

Matthew 27:45-54 The Ascent
March 29, 2026

Today is the first day of Holy Week, the week of Christ's Passion. It began on Sunday with his arrival into Jerusalem for the Passover, the great springtime festival commemorating the Exodus experience more than a thousand years before.

By this time in the life of Jesus, there were some who believed that the Passover in question was a good time for the accession to the throne in Israel of the Messiah, who would rescue Israel from their Roman overlords, and re-establish the sovereignty of their nation. Many believed that was the role Jesus was about to play. We have read about The Triumphal Entry, which began at the city gate, and continued by an ascent to the temple, for a sacrifice to mark the day.

Thus, they followed their scripture that described the coronation of their king. It comes from the 118th psalm, and is the source for the chant they chanted, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," and, "Hosanna," which means, "save us."

They gathered the branches of the palm trees so that when they went to the temple to offer the royal sacrifice, it could be tied to the horns of the altar in proper fashion as was told in the psalm.

From there, things did not go as planned. Instead of going to the temple for the sacrifice Jesus got stuck in

the courtyard where he saw the activities of the people who were changing the money at embellished rates, and selling the animals at inflated prices.

The pilgrims, many of whom came from long distances for the Passover, did not have animals with them, and they had money with graven images on the coins that could not be accepted at the temple and had to be exchanged for acceptable currency so they could buy the animals for the sacrifices.

The whole process made it harder for people to participate in what for many of them would be a once-in-a-lifetime event, their only chance to be in Jerusalem for the great festival.

So, as you know, Jesus threw a fit and left and then things descended into what by the end of the week would become the tragedy we call, Good Friday, and so we have read about that too.

The Place of the Skull and the wine mixed with Gall; the sign they made that said, "This is the king of the Jews," and the two thieves on his right and left, his companions in death; the comedy the religious leaders made of it all, "he saved others, but he cannot save himself; the cry of dereliction, the final breath; the words of the Centurion, "Surely this man was the Son of God.

Later, he was buried and then came the days of grief and sorrow, when darkness reigned.

We read it here on Palm Sunday because some will be unable to mark the day on Friday, so that it will have been read before next Sunday, which is, of course, Easter. It is a mistake to go from Palm Sunday to Easter without stopping to observe Good Friday.

The sequence of events means that the high hopes of Sunday morning were met with a shocking disappointment, a world-shattering reversal. Though it seems dark, but there is a reason it is called, “good.” So take the time to marinate in it some this week.

The actual reading for this morning is Matthew 26:14-27:66, which begins with the agreement of Judas to betray Jesus and runs all the way through the guard being placed at the tomb so the body could not be stolen. A good exercise for this week is to read a little each day until Saturday, and think of each reading in the light of both the Sunday arrival, and a week later, the Sunday morning miracle.

In the down-here-on-earth sense, this event is not that uncommon nor is it of great significance. Things like it happen occasionally. It is another execution by the authorities, who don’t seem to know how to operate in any other way when there is trouble afoot.

But as a divine act, it means a great deal more, in fact, it means everything. In Christ’s Passion, something of God’s true nature is revealed. Whatever else we may think or say about God, we learn here of the supremacy of God’s mercy; and of the commitment to all the people of the world, both presently and

throughout, history, that mercy is victorious over judgment, and that any understanding of God as more committed to punishment is a misunderstanding.

The message of this gospel forces us to reconsider. The more natural exhortation is to say that if one acknowledges their guilt, repents of their sin, and believes in Jesus, they will be forgiven. There are places in the bible where this seems to be the case.

But on Good Friday, we learn a new truth. The sacrifice of Jesus for the world’s redemption proclaim’s, “You are forgiven, therefore repent and believe.” Grace comes first.

We see it in one of the last sayings of Jesus from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And in the fifth chapter of Romans where Paul has written, “God has demonstrated his love for us in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!”

Most clearly it is in the Letter of James, “mercy triumphs over judgment.” *That* mercy is the reason this coming Friday is called, “good.” It brings to life what we learn from Deuteronomy, “The Lord your God is a merciful God,” or in the Beatitude, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.”

I can’t help but to think of parable of the Unmerciful Servant, who *was forgiven much*, but was unwilling to *forgive at all*. When we think about the events of Holy Week, we cannot help but see the commitment of God

to the people of the world, to their redemption, for their well-being both in this world and the life to come.

For God did not remain aloof, but became a human being, suffered the human predicament in order take it upon himself so that the words of Paul in the 2nd chapter of Philippians are most appropriate:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The 118th psalm describes the journey of the king on coronation day up the hill to the temple for the sacrifice. For Jesus, that brief journey takes on new meaning, for it is not the ascent to earthly power, but to the cross, where he was lifted up, which is the truest ascent there ever was.

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