

**Palm Sunday (Year A) – April 13, 2014**  
**Matthew 21:1-11 (Liturgy of the Palms); Passion Sunday (Year A): Isaiah 50:4-9a;**  
**Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D Bean**

Being both Palm Sunday *and* Passion Sunday, today has a wrenching quality about it. It began with the jubilation of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—as we held high our palms, singing, “All glory, laud and honor...”<sup>i</sup> But now, we are pulled right into Jesus’ final showdown: his arrest, trial, torture and execution—His Passion—a major change of scenery and a jarring mood swing. This year we hear Matthew’s Passion narrative. As a way to prepare us to hear the account of the passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew, it is necessary to share a cautionary note or two.

Matthew wrote his gospel account around 80 CE writing for his mixed Gentile and Jewish Christian community in Antioch, nearly 300 miles north of Jerusalem. This was ten years after the destruction of the Temple and much of the rest of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, and after the subsequent diaspora, or scattering, of many Jews and Jewish-Christians to more distant lands. The old centers of their universe—Jerusalem and the temple—were gone. The Romans had begun full-blown persecution and were bearing down hard. Matthew’s community needed reassurance, so Matthew cast Jesus as the new center of their universe, the focus of every promise, the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets. These early Christians were in danger of being obliterated by Roman persecution. As well, there had erupted a family fight between the early church and its mother Judaism from which it sprang fifty years earlier in the time of Jesus. Because of both these reasons, the gospel writers tend to play up the role of the Jewish authorities and downplay the obvious and brutal role of Rome in the trial and execution of Jesus. So we see, on the one hand, Matthew portraying in bold relief the insistent demands of Jewish leaders and, on the other hand, the supposed “reluctance” of Roman authorities in the passion and death of Jesus.

Yet, Matthew and his community knew full well that the Roman role in Jesus’ death had been ruthless, without any qualms of conscience, since the Roman death penalty—crucifixion—was handed out to Jesus, as it was to so many others. So, Matthew plays down the Roman role in his written account. But in playing up the Jewish role, he does so with such transparent inaccuracies regarding the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish judicial process that, while Roman authorities getting a hold of this gospel wouldn’t have easily known, the Jewish-Christian hearers/readers of Matthew’s community would have known that this gospel was still pointing the finger at Rome.<sup>ii</sup>

So, as you listen to the Passion Gospel of Matthew, please also recognize that the details of the trial of Jesus are in total contradiction to our reliable knowledge of Jewish procedure at court. That process demanded, for example, 1) that capital crimes should be tried in daytime only, whereas we read that Jesus was tried at night; and 2) that capital crimes trials should certainly not happen during festival time, whereas we read that Jesus was tried during the Passover festival; and 3) that such trials were certainly not to be dealt with in a single day, whereas we read that Jesus’ trial was speedy in the

extreme. As well, Jesus' interrogation before the High Priest is totally inconsistent with the due process required in a proper trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. Also, the summoning of false witnesses for the prosecution who immediately appear, then contradict each other, and who quote in a distorted form a saying of Jesus about the end of the old Temple and the building of a new one—all this would have been a breach of Jewish judicial process and Jewish Law. Finally, there is not in any historical account outside of the gospel accounts of Jesus' trial one single instance of a person ever being indicted and convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death by Jewish authorities because that person claimed to be the Messiah—and yet we know there were a number of pretenders to the title "Messiah."

Again, Matthew's deliberate use of transparent inaccuracies regarding Jewish judicial procedure, show his indirectly pointing the finger at Rome. Unfortunately later readers of this gospel would not catch these subtleties, inaccuracies, and context, and that's where it all gets dangerous. For example, there is a lasting and evil legacy identified with one particular verse in Matthew's account where we will hear, "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and our children'" [27:25]. Matthew places this as the shouting of the crowd partly coming from the voices of the followers, or partisans, of the Zealot leader Barabbas, determined to save their leader whatever it might cost this other man named Jesus. Yet we know that the centuries-long descent into the night of Auschwitz used the warped twisting of that verse to justify such evil on a massive scale. Christians who taunted Jews throughout the centuries with accusations of "Christ-killers" have not only twisted Matthew's story of the Passion of Jesus, but have entirely missed its ultimate purpose, namely to point us again, and encourage our recommitment, to this Jesus, this misunderstood Jew, whose mission was and still is the repair and reconciliation of all false divisions which prevent the unity in diversity of all humankind and all Creation with God. More than 1,930 years after this gospel account was written, if this and other inflammatory passages are read aloud—as we will do so in a minute—without acknowledging both their proper context and the evil done by their misappropriation, we would once again be complicit with the evil which wrought the Holocaust, and other divisive and destructive rifts within the world today.

Okay, now I can finally stop talking, although I felt it had to be said, and let Matthew's gospel speak for itself. There are plenty of good reasons to let this gospel speak for itself, not the least of which is the preacher's reluctance not to be one more voice violating the near silence of Jesus. The Passion narrative begins with Jesus' last supper with his disciples, and then his quiet "unanswered prayer" in Gethsemane at the base of the Mount of Olives—"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." After that the story is full of noise. Yet, at the center of it all is the astounding silence of God. It is the one voice Jesus cannot seem to hear, a silence so difficult to bear that Jesus uses his last breath to break it, crying with a loud voice that shakes the earth even now: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This voice of God-forsakenness is spoken in the deepest pain which reflects the full measure of our human capacity for destructiveness. Yet, in Jesus whose divine voice speaks, it is also the full measure of God's power revealed in forgiving love through the One who, even as his own life slipped away, did not count death too high a price for being God-

with-us. And we don't need to rush to Easter to see that somehow Jesus came out the victor.

Remaining seated, let us now hear the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

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<sup>i</sup> The Hymnal 1982 (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation), Hymn 154.

<sup>ii</sup> And so, in Matthew's version we get the trial before the Jewish high priest Caiaphas and the council of the Sanhedrin, and particularly the threats against the temple. In our text today, Jesus avoids the question of whether He is Messiah, with all its contemporary military connotations, and instead accepts the title 'Son of Man', which would have been much more ambiguous - but was still taken as a Messianic claim by the Sanhedrin. So, instead, in Matthew's gospel the Sanhedrin present Jesus before Pilate on a charge of subverting the nation and stirring up rebellion. But Pilate apparently realizes that there is no substance to the charge. The ironic result is that Barabbas, a guerilla leader who *is* guilty of insurrection and rebellion is released and Jesus condemned.