

Homily for April 9, 2006
Palm Sunday

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah: 50:4-7
Psalm 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24
Philippians 2:6-11
Mark 14:1-15:47

The Passion of Christ belongs to everyone.

Recently I was talking to several men who had fought in World War II. They told stories of the horrors of warfare: bombs dropping all over the place, snipers hidden in every nook and cranny of cities and towns, some of them being taken prisoner, the general hopelessness of devastation, and what seemed to be a never-ending prophecy of doom.

These men said that a number of their colleagues had lost faith in God, while others saw their faith deepened. Their solidarity and camaraderie with each other was what kept them alive emotionally. Their only hope was that things would get better.

Isaiah must have shared some of these kinds of feelings with the Israelites. They have been hearing prophets say that things are going to get better. Keep up your courage. God is coming to the rescue. Be patient. This segment from Isaiah is the Third Servant Song, one of four Suffering Servant Songs which originated at the time of the Babylonian captivity. They stand out especially because they are so personal. Whoever the servant is, he has a mission. Suffering unites this servant with all of Israel. The central mission is to speak a message of hope to the Israelites in the desperate circumstances of their time.

Some commentators surmise that the servant could even have been a woman because of the “noticeably feminine” imagery (see Isaiah 49:15 and 54:1-15). There is, in today’s passage, a lively blend of submission bolstered by strength. Notice the personal motif: “I gave my back to those who struck me,” and “I did not hide my face.” These words suggest that this servant was not afraid of the enemy and looked him squarely in the eye even in the midst of insults (“buffeting and spitting”). Whoever this servant was, he or she was certainly courageous and felt that suffering was not in vain. One can understand why this reading appears as we prepare to read the Passion of Christ – the suffering servant – who was led “like a lamb to the slaughter and uttered not a word.” Even in the midst of this suffering, the servant will speak to and encourage the weary. This has led the church to interpret these words as a reference to Jesus’ mission of healing, being betrayed and handed over to death, and finally vindicated in the resurrection.

For so many people, only confidence of divine support can make suffering endurable. Perhaps that is one reason why so many people can identify with the suffering of Christ, because in some way, it is the world’s suffering, the world’s story. It is our suffering, our story as well. To hear the story is to hope for strength in difficult moments of life, praying for an end to the violence that dogs our nations and our cities,

hoping for tolerance and inclusiveness among both believers and unbelievers, praying for an end to the death penalty, and looking for signs of hope and resurrection in our own lives. We remain confident that goodness will prevail over evil.

Let us pray: You invite us to be a part in the drama of your redeeming love, Father, God of the living. May our weakness be healed by the Cross and Resurrection of your Son as we journey together through this Holy Week. We ask this through that same Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Passion of Christ
belongs to everyone.