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Christ as Servant

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Passion Sunday
Sunday Readings for April 13, 2014 for Cycle A:
Is 50:4-7; Ps 22:8-24; Phil 2:6-11; Mt 26:14-27:66

CHRIST AS SERVANT

Lawrence E. Frizzell

As we reflect upon the Church's liturgy we find a treasury which is virtually inexhaustible. The combination of word and symbol, music and silence may be experienced on many levels. Preparation through prayer and study is nowhere more important than for Holy Week. So much is offered between Passion (Palm) Sunday and Easter! This column can but introduce one theme among the riches that can be discovered in the Scriptures, the Liturgy and in the spiritual writers of the Church. Not wishing to pass over the great message of divine forgiveness and the call to new life in the Covenant, now extended to people from all nations, we will concentrate on a thread that joins all three readings: the relation between teacher and disciple.

In the Hebrew tradition all forms of leadership are expressions of service; thus Moses, Aaron, David and their successors are called "servants of God", leading the people in worship and the extension of prayer into the fabric of daily life. The second part of the book of Isaiah depicts a Servant of God who will teach in a most benign and sensitive way (Is 42:1-9; 49:1-6). Few educators are universally appreciated and some are persecuted for their efforts. Their message may provoke mistreatment but God's Word does not tolerate compromise. Rather than offering a violent reaction, the servant professes trust in God's help and suggests a settlement in court (Is 50:7-9).

When Jesus was arrested in Gethsemani (the garden of olive trees), he made the same plea for nonviolence. He admonished his disciple: "Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52).

Although the records of trials of some early Christians during the Roman persecutions are still extant, there is no official document of the Jewish or Roman trial of Jesus. The slight differences among the four Gospel accounts may indicate the oral traditions of early Christian communities. Our limited space does not permit us to discuss the differences between these accounts and Jewish legislation recorded in Tractate Sanhedrin of the Mishnah (compiled about AD 200). If these laws were in effect during the time of Jesus, then his trial would have been illegal on several counts. To maintain their position during the Roman occupation of Judaea (which began in AD 6), high priests and their advisors made compromises with Roman authorities and tried to control the popular leaders who rose from time to time among the ordinary people. Some of them perceived Jesus to be a threat and conspired to kill him. He was another of a long line of teachers whose very popularity provoked jealousy and anger among those in power. How would Jesus fare in the courtroom of many countries today?

One of the terrible tragedies in Christian history has been the accusation that "the Jews" killed Christ. We must be reminded at this time of year of the statement of the Second Vatican Council.
"True, authorities of the Jews and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still what happened in his passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today" (Declaration on Non-Christian Religions #4).

When we hear the Passion of Jesus proclaimed, we Christians tend to identify with the Master in his innocence and integrity. How consoling! However, this approach may rob the Word of its power to transform our lives. Disciples fled, Peter denied Jesus and Judas Iscariot betrayed him. We must learn to know ourselves in the weaknesses that may lead us to similar tragic failures. Secondly we must ask if we are persecutors of the stranger, the poor, the handicapped, those who courageously "blow the whistle" on corrupt activities in our working place... Only then will we learn the Church's teaching, that "Christ in his boundless love freely underwent his passion and death because of the sins of all people, so that all may achieve salvation" (Declaration on Non-Christian Religions #4). As beneficiaries of God's forgiving love through Christ's sacrifice, we should strive to have among ourselves the same attitude as Christ Jesus, who taught us how to love and die as an act of service in obedience to the Father (Phil 2:5-8).