

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

(Year A)

<i>Procession with Palms Gospel</i>	Matthew 21:1-11
<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 50:4-7
<i>Response</i>	My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 2:6-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 26:14-27:66

So finally we come to the Sixth Sunday of Lent, which is commonly known as Palm Sunday, because this is a Sunday where we process in with palms into the Church and we have a Gospel right at the very beginning of the liturgy. But it is technically actually referred to as Passion Sunday, because it's also the Sunday where — you may recall — we read the entire passion narrative from one of the first three Gospels. So in Year A, Year B and Year C on this Sunday we will read the entire passion from Matthew or Mark or Luke. I bring this up because it is kind of important to remember that every single year during the Lenten season we will hear the entire passion of Christ twice, once on Palm Sunday - or Passion Sunday — from one of the synoptic Gospels and then we hear it again every year from the Gospel of John on Good Friday. So the Church picks John's account of the passion — who was an eyewitness — to give to us every year on Good Friday during the Triduum. So what we are doing today is we are celebrating both Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which took place before his passion on Sunday, and we're also anticipating Good Friday by hearing the entire passion of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew. So obviously this video could last for hours if we did every aspect of both the triumphal entry and the passion. What I am going to do

instead is I just want to make a quick point about the triumphal entry in the account of Matthew's Gospel and then we are going to walk through the passion narrative. We are going to put most of our focus on the passion narrative and highlight how Matthew's account of the passion is fulfilling the Old Testament. So let's look first at the processional gospel, this opening gospel, from the triumphal entry. It's from Matthew 21:1-11. This is the famous story of Jesus sending the disciples to find a donkey and then riding that donkey into the city of Jerusalem in which crowds begin to gather, spread their garments on the road, cut branches from trees and proceed before him shouting one thing that I want to highlight. It says:

And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted,
“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the
Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”¹

So my question here about this is why do the crowds lay branches and carry branches and shout “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”? Well the answer — surprise, surprise — lies in the Old Testament. When they do this they are quoting Psalm 118. Psalm 118 is a description of a king coming into the city of Jerusalem. And by the first century A.D. it was interpreted as a prophetic psalm, as a psalm about the coming of the future king, the Messiah, to the city of Jerusalem. So when they start proclaiming the words of this Psalm: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (that’s Psalm 118:26), they are in effect welcoming Jesus into the city of Jerusalem as both King and Messiah. That's why they say, “Hosanna to the son of David!” That's the name for the king of Israel. But what's interesting about this, the one point I would highlight for us, is that if you read that verse in context it actually says something interesting about the branches. Why do we use branches? Psalm 118:26-27 reads:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Blessed be he who enters in the name of the LORD!

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

and then it goes on to say:

The LORD is God,

and he has given us light.

Bind the festal procession with branches,

up to the horns of the altar!

So the psalm was originally intended to welcome the king into Jerusalem who was also a priest and who would ascend up to the altar to offer sacrifice. So when the crowds welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, he too is a king coming into the city of Jerusalem, and he too was going to go up to the altar to offer sacrifice. But it's not the altar of sacrifice in the Temple, it's the altar of the cross. So whenever, on Palm Sunday, we take those words upon our lips and carry branches in procession, we are in effect welcoming Christ the King into the temple of our church and our sanctuary. And he's going to go in the person of the priest or the bishop, he's going to walk and proceed up to the steps of the altar. And there he will offer the true sacrifice of his body, his blood, soul and divinity. So it is a very powerful moment on Palm Sunday as we recall his triumphal entry, but we also, in a sense, make it present again in the procession with branches and in the Eucharistic sacrifice. So that's just one quick point about the palms. I wanted you to know it because it's powerful and important.

Now with that said let's turn to the account of the passion narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. So on Palm Sunday then this year, we're going to be listening to the full passion narrative from the Gospel of St. Matthew. Now that's three chapters, three full chapters from Matthew's Gospel. So for the sake of time in this video I'm not going to read the entire passion narrative out loud. You'll hear that at the Mass dramatically read. Very powerful. It's one of my favorite things to do is listen to the entire passion in the Mass. However, for our sake here, what I want to do is

walk you through the whole passion, but highlight key elements of the passion in the Gospel of Matthew showing you two things. First, what are the unique elements in Matthew's Gospel? There are certain things that are only in Matthew's passion. And second, even more importantly, how does the passion of Christ fulfill the Old Testament? In other words, what do each of the events in Jesus' passion mean from a Jewish perspective? How would they have been received in a first century Jewish setting, especially Matthew being a very Jewish gospel, and what was he fulfilling in carrying out these actions? So what I'll be doing is I'll walk through basically seven key points of the passion narrative. And I want to use key verses to show you how Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament and revealing himself to be the long awaited Messiah, the Son of God, the Redeemer of the whole world.

