

Each year during Holy Week—on the Sunday before Easter, which we know as Palm Sunday but the Church traditionally calls Passion Sunday, we proclaim at liturgy the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. On Palm Sunday we rotate Matthew, Mark and Luke's version. This year it will be the Passion according to Mark. On Good Friday we always use John's version. You have taken the last couple of hours to see, talk about and think about some of the other characters that are part of this story—Pilate, Judas, Peter, the crowd, the women, the two thieves crucified with Jesus. Let's now take a brief look at Jesus. Why did Jesus suffer and die? Why did God allow it? How do we connect his suffering and death to our lives?

"Passion" of our Lord Jesus Christ

--to experience intensely and deeply, especially desire for someone

--connected to Jesus: to suffer

Note the interesting connection: for Jesus, his deep love for God and for us gives him the strength to undergo, to suffer, cross and death, so that the symbol of death and destruction—the cross—becomes a symbol of strength and hope, of God's love for us.

--his deep and intense love and desire for us to be free of sin, whole and healed, fully open to God, leads him to accept, even though completely innocent, a suffering and death reserved at that time for a criminal.

Let us look in particular at the gospel of Mark which we will proclaim in two Sundays on Palm (Passion) Sunday

--If look at this gospel in total, you see a very interesting structure

--Begins with the announcement: This is the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the son of God and then never uses this title, son of God, until Jesus has died, beaten and emaciated, on the cross and the centurion says: "Truly this man is the son of God!" [Picture of centurion with these words placed over them]

--And in between, many of the stories of Jesus' ministry are examples of how people in general, others who were healed, the leaders of the people of various groups, the disciples themselves, just don't get it. They want Jesus to be other than he is. They want life to be easier than it is. No, says this gospel, if you are going to proclaim this man as the son of God and commit your life to him, then know you are also saying that you are willing to embrace a way of life that includes the cross and suffering, if necessary, in staying obedient to God's way. Even if mocked by others; even if life from others' vantage point seems like a failure, the Christian knows that God has the final say and entrusts himself/herself to God no matter what.

So, Why did Jesus suffer and die?

--Not because God willed it. God does not desire anyone to suffer. Rather, it was a series of choices that people made. People chose to take offense at what he said and did. People felt threatened by his message of God's kingdom breaking in and the demands that kingdom places on our way of life. People felt the status quo, even if not great, was better than risking the changes Jesus was preaching. It was those choices, rooted in ignorance, jealousy, anger, spiritual blindness, fear, and other emotions that leads to Jesus' death.

--the human condition of imperfection, including the sinful and harmful choices we make, is why he suffered and died.

So, Why did Jesus allow himself to suffer and die?

--Because being faithful to his ministry and mission, to be obedient to what Abba God had asked of him, even if not fully understandable or liked, was more important than holding on to his own life.

How can we relate to Jesus' suffering and death?

--it is not the amount of suffering he underwent that is key, as though the sheer weight of the suffering was what was important. In our tradition we have sometimes overemphasized that. That is to glorify suffering for its own sake. No! Jesus did not want to suffer. We should not want to suffer.

--But we too are called to be obedient to our mission, the life God has asked of us—friend, parent, student, and much more—and in being faithful to that mission, we will at times face crosses and sufferings. We will face situations where it will seem easier to give up or go against what we know is right. In remaining faithful to our missions in life, we will face crosses and suffering and have to trust that God gets the final say.

--But we can turn from that path. [Here I want the different groups to chime in with the words of Jesus on the cross, when I say "With Jesus we say.." the group that had that phrase in their last room should say it out loud.

Take Judas[picture]

--angry because Jesus was not doing what he wanted or because he wanted to force Jesus to do something else, he betrays Jesus, and then regrets what he did and thinks that life isn't worth living. But with Jesus we pray [together] "It is finished" not out of despair or thinking that life isn't worth living but knowing that in the end it is not that we accomplish everything we think should happen but that we trust in God fully.

Take Peter[picture]

--out of fear he denies Jesus. In many ways fear leads to some of the worst choices in life and can cause others to suffer. And Peter feels lost and forsaken. But with Jesus we pray [together] "My God, my God why have you forsaken me" not because he doesn't trust in God but as a way to take his feelings and turn it into an act of faith. Those words come from Psalm 22 and if you pray the whole psalm you realize it ends with a statement of faith and trust.

Take Pilate[picture]

--a position of power and responsibility yet wanting to wash his hands of any responsibility. We cause suffering of others when we refuse to take responsibility for our actions. God puts us into situations and positions of responsibility and wants us to act responsibly. But even when we fail, we remember that Jesus on the cross said [together] "I am thirsty"; he is thirsty for our faith and trust, for us to carry out our responsibilities.

Take the thieves[picture]

--the one taunting and trying to manipulate to get advantage, the other accepting that he had truly done wrong. Even when we have strayed from goodness, have sinned and hurt others, God can forgive us, if we are truly sorry and turn to God. With Jesus we say "Today, you will be with me in paradise" because not even the most awful sin or crime puts a person outside of God's grace, if we are open to repentance.

Take the women [picture]

--weeping at what Jesus is going through yet feeling powerless to change anything. Suffering as they see the other suffer but not knowing what to do with that suffering. We know that Jesus never leaves us isolated and alone. With his mother and beloved disciple Jesus connects them to each other, so that

no one believes that suffering alone is the final word. With Jesus we say “Woman, behold your son; Son, behold your mother” because though Jesus shares in our sorrow whenever anyone suffers, he never ends with the suffering but always with a community of hope that will walk with us in that suffering.

Take the crowd [picture]

--on Jesus' side one minute, calling for his death another minute. Not standing up for what is right and just whether all agree or only a few, but looking at what others are doing and going along with them. Much suffering is caused by us being like the crowds. But as we listen to the passion in Holy Week, with Jesus we say “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” because so often real harm and evil is done by good people who do not stand outside the will of the crowd. We need such forgiveness as well.

Recap:

--Jesus died because some good people didn't stand up for what is right; because some bad people let their ignorance or anger or jealousy control their decisions.

--he didn't fight but we should not take that to mean he was weak or powerless. Rather he chose to remain faithful to God his father, to show how even in the midst of humanity's sin and hurt, God is willing to share in that so that we might learn a different way.

--it is not the amount he suffered that is the key, but his faithfulness to his mission and ministry. When we are faithful to what God asks of us, at times some crosses and suffering will come our way. With Jesus we accept them not as victims but offering them to God and trusting in God.

Let us conclude with prayer. I invite you to sing vs. 1,2 and 5 of Were You There #570 in the hymnal and to look at some of the pictures and words of Jesus

[pictures of crucifixion and also the ones used]

At end, [table car]

Invite people to leave more quietly. Show the cross they are to pick up, one per family, so they can complete the home activity. And pick up a home packet on the way out. Thank you.