

On Palm Sunday every year I usually make some remarks before the reading of the Passion Gospel in lieu of preaching a sermon on the Passion Gospel. Think of them as introductory, preparatory remarks beforehand, rather than a reflection afterwards.

And this year we're using a Gospel we've never used before. Usually on Palm Sunday we read from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, depending on the year, and read John on Good Friday. But since we're reading through John as our Parish Reading Project this Lent and into Easter week, I asked the bishop's permission to substitute in John today, and he agreed.

So what will we hear in John's account of the Passion? And what is unique to John that we wouldn't hear in Matthew, Mark, or Luke?

First off, John has been preparing us for this reading all throughout his Gospel. In John, more than in any other Gospel, Jesus has been talking all throughout his ministry about his crucifixion. And it is also his exaltation. He is not an unwilling victim carried along on the currents of fate or circumstance. No, Jesus is heading toward the cross all through John. Jesus starts way back in chapter 3 talking about the cross. He talks about being lifted up from the earth in order to draw all people to himself,<sup>1</sup> so that all who believe in him may have eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus talks about going to the cross willingly. He says that he lays down his life for his sheep, and a couple verses later that he has the power to lay down his life and the power to take it up again.<sup>3</sup>

Thus in John we see a very confident Jesus who is in control every step of the way during his Passion. At his arrest, Jesus is unafraid, but those arresting him cower in fear.

During his trials in front of the high priest and later Pontius Pilate, Jesus is in control and steers the direction of the conversation. This eventually frustrates Pilate so much that he asked Jesus, "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"<sup>4</sup> <sup>11</sup> To which Jesus replies, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus holds onto his core values and his mission throughout his Passion. The priests jettison their core values—they publicly proclaim that Caesar is their only king, even though they should say we have no king but God. Pilate jettisons his job of enforcing the law in order to cover his own rear end. But Jesus is always focused on what he has to do.

And in John, he carries the cross by himself all the way to Golgotha. John omits any mention of him getting any help from Simon of Cyrene. And at the end of the crucifixion in John, Jesus says, "It is finished."<sup>6</sup> This is not a cry of defeat. You could also translate this

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<sup>1</sup> John 12:32-34

<sup>2</sup> John 3:14-15

<sup>3</sup> John 10:15, 17-18

<sup>4</sup> John 19:10

<sup>5</sup> John 19:11

<sup>6</sup> John 19:30

statement as, "It is accomplished. It has been put into effect. It has been fulfilled. It has reached the utmost perfection." This is not a cry of defeat. It is a statement of the Good Shepherd willingly giving his life for his sheep to draw them to himself, to bring them eternal life. And since Jesus alone has the power to lay down his life and take it up again, John adds, "Then (Jesus) bowed his head and gave up his spirit."<sup>7</sup>

And then, John adds eyewitness testimony from the foot of the cross, something again unique to John." He says, "One of the soldiers pierced (Jesus') side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out."<sup>8</sup>

And to make sure that we know how important the blood and water are, he adds this note of emphasis: "(He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.)"<sup>9</sup>

Anatomists say the water is probably clear pericardial fluid assuming the spear pierced Jesus' heart, mixed with blood from the heart chambers. It wouldn't have gushed out—at most it would have slowly oozed out of the wound.

But John sees something deeply profound in this. John is able to catch a glimpse of the true power of the cross. This is not just an ordinary execution. This is something far more powerful.

Blood and water. Something that stains, and something that cleanses. Death, and new life. "Let the water and the blood / From thy wounded side that flowed / Be for sin a double cure / Cleanse me from its guilt and power."<sup>10</sup>

Blood and water flow from Jesus on the cross. And the power of that blood and water bring us new life. Our sins are forgiven. We are reconciled to God. Jesus dies, and we are given life, eternal life.

That is Jesus' mission throughout his ministry. In the Passion of John, it is mission accomplished.

Like John, you too can be a witness to the power of the water and the blood. Jesus' death is not just a painful, horrible spectacle. It's also life giving and life changing.

As we will pray on Good Friday,  
*Savior of the world, by your cross and precious blood you have redeemed us: Save us and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord.*

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<sup>7</sup> John 19:30

<sup>8</sup> John 19:34

<sup>9</sup> John 19:35

<sup>10</sup> Hymn #685, *The Hymnal 1982*