

by Dr. Chris Franke

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and pray this excerpt from Psalm 119, which praises God’s word.

**LEADER:** Though people may persecute us without cause, our hearts stand in awe of your words, Holy One.

**ALL:** We rejoice at your word, like people who find a great treasure.

**LEADER:** Great peace belongs to those who love your teaching.

**ALL:** Nothing can make us stumble.



he date of Palm Sunday falls in April this year. “April is the cruelest month,” the poet T. S. Eliot writes in the first line of

his poem “The Waste Land”—“breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain.”

Lent brings us into spring in the northern hemisphere. The liturgy mixes life and death, hospitality and complicity in its readings. As worshipers on Palm Sunday, we first take the part of the enthusiastic crowds that welcome Jesus to Jerusalem with waving palms and then in the passion we take the part of

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

the crowds that yell, “Crucify him,” at Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Both scenes invite us to see Jesus as the messiah, who is the Spirit-anointed prophet of good news for the poor and an insurrectionist in the eyes of the Romans.

In the daily mix of violence and compassion in our news today, perhaps we need the assurance of the medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich that all will be well again with the passing of winter and for Christians with the coming of Easter. Her song about the Bells of Norwich says, “*Love like a yellow daffodil is coming through the snow. Love like a yellow daffodil is Lord of all I know. Ring out bells of Norwich, let the winter come and go. All shall be well again I know.*”

The liturgies of Holy Week give worshipers parts to act out: the procession with palms this Sunday, footwashing on Holy Thursday, venerating the cross on Good Friday, following

the newly lit Easter candle into the dark church on Holy Saturday. We walk with Jesus to his cross and follow the women to the empty tomb and its good news. This is the week to go to church and rediscover who Jesus is, stir our dead roots, and

live his mission into our world.

- To whom do you extend hospitality in your life and home?
- When have you accepted complicity with actions or values not your own?



- What memories of Holy Week stand out for you?



# GOSPEL

## An innocent man is crucified.

To read Luke's complete passion account 22.14—23.56, use a New American Bible or Holy Week missalette.

**NARRATOR 1:** Two others who were criminals were led along with Jesus to be crucified. When they came to Skull Place, they crucified him there and the criminals as well, one on his right and the other on his left.

**NARRATOR 2:** People stood there watching, and the leaders kept jeering at Jesus.

**LEADERS:** He saved others; let him save himself if he is the messiah of God, the chosen one.

**NARRATOR 1:** The soldiers also made fun of him, coming forward to offer him their sour wine.

**SOLDIERS:** If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.

**NARRATOR 2:** There was an inscription over his head: "This is the king of the Jews."

**NARRATOR 1:** One of the criminals hanging in crucifixion blasphemed him.

**CRIMINAL 1:** Aren't you the messiah? Then save yourself and us.

**CRIMINAL 2:** Have you no fear of God, seeing you are under the same sentence? We deserve this, after all. We are only paying the price

for what we've done, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you enter into your reign.

**JESUS:** I assure you, this day you will be with me in paradise.

**NARRATOR 2:** At midday darkness came over the whole land until midafternoon with an eclipse of the sun. The curtain in the sanctuary was torn in two. Jesus uttered a loud cry.

**JESUS:** Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.

**NARRATOR 1:** After he said this, he died.

**NARRATOR 2:** The centurion, upon seeing what had happened, gave glory to God.

**CENTURION:** Surely this was an innocent man.

**NARRATOR 1:** When the crowd which had assembled for this spectacle saw what had happened, they went home beating their breasts.

**NARRATOR 2:** His acquaintances and the women who had accompanied him from Galilee were standing at a distance watching everything.

Luke 23.32-49



Could a man who was crucified be God's messiah, who came to save people and bring them new life? Jesus, who died the death of a criminal, wasn't even powerful enough to save himself. The first preachers had to face mockers' questions: How could Jesus be the king of the Jews, the messiah of God, God's chosen one? If he were, he would have the power to save himself or God would save him.

### ● What are your questions about Jesus' crucifixion?

People in Jesus' time popularly expected a messiah who would restore Israel's place among nations. When Jesus' followers reread their Hebrew scriptures after his death and resurrection, they read them with Easter eyes. For example, the songs of the prophet Second Isaiah describing the Israelites in exile as God's suffering servants also fit Jesus. Luke depends on such insights to explain that Jesus suffered and died "according to the scriptures." For Christians, Jesus' death and resurrection are one inseparable whole.

For this reason, the passion accounts present Jesus as someone who knows

## What kind of leader is a crucified messiah?

The written gospels grew up around the passion story as the core of the traditions. Why did the passion story take fixed form first? Why was it the first part

of the story of Jesus' life to be retold and written down in such detail? The first preachers had to respond to the questions that Jesus' shameful death raised.



Stations of the Cross in the Roman Catholic chapel, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.

what will happen. In Luke’s account Jesus takes his place at the last supper table and prophesies, “I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I tell you, I will not eat again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (22:18).

Jesus knows that someone with whom he is eating the Passover supper will turn him over to soldiers. He knows that Peter will betray him. He accepts the Father’s plan in his prayer in the garden. He promises the repentant criminal, “This day you will be with me in paradise” (23.42).

