

April 5th, 2020: Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

Gospel (Procession with Palms): Matthew 21.1-11

First Reading: Isaiah 50.4-7

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 22.7-8, 16-17, 18-19, 22-23 (R. 1)

Second Reading: Philippians 2.6-11

Gospel (longer version): Matthew 26.14-27.66

Homily by Fr. Robert Weaver

I recently read parts of an interview with Christian Smith, lead author of a book entitled *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (2020). In this interview, Smith discussed a form of spirituality that is common in present-day American life and it is safe to assume that it is common in Canada as well. These are the characteristics of this spirituality:

1. There is definitely a God who created the universe and all within it and who is aware there are human beings on earth.
2. God wants humans to be nice and fair to one another, as is found in the Bible and taught by the majority of the world's religions.
3. The primary purpose in life for humans is to be happy and to feel good about themselves.
4. God is not particularly involved in people's lives but is available for assistance when they are experiencing difficulties.
5. People who behave properly and are essentially "good" will definitely go to heaven or to some sort of "better place" after they die.

(See: <https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2020/01/there-are-habits-that-can-help-parents-pass-down-faith-researcher-says/>).

Perhaps you have heard people discuss their spiritual beliefs and they mention some or all of these characteristics or others that are very similar to them. And when we hear these beliefs, we might be lulled into thinking that they are pretty similar to what we believe as Catholic-Christians. After all, as Catholics we are supposed to be good persons - right?

While it is true that we are called to live moral and virtuous lives, and to ask for God's forgiveness when we fall short of this call, it is important to note that the characteristics that I previously listed are glaringly misleading. This is because they fail to mention Jesus, the Almighty Son of God, who is the way, the truth, and the life and who states that no one comes to the Father except by him (John 14:6).

What's more, Jesus is one of the three Divine Persons of the Most Holy Trinity who loves us more than we can ever imagine, and who wills that we be open to his loving presence in every aspect of our lives. This is in definite contrast to the remote and largely impersonal God alluded to in the above-mentioned characteristics (especially #4).

(See: <https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2020/01/there-are-habits-that-can-help-parents-pass-down-faith-researcher-says/>).

When God came to earth in the very Person of Jesus Christ, he made it clear that he invites each and every human being into a relationship with him – a relationship so personal that we recognize him as the defining aspect of our lives, that is, the very source of our being and the very core of our identity. This close union we are called to have with Jesus is marvelously described in today's Gospel reading.

Before I get into that reading, I would like to highlight that today we are celebrating the Sixth Sunday of Lent, often referred to as Palm Sunday, because this is the Sunday when Catholics customarily process into the Church with palms and thus commemorate Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem prior to his passion. But it is technically referred to as Palm Sunday of the Passion of The Lord, since it is the Sunday when we read the entire passion narrative from one of the first three Gospel accounts, that is, Matthew, Mark, or Luke (this year it is from Matthew). And we also read the passion narrative again on Good Friday – on this day it is always John's account (see: Pitre, MRE, p. 1-3).

Let us now turn to today's Gospel reading (Mt 26:14-27:66) which follows the second reading. It highlights how Jesus, as the time for his fateful and grueling crucifixion draws near, predicts that his disciples

will soon abandon him. Peter, for his part, vehemently announces that he will never abandon Jesus and to this Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times” (26:31-34).

After this Jesus and his disciples made their way to the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus prayed to his Father, saying “...if it is possible, let this cup [of suffering] pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (26:36-39). In his humanity, Jesus understandably dreaded the forthcoming events. This was due to the tremendous physical (torture and crucifixion) and spiritual (bearing the sins of humanity) pain he was about to undergo. This agony in the garden is viewed as Satan’s most intense attack on Jesus and yet Our Lord held firm, maintaining his union with the Father (“...not what I want, but what you want”) (see: Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, p. 56).

Matthew then describes how Jesus was arrested and, just as he had predicted, “all the disciples deserted him and fled” (26:47-56). Jesus is then directed to appear before Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, and other influential members of the Jewish hierarchy. They then began to interrogate Jesus, and this went on for a while (26:57-68).

Meanwhile, Peter had followed Jesus from a distance when he was arrested in hopes of being able to find out what would happen to him (26:58). But as Jesus’ trial went on, Peter faced an interrogation of his own.

As we read, a servant girl came up to Peter and said to him, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” Peter dismissed her accusation, perhaps even a bit nonchalantly, by saying “I do not know what you are talking about.” In time, another servant girl came along and said to those nearby, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” This time Peter’s reaction was more intense, for he denied it with an oath and said “I do not know the man.” Matthew does not give us the wording of this oath

but they were common in Jewish life at this time and involved calling down a curse on one who broke a promise. (See: 26:69-72 and <https://life1025.com/2014/04/close-look-peters-denials/>.)

Later on, a bystander came up – obviously someone who had heard Peter speaking, and told Peter that by his accent he could tell that he was affiliated with Jesus. Once again Peter denied knowing Jesus and, according to one Bible translation (Ignatius Catholic Study Bible), he “began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know the man.’” Immediately, the cock crowed; Peter remembered Jesus’ prediction that he would deny him three times, and he began to weep bitterly (see: 26:73-75 and <https://life1025.com/2014/04/close-look-peters-denials/>).

It is interesting to note how, over the course of his three denials, Peter’s lies become more linked to his personal identity. As I stated, his first denial was very dismissive and perhaps even indifferent, the second was more intense and in the third denial he even called down a curse upon himself if he were lying. For that third denial, it was if Peter was saying “by the very nature of who I am as a person, I do not know who Jesus of Nazareth is.” And with that complete and utter rejection of truth and reality, Peter heard the cock crow and he fell into a state of great distress.

However, we know that due to God’s never-ending mercy and grace Peter did not “stay down” for long. For instance, John’s Gospel account (21:15-17) describes how Peter encountered Jesus after his Resurrection and told him three times that he loved him. In doing this, Peter made amends for denying Jesus three times. After this, Peter went on to be a courageous proclaimer of the Good News and ended up being martyred for the Faith around A.D. 67 (see Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, p. 201).

Hence, it is evident that Peter, after encountering the Risen Lord and fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit, led a life in accordance with the saving principle outlined by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

This principle is as follows: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (2:20a).

What was true for St. Peter and St. Paul is, of course, true for us. Jesus invites each one of us to a deep and personal union with him and to be open to his powerfully loving presence in every aspect and detail of our lives.

When we consider our lives right now, we know they have been dramatically impacted by the novel coronavirus. Nations around the world have greatly slowed down their activities, schools and colleges have sent their students home and are offering courses online, and we are strongly discouraged from leaving our homes unless absolutely necessary. Many people are no longer working and we are in a situation that no generation, perhaps since the flu of 1918, has had to undergo

(Source: Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., “Love in the Time of COVID-19).

Indeed, we are living in a challenging time but in the face of this challenge the Risen Lord is with us every step of the way. Moreover, he is calling us to deepen our union with him. By praying and offering up our trials to Our Lord, we are filled with the healing courage, strength, and compassion that only he can give. It is Jesus who calls us to place our burdens and troubles before him, and he will give the rest we need (Mt. 11:28). And it is Jesus who calls us to invite others to also experience his healing power, and to boldly make known “Jesus of Nazareth - oh yes, I **do** know the man!”