

Palm Sunday (B)

Gospel text (Mk 14,1-15,47): It was now two days before the feast of the Passover and Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the teachers of the Law were looking craftily for a way to arrest Jesus and put him to death; for they said, «Not during the Festival, or there might be trouble among the people».

Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. As he was reclining at dinner, a woman entered carrying a precious jar of expensive perfume made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfumed oil on Jesus' head. Then some of them became angry and said, «What a useless waste of perfume. It could have been sold for more than three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor». And they criticized her. But Jesus said, «Let her alone; why are you troubling her? What she has just done for me is a very charitable work. At any time you can help the poor, for you always have them with you, but you will not have me forever. This woman has done what was hers to do, she has anointed my body beforehand for my burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever the Good News is proclaimed, and this will be throughout the world, what she has done will be told in praise of her».

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus to them. On hearing him they were excited and promised to give him money. So Judas started planning the best way to hand him over to them.

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the day when the Passover Lamb was killed, the disciples asked him, «Where would you have us go to prepare the Passover meal for you?». So Jesus sent two of his disciples with these instructions, «Go into the

city and there a man will come to you carrying a jar of water. Follow him to the house he enters and say to the owner, 'The Master says: Where is the room where I may eat the Passover meal with my disciples?'. Then he will show you a large room upstairs, already arranged and furnished. There you will prepare everything for us». The disciples went off. When they reached the city, they found everything just as Jesus had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were at table eating, Jesus said, «Truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who shares my meal». They were deeply distressed at hearing this and asked him, one after the other, «You don't mean me, do you?». And Jesus answered, «It is one of you Twelve, one who dips his bread in the dish with me. The Son of Man is going as the Scriptures say He will. But alas for that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed; better for him if he had never been born».

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And He said, «Take this, it is my body». Then He took a cup and after He had given thanks, passed it to them and they all drank from it. And He said, «This is my blood, the blood of the Covenant, which is to be poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not taste the fruit of the vine again until the day I drink the new wine in the kingdom of God». After singing psalms of praise, they went out to the Hill of Olives.

And Jesus said to them, «All of you will be confused and fall away; for the Scripture says: I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go to Galilee ahead of you». Then Peter said to him, «Even though all the others fall away,

I will not». And Jesus replied, «Truly, I say to you, today, this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times». But Peter insisted, «Though I have to die with you, I will never deny you». And all of them said the same.

They came to a place which was called Gethsemane and Jesus said to his disciples, «Sit here while I pray». But He took Peter, James and John along with him, and becoming filled with fear and distress, He said to them, «My soul is full of sorrow, even to death. Remain here and stay awake». Then He went a little further on and fell to the ground, praying that if possible this hour might pass him by. Jesus said, «Abba (Daddy), all things are possible for you; take this cup away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want». Then He came and found them asleep and said to Peter, «Simon, are you sleeping? Couldn't you stay awake for one hour? Keep watch and pray, all of you, so that you may not slip into temptation. The spirit indeed is eager but human nature is weak. And going away He prayed saying the same words. When He came back to the disciples, He found them asleep again; they could not keep their eyes open, and they did not know what to say to him. When He came back the third time, He said, «You can sleep on now and take your rest! It is all over, the time has come; the Son of Man is now given into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us go. Look: the one betraying me is right here».

While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, came up. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, who had been sent by the chief priests, the teachers of the Law and the elders. The traitor had arranged a signal for them, «The one I kiss, he is the man. Arrest him and take him away under guard». So, when he came, he went directly to Jesus calling, «Master! Master!» and

kissed him. Then they seized Jesus and arrested him. One of the bystanders drew his sword and struck out at the High Priest's servant, cutting off his ear. Jesus turned to them saying, «So you have set out against a robber! Did you need swords and clubs to arrest me? Day after day I was among you teaching in the Temple and you did not arrest me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled». Then they all deserted him and fled. A young man covered by nothing but a linen cloth followed Jesus. As they took hold of him, he left the cloth in their hands and fled away naked.

They led Jesus to the High Priest and all the chief priests assembled with the elders and the teachers of the Law. Peter had followed him at a distance and went right into the courtyard of the High Priest, where he sat with the guards, warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole Council tried to find some evidence against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they were unable to find any. Even though many came up to speak falsely against him, their evidence did not agree. At last some stood up and gave this false witness: «We heard him say: 'I will destroy this Temple made by hands and in three days I will build another not made by human hands'». But even so their evidence did not agree. The High Priest then stood up in the midst of them and asked Jesus, «Have you no answer at all? What of this evidence against you?». But Jesus was silent and made no reply. The High Priest put a second question to him, «Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?». Then Jesus answered, «I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Most Powerful and coming with the clouds of heaven around him». The High Priest tore his clothes to show his horror and said, «What more evidence do we need? You have just heard his blasphemous words. What is your decision?». And they all condemned Jesus saying, «He must die».

Some of them began to spit on Jesus and, blindfolding him, they struck him saying, «Play the prophet!». And the guards set upon him with blows.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the High Priest's servant-girls came by. Noticing Peter beside the fire, she looked straight at him and said, «You also were with Jesus, the Nazarene». But he denied it, «I don't know or understand what you are talking about». And he went out through the gateway. The servant-girl saw him there and told the bystanders, «This man is one of them». But Peter denied it again. After a little while those standing by said to Peter, «Of course you are one of them; you are a Galilean, aren't you?». And Peter began to justify himself with curses and oaths, «I don't know the man you are talking about». Just then a cock crowed a second time and Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him, «Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times». And he broke down and wept.

