

Sermon for the Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Matthew 21:1–11; Philippians 2:5–11; Psalm 22:1–11; Matthew 26:36–27:66

Yesterday morning, a parishioner from my Indiana days circulated an op-ed from Friday's *New York Times* that a friend of hers, Simone Hannah-Clark, had written.¹

Simone is a nurse in an intensive care unit in New York City. She wrote about her life and work during this pandemic. The workdays are very long days; the work that she and her colleagues do is physically and emotionally draining. She cares for new arrivals. She cares for those who are starting to heal. She cares for the bodies of those who die.

She leaves home early in the morning and returns late. She doesn't see her children when they are awake. Her shoes come off before she enters their apartment. Her clothes come off when the door closes. She worries that she may be bringing the virus home. She greets her husband after she has showered and donned fresh clothes. She sleeps in another bedroom. The suffering of Jesus was very much in my mind as I read her words.

¹ Simone Hannah-Clark, "An ICU Nurse's Coronavirus Diary,"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-icu-nurse.html>,
(accessed 4 April 2020).

I don't know anything about her personally but count me among those who believe Paul's words to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ," are more than just a Christian command. Bearing the burdens of others is fundamental to being human—and so is sin.

Yesterday afternoon, when I turned to the Ulrich Luz's commentary on Matthew, I wasn't surprised when I noticed what was for me an unfamiliar translation of the two verses that Professor Luz labeled, "The First Mistreatment." I am used to the vocabulary of the Revised Standard Version, "Then they"—the chief priests and the members of the Sanhedrin—"spat in [Jesus'] face, and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?'"² The New Revised Standard Version is the same, except Jesus is called Messiah, not Christ. Professor Luz gives, and I checked the Greek, a more accurate translation:

Then they spat in his face and hit him with their fists, but some slapped him saying: "Prophecy to us, Christ, who is hitting you?"³

² Matthew 26:67–68.

³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 447.

The verb here is *kolaphízō*—“strike with the fist, beat . . . cause physical impairment, torment.”⁴ It’s more than mistreatment; Jesus’ torture is underway. This torture will continue until he cries out from the cross two times, once with words, once without. We know these words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”⁵ Then, after the second cry, Matthew’s Jesus himself lays down his life,⁶ as does John’s Jesus, but in John, Good Friday’s gospel, there is no cry from agony.⁷

For Matthew, Jesus’ crucifixion was not only the hours of darkness,⁸ but when Jesus yields up his Spirit, the earth quaked and the dead began to rise to new⁹ life.

Massey Shepherd, in his commentary on the 1928 Prayer Book, reminds us that the responsibility for Jesus’ death lay with Pilate. Jesus was not stoned to death; Roman soldiers crucified him. Shepherd wrote, “It is significant that the Creeds of the Church recall that Pilate, not the Jews, bears the ultimate

⁴ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* “*κολαφίζω*,” 555.

⁵ Matthew 27:46.

⁶ Matthew 27:50.

⁷ John 19:30.

⁸ Matthew 27:45.

⁹ Matthew 27:52.

responsibility for the tragedy that took place on Calvary.”¹⁰

When I was at Nashotah House Seminary, Father James Griffiss was professor of philosophical and systematic theology. In 1964, he was in residence here at Saint Mary’s and assisted in the services. I was very nervous at the altar and in the pulpit the Sunday I realized he was here for Solemn Mass. One his stories he shared with his students was an experience in a parish on the lower East Side. He was teaching a Sunday School for a group of teenagers. When he told them Jesus had died for their sins, a girl piped up loudly, “Who asked him to?” His story has stuck with me because it one of the encouragements I have had to try to be careful with religious language.

I know the hymn *Ah, holy Jesus* is an important part of an understanding of Jesus’ death for many people. It asks, you may remember, “Who was the guilty?,” and it answers, “ ’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I was it was denied thee: I crucified thee.” With respect, there was one crucifixion, one sacrifice, once offered. We don’t go

¹⁰ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 136–37.

back to Bethlehem at Christmas. We don't go to Calvary today.

I am sinner. But my sins are my own. I sin against Jesus and others. Father Griffiss was also very helpful as my journey in seminary days commenced: I want to be an Easter Christian, not a Good Friday Christian. That journey continues. The shape of the liturgy for today predates the use of the Nicene Creed or the Confession of Sin in the celebration of the Eucharist. I always hear the absolution after the confession of sin in the contemporary language Eucharist, that God may keep us in eternal life, as a reminder that our God has already redeemed us and gone ahead of us to the life that never ends.

✠ May the Divine Assistance remain with us
always and with those who are absent from us.
Amen.

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