So let's begin. I'll be taking verses from Matthew chapter 26 through 27, which is the passion narrative. And I think I said three full chapters but it is in fact just two full chapters, but they're long chapters! So let's walk through that together. The passion narrative in the Gospel of Matthew begins first and foremost with the handing over of Jesus by Judas and the account of the Last Supper. And one of the things you will notice in Matthew's passion narrative is that he emphasizes over and over again that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. So let's begin with the Passover. For example, in Matthew 26:17 it says:

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain one, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at your house with my disciples.'" And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the passover.

Okay, so pause there. Matthew goes on to recount the words of institution and the Last Supper. Why is he stressing so much that the Last Supper was a Passover meal? Well in a first century Jewish context anyone would've known that the Passover meal was the annual memorial of the deliverance of the 12 tribes of Israel from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. So, on the Passover night the lamb was sacrificed, unleavened bread was eaten, and Israel was finally set free. They were redeemed. They were delivered. And they began their journey home to the promised land. So when Jesus institutes the Eucharist, the Last Supper, in the context of the Jewish Passover meal, he is, in a sense, inaugurating the new Passover. And so his Passover is similar to the old Passover. It takes place on Passover night, involves the sacrifice of the lamb with the Apostles preparing the Passover meal, but is also different because in this Passover meal, Jesus identifies himself as the new Passover lamb. This is my body. This is my blood. And then he commands the disciples to carry out this Passover meal. And so the question is, what's new about the new Passover? Well, one key element I want to highlight here...I could go into a lot more depth. My book *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, I have a whole book on this...but for tonight I just want to emphasize one point. The old Passover began in Egypt and ended in Jerusalem, in the earthly promised land. It was a journey from Egypt to Canaan. But the new passover of Jesus, in his passion, begins in Jerusalem, and where does it end? Well it ends with his resurrection and his ascension into the heavenly promised land.

So Jesus now is inaugurating this new Passover of a new Exodus that is ultimately going to lead to him passing over from this world into heaven, into the life of the Trinity, into the heavenly realm of the father, into the heavenly promised land. So that's what his whole passion is about: setting in motion that new Exodus with a new Passover. It also shows you that if he is the true lamb that we have to eat his flesh in the Eucharist. That's point number one. Matthew is showing us the new Passover.

The second observation I want to make about Matthew's Gospel is in the account of the garden of Gethsemane. After he tells us about the Last Supper in Matthew 26:30 and following, Matthew gives us an account of Jesus' agony in the garden and notice he highlights two elements here. First he says this:

when they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives.

So the Mount of Olives was a mountain east of the city of Jerusalem where Jesus and his disciples travel across the valley east of the city, and they go to this mountain of olives. And there Jesus predicts that they're going to betray him, that they're going to abandon him, and then he begins to pray. And Matthew tells us that Jesus went with them to a special place called Gethsemane, and there he said to his disciples sit here while I go over there and pray, and his agony begins. So what is the significance of the agony in the garden taking place on the Mount of Olives in the garden of Gethsemane? Any first century Jew reading the passion of Christ would've known that the Hebrew for Gethsemane meant an oil press. So Jesus goes over to the mountain of olives into the garden where they would press olives to make oil, and that's where his passion begins. That's where his agony begins. As he begins to take the sufferings and the sin of humanity upon himself, and he asked his disciples, "pray that you not be put to the test." He says "my soul is sorrowful even unto death. Wait here. Keep awake with me." So why does Matthew emphasize in his passion narrative that Jesus' agony takes place on the mountain of olives and in the garden named after an olive oil press? Well one possibility is that in ancient Jewish tradition they believed that the tree of life that was placed in the garden of Eden was actually an olive tree. So if you read ancient Jewish writings outside the Bible like the life of Adam and Eve they actually say that the tree of knowledge was a fig tree and the tree of life was an olive tree. So Matthew may be highlighting here not just the historical fact that Jesus is on the Mount of olives, and that he goes to his passion in the Garden of olives, in the

garden of Gethsemane, but he may see our connection with the Jewish tradition of the tree of life. Because what does Jesus do? He's going to go to the wood of the cross, and pour out his life for the sins of humanity so that we might have the forgiveness of our sins, and that we might be restored to paradise. We might be restored to Eden. So it's fitting that if the fall of Adam and Eve took place in a garden where the center of the garden was an olive tree, that Christ now is going to redeem humanity in a garden where olive trees grow. In a sense, he's going back to Eden as the new Adam in order to inaugurate not just the new Exodus in a new Passover, but the beginning of a new creation where he's going to make all things new, through his passion, through his death, and through his resurrection. So that's the second fulfillment: new Passover and also new Adam.

