

Palm Sunday

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Date: 29 March 2026

Preacher: Ife Ojetayo

[0:00] Please be seated. Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. This Sunday, next before Easter, commonly called Palm Sunday.

And as is our custom, on this Sunday we read the Passion Gospel as we've just read in full. It is long, I know. It is heavy.

It is not easy to hear. And that, in part, is precisely the point.

First, we must pass by way of the cross. In fact, the lectionary places before us the Passion readings, according to all of the four evangelists, the four gospel writers, across Holy Week.

[1:46] And if you were to go through the morning prayer and the rhythms of the church through this week, you will read the Passion narrative. We will read St. John's Passion narrative when we gather again on Good Friday.

And this is really for us to be invited to look again and again. And do not turn away too quickly from what Christ has done for us at the cross.

Our epistle this morning, read from Philippians 2, gives us the theological key to what we've just heard in the gospel reading. There, St. Paul tells us that Christ Jesus, who is he?

He, being in the form of God, equal with God, took upon himself the form of a servant. Last week we heard our Lord himself declare, before Abraham was, I am.

He rightly takes upon himself the divine name. The name revealed to Moses at the burning bush. He claims nothing less than equality with God.

[2:58] And yet this same eternal son crosses an infinite distance. He who is infinite becomes finite.

He who is eternal enters into time. He who is all-glorious takes on frail flesh. And even that is not the end of his humiliation.

St. Paul presses further in his epistle. He humbled himself, we're told. And became obedient unto death. And not just any kind of death. But the death of the cross.

Even the death of the cross. The most shameful, degrading, cursed death imaginable. The death, the kind of death that is reserved for criminals.

Reserved for rebels. Reserved for slaves. As one ancient saint said, the passion of Christ is the subject upon which the Christian mind most delights to dwell.

[4:06] Because the more we contemplate Christ's divinity. As St. Paul tells us, we truly is. Very God of very God. The more we contemplate his majesty.

His power. His glory. The more astonishing his humility becomes to us. That such a one would descend so low for us.

And in his passion, which we read this morning. That we've just read in Matthew 27. We see not merely a story. We don't only just see a simple account of injustice.

Rather, we see in this reading, in this story, the center of all history. This account of our lost suffering and death on the cross is at the very center of our Christian faith.

I hope you know that. And it confronts us, doesn't it? Because in this passage, three great realities are set before us. Guilt.

[5:13] Innocence condemned. And then an invitation. Let's first look at guilt. Matthew wastes no time. As he begins this chapter, we're brought immediately into the evil plot of unjustly condemning an innocent man to death.

The religious leaders, what have they done? They've bind Jesus and they've delivered him to Pilate. The same voices that cried. As we've done this morning.

Hosanna to the son of David. Those same voices now prepare to cry. And did cry. Crucify him. And we ought not to pass over that too quickly.

It's not merely performative reenactment that those words were uttered by us in our very reading this morning. The reality is that as quickly, the human heart turns just as quickly as we see in this story.

Our hearts is prone to turn just as quickly. How easily devotion becomes indifference. And indifference turns to hostility.

[6 : 25] And Matthew wants us to see something clearly. He wants us to see that Jesus is innocent. And he also wants us to see in this story that everyone else in this story.

Everyone else is guilty. Judas knows it. That's why he said, I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.

But notice carefully, this awareness in Judas did not lead on his part to repentance. That's the great tragedy. He was halfway there. I am guilty.

I have sinned by betraying innocent blood. But that awareness did not lead to repentance. Instead, he had a remorse without hope. He feels the weight of his sin.

But instead of turning towards mercy, he collapses into despair. And there's warning there for us. It is possible to feel guilt deeply.

[7 : 27] It is possible. And yet never be saved. Because guilt alone does not save. Only grace received by faith.

That's the only way to salvation. Grace of God freely given, received by faith, is the means by which we are redeemed and brought from death to life.

Judas did not see that. The chief priests also, they also knew their guilt. They knew it too. They handled the silver that Judas threw in guilt.

They handled it out with hesitation. They called it blood money. And yet, they had no hesitation in shedding innocent blood.

This is the outward religion that is full of inward corruption. Jesus correctly diagnoses these men.

[8 : 32] Of them, he had said, they were whitewashed tombs. They attempt to manage their guilt with technicalities. But guilt cannot be managed.

The kind of guilt that condemns us before God cannot be managed. Cannot be managed by just mere religiosity. Or mere piety. Devoid of faith in Christ and submission to him.

Seeing all of these, we, as we see it, must not stand at a distance. Let us not imagine we are merely observers of this story.

Because if we are honest with ourselves, and I hope we will be this morning, we find ourselves squarely in this story.

We find ourselves in Judas' divided heart. We find ourselves in the leader's self-deception. We find ourselves in the crowd's instability.

[9 : 37] We, too, are guilty. Verse 11 to 26 of the gospel narrative, the scene now shifts to this ruler, Pilate, the Roman governor.

He was a man of power. A man of authority. And yet, remarkably, he sees what others refuse to see.

