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# Jesus: The Way Beyond Violence

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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# **Jesus: The Way Beyond Violence**

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**Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell  
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies  
Seton Hall University  
South Orange, NJ**

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## **Passion Sunday**

March 24, 2013 Sunday Readings for Cycle C:

Is 50:4-7; Ps 22; Phil 2:6-11; Lk 22:14-23:56

### **JESUS: THE WAY BEYOND VIOLENCE**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

Whether the action thriller is a cowboy movie or a kung-fu film from Hong Kong, the struggle between good and evil is always violent. Does "popular culture" in East or West see no alternative to the use of force for asserting rights or overcoming malice? If this is the message that pervades modern societies, are we surprised that young people everywhere seek "power" through possession and use of weapons?

The ancient world into which Jesus came was similar to our own time. Large armies exerted the will of emperors over unhappy neighbors and bandits made travel hazardous. To see beyond such dilemmas to an era of peace, pious Jews reflected on the message of Israel's prophets. Most popular were passages of their teachings that promised a virtuous king who would vanquish evil, just as his ancestor David had conquered the Philistines. As with Moses before him, David gave the credit to God (see 1 Sm 17:45-47) and this is recalled as Jews prayed for strength under oppression. "You delivered Goliath of Gath, the mighty warrior, into the hands of David your servant, because in place of the sword and spear he put his trust in your great Name" (Dead Sea/Qumran Scroll, *War of Sons of Light* XI:2). It seemed to many that even God must use force to crush the military or physical might of the wicked.

During the Babylonian Exile (587-538 B.C.) the chosen people began to hear a different message. A prophet following the inspiration of Isaiah applied the master's teaching of a peaceful future (Is 2:2-5; 9:5-6; 11:1-12) to the very process of education. The ideal teacher would bring forth justice without dominating over or crushing the weak (Is 42:2-3). Learning through continuous intimacy with God (Is 50:4-5), he would be patient even with those who persecuted him for his words. Relying on divine assistance, he would resolve debates, not by force but by a court case. "If anyone wishes to oppose me, let us appear together. Who disputes my right? Let him confront me!" (Is 50:8). Thus he drew upon the insight of the great Isaiah: God's law should be the basis for resolving potential conflicts and God himself will be the judge (see Is 2:4).

Through the teaching ministry of Jesus, his constant message was that violence and malice must be faced with prayerful equanimity (Lk 6:27-36). The Passover meal celebrated Israel's peaceful departure from Egypt and a victory over Pharaoh's army that belonged to God alone. Jesus also looked ahead to the situation when all would acknowledge God's reign over them (Lk 22:14-18). Tragically, the disciples were not yet fully with Jesus, so he counseled them to prepare for their flight and isolation. Then, probably in a tone of irony, he advised each to buy a sword (22:36)! Separated from him they would come to rely only on human resources.

Like the servant described by Isaiah, Jesus accepted trial in court as the way in which his cause could be vindicated. However, the legal system works only when those in authority do not manipulate the laws to their own purpose. Like countless innocent men and women throughout history, Jesus was condemned because Pontius Pilate was willing to sacrifice principle for expediency. The most important witness in human life is offered at the moment of death. On the cross, Jesus forgave those who contributed to his suffering (Lk 23:34); he inspired a criminal to pray in faith (23:42) and he himself died with a prayer on his lips (23:46). This witness led others to believe, at least in an inchoate fashion. "The centurion... gave glory to God by saying: 'Surely this was an innocent man'" (23:47).

Only through faith in the divine ordering of the universe and historical events can people find a viable alternative to violence in efforts to preserve life. The Gospel points beyond the crucifixion to the new life that Jesus enjoyed as risen Lord. An early Christian hymn incorporated into St. Paul's letter to the Philippians presents the Gospel teaching powerfully and succinctly. Jesus' death was not an execution but was his act of obedience to the heavenly Father. Thus did he put the teaching of God's servant into action. In most cultures, people place all their emphasis on *winning* --- and many show no compunction about violating principles to attain this goal! Do we believe deeply enough in Christ's power to follow his example? "Your attitude must be that of Christ!" (Phil 2:5). Otherwise our world will not learn the lesson that is needed so urgently.