A third aspect of Jesus' passion narrative here is the fact that he is the suffering servant, and this one's important. In the Old Testament there are prophecies of the suffering servant like Isaiah chapter 50:4-7, which is actually the first reading for Palm Sunday, where it describes this mysterious servant of God who gives his back to the smiters, and he doesn't hide his face from shame and from spitting. And what happens after the agony in the garden is Jesus is taken to trial before the Jewish leaders, before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, and they begin to subject him to mockery and to abuse, to spitting and that kind of thing. And Jesus does something really strange. He doesn't fight back. He doesn't even speak. He bears those sufferings silently. Why is he doing that? Well look at the description here. I'm going to read from Matthew 26 here. This is very very important. Verse 47 and following, it says:

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, why are you here?"

Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"

Just a quick note there: A Legion was an ancient Roman garrison of 6000 soldiers. So when Jesus tells Peter to put back his sword and that God could send him more than 12 legions of angels, what he is saying is God could send 72,000 angels to my side in a moment if I wanted to fight back, if I wanted to defend myself. But look at what he says in verse 54:

“But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"

So notice this clue here. Jesus’ whole passion narrative is really a fulfillment of the Scriptures. He's fulfilling multiple prophecies of the Old Testament. He’s fulfilling multiple events from the Old Testament. He’s fulfilling the Passover of Egypt. He's fulfilling the fall of Adam and Eve. He's inaugurating a new Eden and a new creation by going through his passion. So everything he does here is a fulfillment of the Scriptures. And that’s what he says:

At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples

forsook him and fled. Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered.

At this point the disciples flee. They take off. He's brought before Caiaphas for the trial. Caiaphas demands that he say whether he is the Christ, the son of God, and he does affirm that. And when he affirms it they react to his declaration by saying:

"He has uttered blasphemy. Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death."

Then Matthew says in verse 67:

Then they spat in his face, and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

Here we see Jesus going to the cross silent like a lamb led to the slaughter, and bearing the spitting and the abuse of the soldiers and of the leaders in Jerusalem, just like the prophecies of the suffering servant had foretold. So he is inaugurating a new Passover. He's inaugurating a new creation as the new Adam, and he's also fulfilling the prophecies of the suffering servant.

There's a fourth element here that's taking place, a fourth fulfillment. If you keep walking through Matthew's passion narrative, one of the unique things about the

passion in Matthew is that it's going to tell us about the death of Judas. This is something that only Matthew's account relays to us. So I'm going to read it and then unpack it from a Jewish perspective. This is what Matthew tells us:

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death; and they bound him and led him away and delivered him to Pilate the governor. When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.

Pause there for second. Why does Matthew tell us about the suicide of Judas at this point? What's the significance of it? None of the other Synoptics give us this aspect here of Jesus being betrayed by Judas, of him throwing 30 pieces of silver back, and then going off and hanging himself. Well one suggestion that I would make to you is this: that this is another fulfillment of Scripture. Because Matthew would have known, especially as a Jewish writer, that in the Old Testament this isn't the first time a righteous innocent man has been betrayed for silver. In the book of Genesis 38, Joseph, the son of Jacob, the righteous and innocent son of Jacob, is betrayed by his brother Judah and sold to the Gentile slave traders for 20 pieces of silver. And we know what happens after that, Joseph is put into a pit. He is left for dead and then miraculously--watch this—he, in a sense, comes back to life. He's risen from the dead because he's rescued from the pit and he rises to the ranks of second-in-command to Pharaoh in the kingdom of Egypt. So notice the parallel here in the Old Testament. Innocent Joseph is betrayed by one of the twelve sons of Jacob named Judah for 20 pieces of silver. Now Jesus the righteous son of God the father the innocent one is betrayed by one of the 12 apostles named

Judas for 30 pieces of silver. That's not a coincidence, especially when you remember that Judas's name in Hebrew is Judah. It's the same name as the brother who betrayed innocent Joseph to the Gentile slave traders. So what Matthew is highlighting here I think is that Jesus isn't just a new Moses inaugurating a new Passover. He's not just the new Adam setting in motion the redemption of the world. He's also the new Joseph. He is the innocent son whose righteous blood is going to be poured out, who's going to be betrayed unto death, so that all of his brothers — in this case the disciples — so that they and the whole world might be saved. Not from famine and starvation like at the time of Joseph in Egypt, but from sin and death itself. So Jesus is a new Moses and Judas is in a sense a new Judah.

