

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 14:1-15:47



FOR THE JOY THAT WAS SET BEFORE HIM

The liturgy of Palm Sunday begins with the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – the “triumphal entry” (Mark 11:1-10), and ends with Jesus lying in a tomb with a stone rolled up to block the entrance (Mark 15:46). Thus, our church celebration observes Palm Sunday and Good Friday in a single service.

For Christians, the events of Holy Week and Easter are the climax of human history – past, present, and future. The Palm Sunday lessons, and indeed the entire Bible, are relevant to the crucifixion and its power to atone for the sins of men. Today our discussion begins with three points concerning these things.

1. The sacrifice of life to atone for sin has roots in antiquity. The Bible says, “*Under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*” (Heb 9:22). Some say the first sacrifice was made when “*the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them* (Gen 3:21)¹. To have this kind of clothing, you have to kill animals.

From then on, the descendants of Adam offered sacrifices to God. The Bible says God accepted the sacrifices of the sons of Adam when they were offered in a spirit of love and worship, which was not always the case. *Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard* (Gen 4:3-5). See also 1 John 3:11-15.

Among all the sacrifices recorded in Genesis, Abraham’s offering of his only son Isaac most prefigured God’s offering of his only Son for the sins of men. When Isaac saw the fire and wood he asked his father Abraham, “*Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*” Abraham answered, “*God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son*” (Gen 22:7-8). And God provided a sheep as a substitute for Isaac. Two thousand years later, John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching him and said, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). And this, not kingship, was the Father’s will for Jesus.

Around six centuries after Abraham, the *Passover* was instituted while the Jews were in Egypt. In each home a lamb was sacrificed, and the lamb’s blood was smeared on the door frame. God said to the people, “*The blood shall be a sign for you, upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt*” (Ex 12:13). Thus each family was saved by the blood of a slain lamb.

Finally, at the last supper, Jesus took a cup of wine. He gave thanks and gave it to his disciples, saying, “*Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matt 26:27-28). In other words, *the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin* (1 John 1:7).

2. Your own good works, no matter how sacrificial, cannot save your soul. Sacrifices and unselfish deeds always receive God’s attention and appreciation. Actions really do speak louder than words. But the attitude of your heart, which God can perceive, matters more. See Ps 50:7-15, for example, or Ps 51:16-17: *For thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*

Sacrifices have not always been acceptable to God, as in the case of Cain. Sometimes they are made for selfish reasons, or grudgingly, or in expectation of reward. See Matt 23:27-28 for example.

3. The OT tradition regarding the sacrifice of life for sin provides evidence that, from the beginning, God planned to sacrifice his only Son, Jesus Christ, as atonement for the sins of mankind. The Bible says, “*God*

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8, KJV). Thus, the OT sacrifices of life and blood to atone for sin must be viewed as prototypes of the Real Thing.

And the Real Thing is personal. Jesus gave his life as atonement for *my* sin. He paid *my* debt that I could never afford. He redeemed *my* life from the pit. He paid the full price. His was not a down-payment. I am not on the layaway plan. I have been fully redeemed – set free from collecting the wages of sin I have earned, and am still earning. Holy Week, as the saying goes, is where the rubber meets the road.

Review just a few of the many NT scriptures that affirm the eternal purpose of the crucifixion:

Mark 10:45. *“For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

Luke 24:25-27. *And Jesus said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.*

2 Cor 5:21. *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Eph 1:4-5. *... Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ ...*

1 Pet 1:18-20. *You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake.*

These verses, as well as many others, leave no uncertainty concerning God’s eternal purpose in giving his Son to the world, as well as the meaning of the cross for you and me personally.

Mark 14:32-36. *And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I pray.” ³³And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. ³⁴And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch.” ³⁵And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.”*

• *“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death ... (v.32).* In the events that took place in the garden, we see how Jesus was *“tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).* Not with the *same* temptation – each of us has his own points of vulnerability. When the enemy discovers yours, he tries to break down your defense at one of those points, as he did in Judas’ case – see John 13:21-30. He managed to convince Judas to doubt not only Peter, but even Martha’s claim, that Jesus was *“the Christ, the Son of God” (John 11:27).*

Jesus loved his disciples. He wished he could remain with them. He had no desire for the suffering soon to come. He seemed not sure it was even necessary. *“Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me” (Mark 14:36).* How often have some of us prayed this way, hoping for relief? *“Father, you can do anything! Please take this from me!”*

Worse yet, Jesus felt the weight of a burden he could not share. His friends would desert him. Even as he was praying in the garden, the disciples fell asleep. His own Father, who could not look on sin, would turn away and forsake him on the cross. Alone and in agony, he would learn what it is to be filled with sin and evil. In this he would suffer punishment meant not for him, but for us.

Would God intervene once again for his own Son, as he had done for the son of Abraham? Not this time. And Jesus never wavered from his Father’s will: *“Yet not what I will, but what thou wilt” (v.36).* With this the battle was over. Satan had lost his bid for power. Jesus rose to face his betrayer.

The Bible says Jesus *endured the cross, scorning its shame, for the joy that was set before him (Heb 12:2).* Even as he prayed alone in the garden, he was certain of the joy to come – eternal joy in heaven, in company with those redeemed by his cross. By the grace of God, may you and I, even in this life, also share our Lord’s vision of this joy to come – made possible by the power of the cross.