Early in the morning, the chief priests, the elders and the teachers of the Law (that is, the whole Council or Sanhedrin) had their plan ready. They put Jesus in chains, led him away and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, «Are you the King of the Jews?». Jesus answered, «You say so». As the chief priests accused Jesus of many things, Pilate asked him again, «Have you no answer at all? See how many charges they bring against you». But Jesus gave no further answers, so that Pilate wondered.

At every Passover festival, Pilate used to free any prisoner the people asked for. Now there was a man called Barabbas, jailed with the rioters who had committed murder in the uprising. When the crowd went up to ask Pilate the usual favor, he said to them, «Do

you want me to set free the King of the Jews?». For he realized that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him out of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask instead for the release of Barabbas. Pilate replied, «And what shall I do with the man you call King of the Jews?». The crowd shouted back, «Crucify him!». Pilate asked, «What evil has he done?». But they shouted the louder, «Crucify him!». As Pilate wanted to please the people, he freed Barabbas and after the flogging of Jesus had him handed over to be crucified.

The soldiers took him inside the courtyard known as the praetorium and called the rest of their companions. They clothed him in a purple cloak and twisting a crown of thorns, they forced it onto his head. Then they began saluting him, «Long life to the King of the Jews!». With a stick they gave him blows on the head and spat on him; then they knelt down pretending to worship him. When they had finished mocking him, they pulled off the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. The soldiers led him out of the city to crucify him.

On the way they met Simon of Cyrene, father of Alexander and Rufus, who was coming in from the country, and forced him to carry the cross of Jesus. When they had led him to the place called Golgotha, which means the Skull, they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he would not take it. Then they nailed him to the cross and divided his clothes among themselves, casting lots to decide what each should take. It was about nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The statement of his offense was displayed above his head and it read, «The King of the Jews». They also crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. People passing by laughed at him, shook their head and jeered,

«Aha! So you are able to tear down the Temple and build it up again in three days. Now save yourself and come down from the cross!». In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the Law mocked him saying to one another, «The man who saved others cannot save himself. Let's see the Messiah, the king of Israel, come down from his cross and then we will believe in him». Even the men who were crucified with Jesus insulted him.

When noon came, darkness fell over the whole land and lasted until three o'clock; and at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, «Eloi, Eloi, lamma sabachthani?» which means «My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?». As soon as they heard these words, some of the bystanders said, «Listen! He is calling for Elijah». And one of them went quickly to fill a sponge with bitter wine and, putting it on a reed, gave him to drink saying, «Now let's see whether Elijah comes to take him down». But Jesus uttered a loud cry and gave up his spirit.

And immediately the curtain that enclosed the Temple sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The captain who was standing in front of him saw how Jesus died and heard the cry he gave; and he said, «Truly, this man was the Son of God». There were also some women watching from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph and Salome, who had followed Jesus when He was in Galilee and saw to his needs. There were also others who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

It was now evening and as it was Preparation Day, that is the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea boldly went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Joseph was a respected member of the

Council who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God. Pilate was surprised that Jesus should have died so soon; so he summoned the captain and inquired if Jesus was already dead. After hearing the captain, he let Joseph have the body. Joseph took it down and wrapped it in the linen sheet he had bought. He laid the body in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock and rolled a stone across the entrance to the tomb. Now Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joseph took note of where the body had been laid.

«Truly, this man was the Son of God»

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Today, in the Liturgy of the Word we can read the Passion of the Lord according to St. Mark and we hear a testimony that leaves us aghast: «Truly, this man was the Son of God» (Jn 15:39). The evangelist is very careful to place these words in the mouth of a roman centurion that, utterly astounded, had seen another crucifixion of the many he might have had to bear witness of, by living in a foreign and subjugated country.

It is difficult to wonder what that centurion must have seen in That face —hardly human— so as to say such words so openly. One way or other, he probably discerned that innocent expression on his face, of someone forsaken and maybe betrayed because of unspeakable interests; or maybe someone who was the object of an injustice amid an unfair society; someone who keeps quiet, suffers, and mysteriously, takes all the corporal punishment inflicted on him. He might even feel he was cooperating with an injustice in front of which he does not dare to do anything to oppose it, as so many others who simply wash their hands before the problems of others.

The image of that roman captain is the image of Mankind that merely contemplates but does nothing. It is also the profession of faith of a pagan. Jesus dying alone, innocent, beaten, forsaken but trusting at the same time, with a profound realization of his mission, and with the “remainders of love” the blows have left in his body.

However, when he entered in Jerusalem, He has been acclaimed as He who comes in

the name of the Lord! (cf. Mk 11:9). Our today's applause is not of an eager and ignorant expectation, as it was the case with the people of Jerusalem. Our applause is for Who has already gone through the nightmare of his total surrender and has come victorious out of it. «It is necessary that we spread out before Christ, rather than boasting soulless tunics, branches or sprouts of plants, common things that, after pleasing to the eye for a short while, they shrivel up and die; we must spread out after we have been covered by his grace» (St. Andrew of Crete).