After the account of betrayal though, now Matthew moves into the famous story of Jesus before Pontius Pilate, where Jesus is brought before Pilate for a hearing, and Pilate in this instance gives the people of Jerusalem at the Passover the option of having one of two prisoners released to them: either Barabbas or Jesus. Let's read the account here for just a moment and see what Jesus might be fulfilling. Here it says this in Matthew 27:15:

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner, called Barab'bas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Barab'bas or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him,

And this is something only in Matthew's Gospel:

"Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the people to ask for Barab'bas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barab'bas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified." And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified."

At this point something happens that only Matthew tells us about so I want to highlight it. It says this:

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barab'bas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

Let's pause there for second. What's going on in this whole Jesus-Barabbas thing? How would this have been understood in a first century Jewish perspective and how should we understand this today? A couple of key points here that will help us grasp what Matthew's getting at. First and foremost, most people get the idea that when Pilate offers them a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, that he's offering them a choice between Jesus the Messiah who was a nonviolent Messiah, who was a peaceful Messiah, and then Barabbas who was a revolutionary. And that the people chose the Revolutionary over the nonviolent Messiah. I think most people are familiar with that idea, but Matthew goes deeper than that by

highlighting for us the name of the revolutionary because “barabbas”, that name in Aramaic, literally means son of the father. “Bar” means son and “abba”, as most people know, means father.

Okay. So on the one hand then Pilate is saying here is one son of the father, who was a violent revolutionary, and here's another son of the Father, who is the suffering servant. Which one are the crowds going to choose? And of course, what do they do? They pick the false son of the father, Barabbas, over the true son of the Father who is Jesus himself. So what's so interesting about this is some translations will highlight the fact that in certain manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel, we not only get Barabbas' last name, we also get his first name. So in certain manuscripts of Matthew it says that Barabbas' first name was Jesus Barrabas. So the irony is even higher here because what we have is Jesus, son of the father, revolutionary; and then Jesus, the true Son of the father, Jesus of Nazareth. And which one do the crowds pick? They pick the false son of the father, they pick Jesus Barabbas instead of Jesus the Son of God. So when that happens then, what we are seeing is the irony in the choice of Barabbas over Jesus. And that irony continues into the famous self-implication or self -declaration of the crowd, "his blood be upon us and upon our children." That is only located in Matthew's Gospel and it is a very controversial verse, because some people, some Christians, over the centuries have taken this verse and applied it to the Jewish people as a whole to say that the Jewish people put a curse upon themselves and are now to be considered accursed by God. I want to stress that the Church rejects that interpretation definitively in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. So I want to make clear what this passage actually means. So on the historical level what's happening here is the crowds are saying his death is upon us. We are taking responsibility for his death because Pilate has just washed his hands and said "I'm innocent of this man's blood." So they say "well we take responsibility for it." On the historical level that's what "his blood be upon us and upon our children" means.

What the Catechism points out in paragraph 597 is that this does not mean that the Jewish people as a whole are collectively responsible for the death of Christ, because it's only this particular crowd at this particular moment in history that is taking responsibility for the death of Jesus. And so the Catechism says in paragraph 598 that "all sinners are the authors of Christ's passion." In other words, there's a real sense that at a mystical level every single person who has ever been born, every single sinner, is responsible for the death of Jesus, because when we sin we, in a sense, crucify Jesus once again. We participate in the evil that led him to the cross. So I just want to stress that. Christians today need to make very clear that the statement of this particular Jewish crowd at the trial and death of Jesus is not something that makes all Jews of all time in all places collectively responsible for Jesus's death. However, there is an irony here because, as Pope Benedict points out in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, by saying "his blood be upon us and our children," the irony is that at a deeper spiritual level they are in a sense praying for precisely what all of us need, which is for the powerful redeeming blood of Jesus to "be upon us and upon our children," so that it might cleanse us from sin and set us free from sin and death. So there's an irony in their words here, just like an irony in Barabbas. So all these levels of meaning are being fulfilled in this astounding account of the passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. It is a very, very powerful moment; very important moment. As Christians we all want Jesus's blood to be upon us and upon our children, because we are all responsible for the crucifixion and the death of Christ.