Luke’s passion account emphasizes Jesus’ innocence. When the crowd, the chief priests, and temple guard come to arrest Jesus, he says, “Am I a criminal that you come out after me armed with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you never raised a hand against me. But this is your hour—the triumph of darkness” (22.52-53).

● **When have you experienced darkness seeming to triumph?**

**T**he charges brought against Jesus are specious. The passion narrative views the religious leaders (the chief priests and many scribes and elders) as plotting to kill him because

they were afraid of the effect he was having on the people. When they ask him if he is the messiah, Jesus refuses to answer directly. They interpret his words to mean that he is the Son of God, testimony by which to condemn him (22.70).

The civil authorities, Pilate and Herod, can find no evidence of a crime. As Pilate says “I did not find this man guilty of any crime, nor did Herod” (23.14-15). Even the criminal on the cross testifies to Jesus’ innocence. “This man has done nothing wrong.”

At Jesus’ death the centurion who stands at the foot of the cross expresses Luke’s view, “Surely, this man was innocent!”

Innocence is a powerful agent of change. The cries of children separated from their parents at the U.S./ Mexican border awakened citizens to the immigration issues more than the plight of adults. Turning the fire hoses on children in Montgomery had the same power during the struggle for Civil Rights. The violence we can justify toward one another we cannot justify doing to children.

Besides Jesus’ innocence Luke emphasizes what a humble leader Jesus is. When his followers argue at the last supper table about who is greatest, Jesus contrasts

two examples of leadership—earthly kings and table servants. Earthly kings, he explains, “lord it over” their people, and are called grand names.

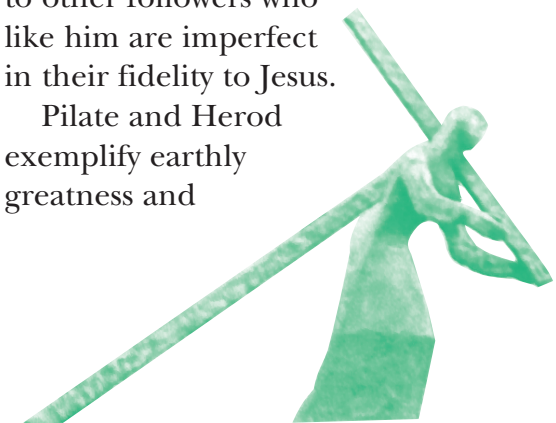
Jesus urges his followers to reject this example and give up grandiose titles. Then he asks, “Who is greater, the person who sits at table, or the person who serves?” Jesus admits the usual answer is the person who sits at table, but he points to himself as an example of a different kind of greatness—“I am among you as one who serves.”

● **How does violence against the innocent affect you?**

● **What leaders have disillusioned you? Who models service?**

**T**here are several characters in Luke’s gospel who play important roles in the passion story. Satan is one of them. Satan disappears at the end of Luke’s temptation story “until an opportune time” (Luke 4.13). The “opportune time” is Jesus’ crucifixion when Satan takes possession of Judas (22.3) and asks for Peter (22.31). Jesus says his arrest is the triumph of darkness (22.53). Unlike Judas, Peter experiences grief that he denied Jesus and so becomes a model of hope to other followers who like him are imperfect in their fidelity to Jesus.

Pilate and Herod exemplify earthly greatness and





leadership. Both have power to sentence subjects to death. Pilate, even though he finds no evidence, fears the unruly crowd. In an act of cowardice, not true leadership, he perverts the system of justice by sentencing Jesus to death.

The two criminals crucified with Jesus characterize the two responses to Jesus throughout Luke's passion account. One mocks him and taunts him, asking him to save himself if he is really the messiah. The other recognizes Jesus is an innocent man and asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

- With which character in the passion story do you most identify? Why?

## FIRST READING

### God's servant can rouse the weary.

Isaiah 50.4-11 is one of the four servant songs in the book of Isaiah. The Old Testament never identifies God's servant with any one person. The New Testament writers, however, use these servant songs when they speak of Jesus.

The chief priests and the people in Luke's gospel fear that Jesus can rouse the weary like God's servant. The priests tell Pilate, "He stirs up the people, teaching everywhere." Luke portrays Jesus, as Isaiah portrays the servant, as an innocent person whom God vindicates.

### God's servant

God has given me the tongue of a teacher that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning God wakens my ear to listen like those who are taught. The Holy One has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard.

I did not shield my face from shame and spitting. God helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. The One who vindicates me is near.

Isaiah 50.4-7

- What likenesses to Jesus do you see in the servant song?
- In what specific ways do you follow Jesus' model of servant leadership in your work?

## PRAY

With his last breath in Luke's gospel, Jesus prays to God for deliverance from his enemies using words from Psalm 31. Make your own prayers of petition, then pray the following verses from this psalm.

**LEADER:** In you, O Holy One, I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame.

**ALL:** Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

**LEADER:** Take me out of the net which lies in wait for me, for you are my refuge.

**ALL:** Into your hand I send my spirit; you have redeemed me, O faithful God.



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## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- The Kino Border Initiative is a mission of Jesuit Relief Service, offering humanitarian aid in both Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. Learn about their work at [KinoborderInitiative.org](http://KinoborderInitiative.org).