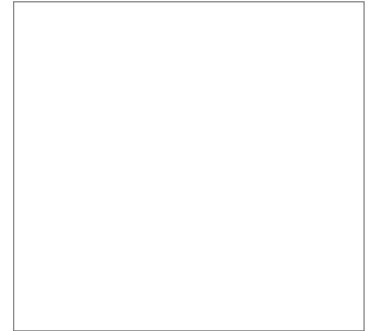


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

Year B

RCL



Philippians 2:5-11

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

The Collect

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 Page 760, BCP

Confitemini Domino

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever.

2 Let Israel now proclaim, “His mercy endures for ever.”

19 Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the LORD.

20 “This is the gate of the LORD; he who is righteous may enter.”

21 I will give thanks to you, for you answered me and have become my salvation.

22 The same stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

23 This is the LORD'S doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

24 On this day the LORD has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

25 Hosannah, LORD, hosanna! LORD, send us now success.

26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the house of the LORD.

27 God is the LORD; he has shined upon us; form a procession with branches up to the horns of the altar.

28 “You are my God, and I will thank you; you are my God, and I will exalt you.”

29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever.

Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, “What are you doing, untying the colt?” They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor
David!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple;
and when he had looked around at everything, as it was
already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

SERMON

I read the Bible. I read books about the Bible. I read books about the books that I read about the Bible and sometimes, I read commentaries on the books that I read about the books I read about the Bible. In my mind's eye, I'm swimming in books about the Bible. I can barely keep my head above pages!

Sometimes, in fact, I can't do it. I sink beneath the weight of all those books and all those words, and sort of drift, like the Sargasso Sea, whither the currents will take me. When I do, the shore I most often bump up against is this: When did Jesus, the champion of the oppressed, the comforter of the afflicted and the afflicter of the comfortable, become the patron saint of the comfortable, the people of ease, the beneficiaries of the status quo?

In the benediction last Sunday, I mentioned that our

faith flourishes best in poor soil. I truly believe that it is so. The same Gospel which speaks hope to the poor speaks sacrifice to the rich. It is a stumbling block for those of us who live in plenty.

Jesus noted that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, but Jesus didn't just have it in for rich people. He had it in for injustice. Jesus knew that those of us who live in comfort will find it much more difficult to respond to the poor because the suffering of the poor – hunger, unavailable medical care, early childhood death – are, for the most part, foreign to us. When we do try to reach out to those who suffer in this way, our baggage holds us back. We're like those passengers filing onto the Titanic, with so much baggage that porters and footmen are required to get us aboard. How can we, who do not suffer want, understand the poor?

When those who live in plenty think of the poor, the mental image that I most often hear expressed is that of the deserving poor – the poor widow, or the orphan children. We like to play God with the poor and decide, for the best of reasons, what a poor person to whom we could reach out would look like, then withhold our compassion until such a one comes by. Jesus came to sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus responded to suffering, even the suffering of those who sold their own bodies. That's a tough sell today. I bet I've met more prostitutes than you have. Surprisingly, they're not all awful people.

Short of giving away all your assets and thus creating two poor men in place of one, how do we relate to those in want in positive ways?

I think the first step in a very complicated journey is to abandon the idea that we are wise enough to discern

the deserving from the undeserving poor. We are called to respond to suffering. We have to adjust our attitude so as to recognize that poverty is not imposed upon some as punishment for a bad attitude any more than wealth is granted to others as a reward for virtue. Some of the wealthiest people today are not nice people at all, and some of the poorest have much to teach us about compassion.

Once we successfully abandon the corrosive attitude that poverty is the fault of the poor, imposed upon them as just punishment for a youth ill spent, how do we understand the presence of need in a land of such plenty?

It is this question that is illuminated for us in the text for today. We tend to forget this part of Jesus' experience. We prefer to view Jesus' actions in terms of our own salvation, and to remove Him from the real world he inhabited. In some sense, this subconsciously gives

us permission to follow Jesus in a spiritual sense without actually having to get our hands dirty with the real world. Jesus had no such easy way out. We need to keep in mind that Jesus wasn't approaching a spiritual death. He was approaching a very much real-world passion.

The world Jesus confronted was one based on injustice. When the oppressed and afflicted of Jesus' time and before cried out to God, they cried out for their children who would die without food, for their parents who would suffer and die without medical treatment, for themselves who lived lives of imposed hopelessness in a land of plenty. With the Psalmist, they cried:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

They cried out for a present help in times of trouble, and to these ones Jesus came. His words to them were words of healing and comfort. His words to the comfort-

able leadership were words of condemnation. Jesus never told us that poverty was the fault of those who suffer, and he never told us that the wealthy and the comfortable were being rewarded for their exemplary virtue.

The careful preparations recounted in our text today cast a revealing light on Jesus' actions and His intentions.

Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

That's an odd thing to do, unless you are familiar with Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

When Jesus sent His disciples with a secret password to fetch the colt, He was making an intentional statement that He was entering Jerusalem as its King, triumphant and victorious. The people around him were well aware of what He was doing, for they proclaimed:

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the
Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor
David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

The people to whom Jesus came were suffering in poverty imposed upon them by unjust systems which kept the poor down, and made the wealthy richer. Rome did not include Judea in its Empire out of love of the Jews. They did so because it was a profitable undertaking, and that profit was coming from those who lived

there. Every denarius that flowed to Rome came from the mouths of the oppressed. Jesus' actions challenged everything about that system.

Historians Walter Scheidel and Steven Friesen¹ studied Roman records and in a recent paper concluded that the glory of Rome, the beautiful ruins and the rest of it, is just the rubble left by the fortunate wealthy, and that it was built on the backs of the working poor, who left little or no archaeological trace. From the viewpoint of history, they might as well not have existed. When Jesus proclaimed Himself King, He was saying, "This which you have made cannot stand, for your comfort is bought at a price weighed in human misery."

The fact we have to face in our time is that our comfort is similarly bought at a price weighed in human misery. The CIA, no less, annually updates just the sort

¹ Scheidel, W., & Friesen, S. (2010). The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire *Journal of Roman Studies*, 99 DOI:[10.3815/007543509789745223](https://doi.org/10.3815/007543509789745223)

of calculation that Schiedel and Friesen made for contemporary societies. In America, the rich are richer and the poor are poorer than was the case in Rome at its height². Based on a widely used measure of income inequality, imperial Rome was slightly more equal than the U.S. is today³. That's truly horrifying.

As we cast our attention about to the discussions on this issue today, what sort of responses do we see? On the one hand, I see things like members of this church volunteering their time to work with the poor. I see a thank you note from River Cities Harvest for the donation of 360 pounds of food in only six months. This week, Kathy and I took another car full of staples donated by this one small church to Eloise Street. I see churchmen and churchwomen volunteering to return grace at the Community Kitchen. I see our people at the

2 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2172.html>

3 <http://persquaremile.com/2011/12/16/income-inequality-in-the-roman-empire/>

hospital. I see wonderful things, awesome acts of charity! I mentioned to you in passing once that CARES needed a baby crib. A baby crib appeared in less than 24 hours. It came from one of you.

But as I expand my attention beyond the saints of this church to our wider society, I see things that are less wonderful. I see evidence that we are stuck, like raisins in a pudding, in a society that looks frighteningly like the one Jesus confronted — one which is structured to keep the poor poor and the rich rich.

The driving engine of American individualism is that anyone who works hard and keeps his nose clean can succeed. The other side of the coin is that if you don't succeed in America, then you didn't work hard or you didn't keep your nose clean. That is true for some people, of course. We'd be foolish to imagine otherwise, but it is not so for others. Many Americans live in im-

posed poverty — poverty imposed upon them by a society whose rules and assumptions operate to keep them there. We call them the working poor. They cry out to us as the oppressed Jews of Jesus' time cried out to Him. Just as the wealthy in Jesus' time could not see the inequalities their lives imposed upon others, we are often blind to the suffering our comfort imposes upon others.

Take Wal-Mart, for instance. Wal-Mart is the most profitable company in America. They provide employment for 2.1 million employees, and they give generously to charitable causes. How do they stay so profitable? Average wage is 6% below the poverty level for a family of four according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and is 2.5% lower than the national average for retail workers. Worse yet, when Wal-Mart comes into a community, each Wal-Mart job replaces 1.4 community jobs. Wal-Mart's health-care package only covers 54%

of it's employees, comes with a maximum \$10,000 out of pocket cost to covered employees as well as a high annual deduction of \$4,400. That equals out to about 25% of the average employee's wage⁴.

Think about that for a minute. If you have a couple of kids, work at Wal-Mart, do a good job and keep your nose clean, your reward is a paycheck that is 6% below the poverty level. You can't feed your family.

I'm not trying to hold up Wal-Mart as the villain in this piece. As I said, Wal-Mart gives generously to charitable causes. The problem isn't Wal-Mart. They are just one corporation operating within the system in which we live. Wal-Mart and the other systems and organizations we create to get our business done are tainted with our sin. Oftentimes, what we are doing is creating an organization which will tell us that our sins, which are

⁴ <http://jeremey.hubpages.com/hub/Most-Profitable-Corporations-in-America-Top-5>

built into it, are alright. As Christians, we are to attend ONLY to the voice of the Holy Spirit. That's very tough to do if the organization which pays you your paycheck is requiring that you attend to it. Believe me! I know from personal experience.

The question I pose to the saints of this church is this: is a system which permits this much inequality reflective of the life and teaching of Jesus? And if it is not, is it any business of yours, here in Bellefonte?

I would urge that it is not just and that it is our business. Bishop Desmond Tutu reminded us, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Where are we, church? Where are we?

Paul wrote to the church he founded in Philippi from prison. He told them:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death —
even death on a cross.

Jesus came to confront human injustice and reveal the love of the Father for all. Many could not or would not believe this. Many believed but were afraid to join with Him. To see spiritually is to be in a living relationship with God and to live in the knowledge and wisdom that comes from that relationship. To see spiritually is to join with Jesus as His servant and to be as intolerant of injustice as He was. In courage draw near to Christ, the light of the world.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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