So with trial of Jesus and the scourging out of the way, now Matthew moves into the actual crucifixion of Christ and the death of Jesus. And because it is Passion Sunday, I at least would like to read the account of Jesus' death in Matthew. So let's read Matthew 27:32 and following, it says this:

As they went out, they came upon a man of Cyre'ne, Simon by name; this man they compelled to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Gol'gotha (which means the place of a skull), they offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.

Pause there for a moment. Why was it called Golgotha, the place the skull. We don't actually know. We don't know for a fact, but some ancient Church Fathers said that it was because this was a place of execution. So when the Romans would execute people they would do one of two methods. If you were a non-citizen, like Jesus, you would be crucified; but if you were a Roman soldier or a Roman citizen, you would be decapitated. You would be beheaded like St. Paul. So some scholars and ancient Christian's suggest that this place is called Golgotha because they would leave the skulls of the beheaded victims, as well as in some cases even the the bones of some of the executed men who were crucified there. So it was a place of death. It was a place of execution. It was the place of the skull. Others have suggested that it is because there is a particular hill in Jerusalem that looks like a skull if you look at the shape of the skull. And you can go there to this day and you can see it. You have to stretch a little, but you can kind of see it. So that's another suggestion. In any case, it's a place associated with death. Oh, there is a third tradition as well. Some of the Church Father's said that it was the place of the burial of Adam. So that Adam and Eve had actually lived in Jerusalem. That in Jerusalem was where Eden used to be and that Adam was buried under the mountain of Golgotha. So sometimes, on depictions of icons of the crucifix you'll see a grave underneath the cross with a skull or sometimes you'll see Adam and Eve depicted as being beneath the crucifix. That's part of the tradition of connecting Golgotha with the death of Adam. So where the old Adam died and was buried, the new Adam is going to bring life through his death and his resurrection. Any one of those interpretations is out there as an ancient meaning for the place of the skull. In any case, Matthew continues in verse 35:

And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him there. And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni?" that is, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "This man is calling Eli'jah." And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Eli'jah will come to save him." And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

At this moment in the Mass we always kneel and pause to honor the moment when Jesus died. Matthew now continues in verse 51, and this is only found in Matthew's Gospel:

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Let's stop there. What's going on now? We've seen that Jesus has fulfilled the Passover, he's the new Adam, he's the suffering servant, he's a new Joseph, he's the true son of the father. What's going on in this account of Jesus's death? Well I'd like to highlight one key element and that is the so-called cry of dereliction. In Matthew's Gospel here Jesus's final words on the cross are, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" or "why have you forsaken me." Over the years of teaching the passion I've realized that this is a troubling passage for a lot of people because when they hear Jesus cry out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" it can sound as if he is despairing in his final moments, as if he not only feels abandoned by God but thinks that God has turned his back on him, or abandoned him, or forgotten him. In fact some non-Catholic Christians, some Protestant Christians would actually say that that's what happened. They say that at the moment of Jesus's death the father turned his face away from Christ and turned his back on Christ because he could not look upon sin and Christ took the sins of the world upon him at that point. Well I think that's wrong. I don't think that's what is going on here. I don't think that Jesus either despaired or that God turned his back on him, and the reason I think both of those interpretations are wrong is because of the Jewish context of Jesus' words. See when Jesus says, "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" he's not just crying out in the anguish of his crucifixion, although he is crying out in anguish, he's quoting the Old Testament. He's quoting Psalm 22, which is in fact the responsorial psalm for this passion Sunday. And if

you go back to Psalm 22, what you will find out is something really fascinating. What you'll see is, although Psalm 22 begins in desolation and the experience of David feeling abandoned by God, the Psalm ends with the conversion of the nations. It ends with the conversion of the pagans. It ends with the conversion of all the families of the earth. So just for a quick second if you look at the Responsorial Psalm for today, the opening lines are:

Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

So it's true. It begins with David feeling forsaken by God. If you walk through the whole Psalm--and I would really encourage you to read it in its entirety--you'll see that David goes on to say things which can't possibly apply to him. He says things like this:

they have pierced my hands and feet --
I can count all my bones --
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among them,
and for my raiment they cast lots.