What does he see? He sees that Jesus is innocent. He sees that Jesus is innocent. He asks the people, the crowd, the Pharisees, the rulers of the temple, what evil has he done?

And there is no answer from them. Because there is none. There is no evil he has done. And yet, Jesus stands silent before them. The innocent.

He offers no defense. No argument. No protest. And here, the prophet Isaiah speaks across the centuries about this. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, so he opened not his mouth.

[10 : 53] Why? Because he is not merely a victim. He is a sacrifice. Pilate knows the truth.

He knows the truth of this man's innocence. But he lacks the courage to act upon the truth that he knows. He fears the crowd. He fears unrest.

He fears the cost of doing what is right. And so he does what weak men in positions of power so often do. He compromises.

He gives in to cowardice instead of courageously standing for truth. Then, he performatively washes his hands saying, I am innocent of this man's blood.

But he's not. He's not innocent. Neither are we. Then comes the choice for the crowd. Barabbas or Jesus.

[12:00] A murderer or the Messiah. A rebel against Rome or the king of heaven. And the crowd chooses Barabbas.

They choose the violent man over the righteous one. They chose the guilty over the innocent. The guilty goes free while the innocent is condemned.

And here, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, we see ourselves in the story. Barabbas.

Because this is not merely an injustice. It's a substitution.

Barabbas walks free because Jesus takes his place. And that is our story, brothers and sisters. We are Barabbas.

Guilty. Deserving judgment. And yet, Christ stands in our place. Condemned for us.

[13:09] And then, we hear that dreadful cry of self-condemnation from the crowd. They yelled, His blood be on us and on our children.

These are words spoken in blindness. And yet, they are words of profound truth. Because his blood does fall upon us. His blood does fall upon us.

But the question is, will it fall upon us in judgment? Or will it fall upon us in mercy? As we see in the story, the suffering of our Lord intensifies.

the soldiers mock him. They dress him as a king. A crown of thorns was placed upon him. A scarlet robe, a reed for a scepter. They kneel before him in mock homage.

Hail, king of the Jews. And yet, they speak better than they know. Because he is king. Not in spite of the cross. He is king because of the cross.

[14:23] He is king through the cross. Because at Golgotha, they crucified him. They divide his garments, we're told by Matthew. They sit and they watch him die.

Passersby's, they mocked him. Religious leaders, they mocked him. Even the thieves were killed alongside him. They mocked him. And the taunt is repeated by all.

He saved others. He cannot save himself. But here's the great and holy irony. He can't save himself.

He will not save himself. Because he is saving them. He is saving us. If he comes down from the cross, we are lost.

If he remains on the cross, we may be redeemed. That's the reality of what was going on.

[15:30] And then, later on in the story, Matthew tells us that there was darkness. Darkness for three hours from the sixth hour to the ninth. Here is a cosmic sign of judgment over all of creation as the Lord of life gives up his own life.

And then the cry from him, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? These words of the psalmist from Psalm 22 that we also read this morning, this is the cry of the righteous sufferer.

And here we come to the deepest mystery of all. The Son of God bearing our sin endures the judgment of God.

The full weight of God's wrath was poured upon him for our sake. Not for his own sins, for he has none, but for ours.

And when he dies, what happens? The curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom. God himself, as it were, opens the way because of his sacrifice.

[16:57] No longer do we have separation between God and man, but the cross of Christ through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ himself has bridged the chasm and brought reconciliation.

The earth trembles, the tombs are open, the way is made clear for us to have peace with God.

And a Roman centurion, an outsider, a pagan pronounced truly. This was the son of God.

Here is a foreshadowing of the promise being fulfilled immediately after his death as the Gentile nations are grafted in by faith. And now we come this morning to the question because this passion story is not simply to be admired, it is to be answered there is a question before us this morning.

Where do you stand in this story? Do you stand with Judas feeling guilt but without hope? Do you stand with the leaders outwardly religious but inwardly hardened?

[18:22] Do you stand with Pilate knowing the truth full well but unwilling to act upon the truth that you know? do you stand with the crowd swayed by the voices around you?

By the culture? Or will you stand this morning with the centurion and confess truly this was the son of God?

God because this passion is both for us a warning and it is an invitation. It's a warning because of the seriousness of sin.

It is the seriousness of sin that brought Jesus into our world to take on our human frailty, to go to the cross, to die for our sins.

it is because of the seriousness of sin. Sin is not just some social condition. Sin is personal.

[19:35] we are all sinners. And our sin is a serious matter that has separated us from the source of life.

But an invitation to receive the mercy of God is also before us. There is good news. I have good news for you this morning. the blood of Christ has been shed.

And it does indeed fall upon us. But hear this clearly. His blood falls upon us not for condemnation. His blood falls upon us for cleansing.

If we will but just receive it by faith. So do not turn away this holy week. Do not rush past the cross. stay here.

Look upon him. Crucified for you. Consider what he has done for you. And then believe, trust, receive, and confess him as your savior and your lord.

[21:00] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Paul. Na-n I. Bithered by