cross to be seen by one and all, the ultimate in public degradation and humiliation." (1992, 164-165)

The depth of Jesus' degradation underscores the magnitude of his spectacular vindication. Unless we grasp the depth of his passion we cannot fully understand the wonder of his resurrection. In one stroke his honor is more than reinstated and his memory is restored. His whole life appears in a new light.

As we ponder the passion of Jesus we must remember the thousands of victims of torture throughout the world. It is a scandal that many of the perpetrators of torture profess to be Christians. Immediately before the passion/resurrection narrative in Matthew's Gospel we are told that the way we treat the least of people is the way we treat Jesus. (Matthew 25.40, 45) By a bizarre reversal, we who mourn the torture and humiliation of Jesus continue to inflict that same suffering on him when we torture others or countenance that torture.

Torture often goes by the euphemism of "interrogation" or "extracting intelligence." The real purpose of torture is not to gain information. It is a terrorist technique and an instrument of social control. By maiming and humiliating the torture subject, the torturers send a message to would-be sympathizers and followers.

Consider, in our own time, the detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Many of the Afghan detainees have never known anything except warfare. For many years they were considered "freedom fighters" as the United States supported them in their struggle against the once "Evil Empire" of the Soviet Union. Now, without any hearing or trial, that memory is obliterated, and these same people are re-labeled as vicious terrorists who do not deserve even the procedural protection of international conventions.

Detainees from Afghanistan and Iraq as well as those kidnapped from other lands have been subjected to disorienting sensory deprivation (hooding) and prolonged confinement in painful positions both on their airplane trip from where they were captured and in their animal cages at Guantanamo Bay. They have been isolated from each other, from their families, from legal counsel, and even from the Red Cross. They have been terrorized by the prospect of being executed after condemnation by a secret military tribunal. Early photos showed them returning from their "interrogation" sessions hooded, stumbling, and with their heads bent forward at a rakish angle. The revelations from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and reports from international human rights agencies suggest that American captors have inflicted even worse kinds of torture such as waterboarding in order to "extract operable intelligence" from the detainees.[\[1\]](#)

Some leaders who call upon the Christian God for aid in the war against terrorism support this kind of treatment of prisoners as better than what they deserve. From the opinion polls it appears that most Americans agree with them and approve torture “when necessary for security.”

As we listen to the retelling of the crucifixion on Passion Sunday and Good Friday, and as we mourn the torture and humiliation inflicted upon Jesus, how can we fail to come to the aid of our fellow human beings who are suffering as he did?

In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

Brown 1994 – Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 Volumes, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1994), Vol. 1, pp. 24-35.

Brown 1997 - Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 199-203.

Fuller 1984 - Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary. The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 55-57.

Hames 2002 - Susan Hames, CSJ, Commentary on Palm/Passion Sunday in *Sunday by Sunday* , Vol. 11, No. 26 (March 24, 2002), pp. 1-4.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 152-169.

Neyrey 1998 - Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 139-162.

Pilch 1995 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A.A* Liturgical Press Book(Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 64-66.

[1] In his January 22, 2009 executive order President Barak Obama required the CIA to abandon so-called enhanced interrogation methods "unless the Attorney General with appropriate consultation provides further guidance." We do not know if that "guidance" has been provided to the CIA, but legal torture remains a possibility. See January 22, 2009 Presidential Executive Order – Ensuring Lawful Interrogations, Sec. 3.(c)
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/EnsuringLawfulInterrogations/

LISTENING GUIDE TO THE PASSION ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

A. Predictions and Forewarnings (26.1 - 26.35)

1. Preview (26.1-5)
 - a. Jesus: "the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."
 - b. The chief priests and elders: "they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him."
2. The anointing at Bethany (26.6-13): "she has prepared me for burial."

beginning of the longer form at Mass
3. Judas' disloyalty (26.14-16): "and from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him."
4. The last supper (26.17-29)
 - a. "one of you will betray me."
 - b. "this is my body . . . this is my blood of the covenant."
("The separation of self [body] from blood, the locus of life, indicates death. In effect this prophetic symbolic action proclaims the meaning of Jesus' forthcoming death." [Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992, 155])
5. The prediction of Peter's disloyalty (26.30-35) "this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times."
6. Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (26.36-46)
 - a. "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

b. "See, my betrayer is at hand."

B. Attempts to Destroy Jesus' Honor as Son of God (26.47-27.50)

1. Jesus is betrayed by Judas and abandoned by all the rest of his disciples. (26.47-56)
2. Jesus before Caiphias - **First Status Degradation Ritual** (26.57-68)
 - a. false testimony
 - b. The high priest tears his clothes.
 - c. verdict of death

 - d. abuse: "Then they spat in his face and struck him, while some slapped him . . .".
mockery: "Prophecy for us, Christ: who is it that struck you?"
3. Two interludes (26.69-27.10)
 - a. Peter's disloyalty (26.69-75) "I do not know the man."
[Transition to a proceeding before Pilate. (27.1-2)]
 - b. Judas' remorse and suicide (27.3-10) "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood."

beginning of the shorter form at mass

4. Jesus before Pilate - **Second Status Degradation Ritual** (27.11-31)
 - a. [False] accusations by chief priests and elders (27.11-14)
 - b. Release of Barabbas (=Son of the Father) in place of Jesus (27.15-26a)
 - c. Torture of Jesus (27.26b-31)
 - 1) abuse: flogging, stripping of clothes, crown of thorns, spitting, striking on the head
 - 2) mocking: scarlet cloak, reed as a fake scepter, "Hail, King of the Judeans!"
5. Jesus is crucified - **The Ultimate Status Degradation Ritual** (27.32-50)
 - a. Abuse: parade through the streets, crucifixion, nakedness, and death
 - b. Mockery:
 - 1) [False] charge: "This is Jesus, the King of the Judeans." i.e. a revolutionary

 - 2) Passers-by: "Save yourself, if you are the Son of God"

 - 3) Chief priests, scribes, and elders: "he said I am the Son of God."
 - 4) The bandits who were crucified with Jesus mock him too.

C. The Vindication of Jesus' Honor as Son of God (27.50-28.20)

1. Events immediately following the crucifixion (27.50-66)
 - a. Shout of victory (27.50): "But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice . . ."
 - b. Signs indicating that the last days are breaking in (27.45, 51-53): darkness over the whole land, tearing of the Temple curtain, earthquake, tombs opened
 - c. The testimony of the centurion and his companions (27.54): "Truly this was the Son of God."

end of the shorter form at Mass

2. Burial of Jesus in a rich man's tomb (27.65)
 - a. Women who were witnesses of Jesus' death and burial (27.55-56, 61)
 - b. Burial of Jesus (27.57-60)
 - c. Setting of the guard and sealing of the stone (27.61-66)

end of the longer form at Mass

beginning of the Gospel at the Easter Vigil

3. The Resurrection of Jesus (28.1-20)
 - a. The two Marys visit the tomb and see an angel and Jesus. (28.1-10)

end of the Gospel at the Easter Vigil

- b. Interlude: The guards are bribed to say that Jesus' disciples stole his body while they were asleep. (28.11-15)
- c. Jesus appears on the mountain in Galilee and sends his disciples out to make disciples of all nations. (28.16-20)