Well when did David have his hands and feet pierced? Well he never did! But Christ does. He's fulfilling Psalm 22 by means of the crucifixion by having his hands pierced, by having his feet pierced. In other words, Jesus on the cross is a new David, but he's going far beyond the sufferings that David ever experienced. What David is describing symbolically and metaphorically, Jesus is experiencing

literally by being nailed to the cross and put to death. As you walk through the psalm, what's so fascinating about psalm 22 that Jesus is quoting on the cross is actually says in verse 24:

For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
and he has not hid his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

So by invoking this psalm, Jesus is quoting a Scripture which says that the cry of the one who is apparently forsaken by God is actually heard by God the Father, that the Father doesn't turn his back on the one who is afflicted, and instead hears his prayer and answers the prayer, and so when you get to the end of the Psalm it ends in this way:

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
For dominion belongs to the LORD...

In other words, all the families of the earth will convert when God answers the prayer of the afflicted one. Well go back to the Gospel of Matthew and what do you find? When Jesus cries out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" at the very foot of the cross the pagan Centurion, the Roman soldier, stands there, sees Jesus, hears the cry, and doesn't say "truly this man despaired of God," but "truly this man was the son of God." And right there at the foot of the cross the conversion of the nations begins. The conversion of the Gentiles begins. So Jesus not only quotes the Psalm, he fulfills it in the beginning of the conversion of the nations with the words of the centurion. Very powerful, very significant. And so,

what the Church tells us about this quotation here, about this cry of Jesus is this. The Catechism says:

All the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history, are summed up in this cry of the incarnate Word. Here the Father accepts them, and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son. (CCC 2606)

In other words, what the Catechism is saying is, far from despairing when Jesus cries out "my God, my God, why you forsaken me," what Jesus is actually doing is speaking on behalf of all of humanity. Don't get me wrong, he is crying out in anguish. He feels the pain of the cross, but he's using the inspired words of Scripture to cry out to God on behalf of humanity, who feels abandoned by God in their suffering, who feels abandoned by God in their sin, who feels abandoned by God in the darkness of this valley of tears, such that every prayer that was ever uttered from the beginning of time until the end of time, all the suffering of all of humanity, is caught up into the words of Jesus, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me," which is spoken as a prayer to the Father. And the Father answers that prayer by raising Jesus from dead. So if you've ever felt abandoned by God. If you've ever felt forsaken by God. If you've ever felt like God has forsaken you, always remember that Jesus knows what that's like. He experiences that in his human nature on the cross, but he also cries out to God with Psalm 22, which is the Psalm that tells us God doesn't abandon his righteous ones and that he will answer their prayer and bring about the salvation of the world. That's what happens when the new David speaks the cry of dereliction while hanging on the cross.

One final point then, what about the end of the passion narrative? After describing the crucifixion, Matthew gives one last account here. The passion narrative ends with the burial of Jesus. Let's read that passage together. It says:

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre.

Next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore order the sepulchre to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the sepulchre secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

That is the end of the Passion narrative. Two brief points about the burial of Jesus. Number one, notice here that Jesus is buried on Friday night because the Sabbath is coming and they have to get his body in the tomb before sunset. So Joseph of Arimathea and the women come, they go out to the tomb, and they know where he's buried -- they witnessed the place of his burial. Why is that important? Because it shows that when come back and the tomb is empty, that it is not a case of mistaken tombs. Some skeptics will say that, "oh they just messed up. They forgot which tomb it was." No! They knew exactly where he was buried. That's the first point. The second point is that Matthew tells us that in addition to that verification, that the Roman set a guard over the tomb precisely in order to keep the disciples from stealing the body and then perpetrating the fraud that Jesus was raised from the dead. Now why is this important? Once again it's ironic, because

precisely by trying to make sure the disciples couldn't steal the body, the Romans make sure that everyone now knows that the disciples didn't steal the body, and therefore when the tomb ends up being empty on Sunday morning, it can't be through purely natural causes. Because there is no way a bunch of bumbling fishermen could overtake a Roman guard -- these are trained soldiers, they are trained killers -- and overpower them and get the body out of the tomb, because if you fell asleep on Roman guard duty, the punishment for falling asleep on guard duty was death, it was execution immediately. So in this case, ironically what happens is, the Romans end up verifying for us that the only way the tomb could have been empty on Sunday morning was through supernatural means, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So this final aspect of the burial of Jesus is critical. It's one of the articles of the Apostle's Creed. Jesus didn't just die, he was buried. Because the empty tomb is going to become proof positive that something happened to the corpse of Jesus. That when we say that Jesus was raised from the dead, we don't just mean he's alive now with God or his soul is immortal, but that something happened to his body. And that his soul and his body have now been reunited and that his body is very much not just the new Adam, but the beginning of a new creation, which will take place on Easter Sunday with the resurrection of the dead.