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With the Suffering Master

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With the Suffering Master

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Passion (Palm) Sunday

Sunday Readings for April 1, 2012 for Cycle B:

Is 50:7; Ps 22; Phil 2:6-11; Mk 14:1-15:47

WITH THE SUFFERING MASTER

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The account of Jesus' confrontation with forces that resisted his challenging call to transformation are presented in the Scripture passages chosen for Holy Week. These are not considered as ancient history but resonate with truths that are much needed in our world and, indeed, in our own lives. Religion is still being twisted to serve political - and even military - goals in our time, just as the priestly authorities in Jerusalem catered to the demands of Roman governor and his legions. Some political leaders today choose expediency rather than honesty and justice, just as Pontius Pilate sought to rid himself of a troublesome prisoner. Those who strive to serve God in our time can expect attacks from their contemporaries, in ways similar to the trials of Jesus and his disciples. The Holy Week services should provide a twofold self-examination: How am I living my call to follow Jesus? Am I perhaps sometimes indifferent or siding with those who oppose God's plan?

The theme linking the three readings is the image of God's servant, the teacher who instructs by example even more eloquently than by words. The brief passage from the school of the great prophet Isaiah (50:4-7) builds upon the earlier descriptions of the servant as a gentle teacher (42:1-7; 49:1-6). He is abused by those who cannot tolerate his faithful adherence to the divine will. Rather than react with like actions of violence he patiently relies on God to help him.

The Gospel of Mark alerts call Christians to the pattern in Jesus' life to which they are called to share. Hankering after places of honor in the kingdom, James and John are invited rather to share in "the cup and baptism" of persecution (Mark 10:35-40). The principle of Christian leadership is service and sacrifice, in imitation of Jesus. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many" (10:45).

When the Passion Narrative is read we might concentrate on the acts of service that Mark records. The woman's act of anointing Jesus brings criticism from some of the guests, who express a concern for the poor. Jesus defends her, explaining that, symbolically, she has anointed his body for burial (an important act of piety). "The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me" (14:7). The Jewish listeners would have recognized an allusion to a commandment. "The poor will never be lacking in the land; that is why I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman in your country" (Deut 15:11).

Rather than stress the possible malice of Jesus' persecutors, the Gospel portrays the apostles in their weakness, especially focusing on Judas and Peter. Do I recognize the risk that Christ took in choosing me? Am I a potential betrayer or denier of the Master? "God forbid," says the pious

Christian -- who then prays for the gift to discern the image of Christ in all those whom he or she encounters. A second prayer is for the strength to serve even if the cost might be great.

"They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene...the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross" (15:21). By naming Simon's sons, Mark indicates that they are known to his listeners/readers. Probably Simon became a Christian, learning from Jesus how to bear the burdens of others (see Gal 6:2). Probably in meditating on the fifth station we have realized that we are called to alleviate the sufferings of others. Indeed this is a sublime form of service!

During Jesus' last agony, someone soaked a sponge in wine and gave it to him to drink (15:36). This was a practice of courageous Jews in places where their compatriots were crucified by the Romans. Wine would dull the senses of the person in the midst of his excruciating pain. How do I act when faced with the illness and death of others? Do I respond to the numerous opportunities for acts of service to the sick and their families?

The centurion who witnessed the death of Jesus proclaimed: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (15:39). The one in charge of Jesus' execution was transformed by his experience of how Jesus faced death. May the same grace come to all who have persecuted Christians (and others) in today's world!

During his ministry Jesus touched a large number of people, some of whom had ministered to him (15:41). By his death, Jesus offered the sacrifice that ransomed "the many" (an idiom for the entire human race) and brought them to reconciliation with his Father. The response in faith by the centurion exemplified their acceptance of Jesus, who came to serve all recognizing their need.