

Homily for Passion Sunday, Year C

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Lk 19:28-40; Isa 50:4-7; Ps 21(22); Phil 2:6-11; Lk 22:14-23:56

Theme: Suffering in Humility!

Passion Sunday begins with a gospel reading concerning the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem after the blessing of palms. As he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, Jesus sent two of his disciples to the village opposite with the instructions to bring a colt tied, which no one had ever ridden. When they brought it to Jesus, they threw their garments on the colt, and Jesus sat on it. His numerous disciples rejoiced and praised God, saying, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!' Only Luke's gospel highlights that Jesus is a king. All the other gospels say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' This emphasis in Luke reveals the kind of king Jesus is. He is a humble, peaceful king who rides on a donkey, not a horse of war. In a few days, the shouts of 'hosanna' will turn to shouts of 'Crucify him!'

The first reading from the third Suffering Servant's song in Isaiah focuses on the obedience and trust of the servant in God. The obedience and trust of the suffering servant are contrasted with Israel's disobedience, unfaithfulness, and failure to respond to God's call. This servant is a faithful disciple and has learned his speech from God to reply to the *ya'eph* (Hebrew), the weary, faint-hearted or fatigued. He listens to the voice of God and opens his ears to learn from God every morning in humility without any resistance. The servant is the embodiment of Israel, who ought to learn from God and bring assistance to her children. But the servant is rejected and treated cruelly. He is opposed because he speaks for and on behalf of God. The servant is beaten and insulted. Yet, he puts up no resistance. He gave his back to those who struck him, his cheeks to those who tore at his beard, and his face to those who covered him with spittle. He trusts in the Lord his God in his pain and suffering.

The Responsorial Psalm reveals the pain similar to that of the Suffering Servant. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Jesus cries out to God his Father on the cross using the psalmist's words. However, the words of Jesus are uttered in Aramaic in both Matthew and Mark with slight variations, for instance, my God, *Eli* in Matthew and *Eloi* in Mark (Matt 27:46; Mk 15:34). In Hebrew, the words are *Eli, Eli, lamah azabtani*. *El* is the name of God, and *Eli* means My God. The verb *azab* is to leave, forsake or abandon. This same verb in Aramaic is *sabaq*.

Hence we have *sabachthani* in the gospels. Originally, these words in Psalm 22 were attributed to David describing his despair when Saul sought to kill him. It could also have been when he fled from his son Absalom and Shimei cursing him. Some scholars think that the psalm is a later composition and is not David's words. In whatever case, what stands out is that the psalmist is in anguish and laments that God had forsaken him. 'My God, my God.' Calling the name of God twice underscores his distress and that he wants God to respond quickly. It also shows his relationship and dependence on God. That God had forsaken him communicates the sense of abandonment, left alone in his despair. To the psalmist, God has taken a distance from him in his suffering. He asks God why God is far from his *yeshuah*: salvation, deliverance, help or prosperity. Why has God not listened to the words of his groaning, cries and pain?

When Jesus used these words on the cross, he was expressing that sense of aloneness and abandonment by God his Father. The letter to the Hebrews says: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.' (Heb 5:7). The cry of the psalmist and that of Jesus to God is out of trust that God will save them and deliver them from the pain and agony. At the end of the psalm, the psalmist expresses the hope in God's salvation, and Jesus' last words on the cross are 'into your hands I commend my spirit,' words of absolute trust in God. We, too, can feel a sense of abandonment when we are going through pain, and it

is not out of place to cry out to God using the words of Scripture as Jesus did. There is no need to pretend when we pray. God already sees our pain and understands when we express them using similar words as the psalmist. Let us turn to God in trust that he will consistently deliver us from our pain and distress and hear our cries and groanings.

In the passion narrative, Jesus confirms that he is the suffering servant when he tells his disciples that scriptures will be fulfilled in him, who is numbered among sinners even in his innocence. The words of the suffering servant are fulfilled in Jesus. He was obedient to the voice of his Father and would not do his will, even when it was difficult. They arrested him and mistreated him. They struck him, spat on him, insulted him and turned him into a criminal. In all these, Jesus did not fight back or defend himself because he knew that he would not be put to shame by his Father. The resurrection will vindicate him as the Son of God.

St. Paul tells us in the second reading that Jesus is that humble suffering servant of God. Although he was God, Jesus emptied himself in humility and accepted the condition of a servant. He took on human form and humbled himself to accept death on the cross. Jesus takes on the sufferings of the servant in the book of Isaiah. The vindication of the humble servant is in the resurrection. Paul says, 'God raised him high and gave him a name above all other names.' For us, too, our sufferings will not end in shame when we trust entirely in God.