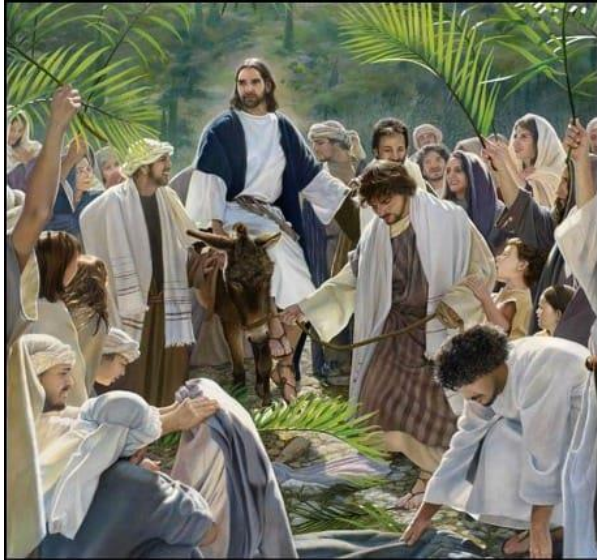


## Homily – March 24, 2024 – Palm Sunday



Not that there isn't enough food for thought in these readings—because there really is—I nonetheless would like to start by first going back to something we heard in last Sunday's second reading. Let me refresh your memory from a week ago. In the Letter to the Hebrews it said, "**Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries to the one who was able to save him from death...**" However, when I

listen to the Passion reading of today or in any of the four gospels, I do hear Jesus' loud cry from the cross, but I do not immediately see where God saved him from death. The way to make sense of this apparent contradiction is to think of it this way: God did save Jesus from death, but God did not save Jesus from dying. Jesus' dying was a long, slow, torturous endeavor. Jesus' dying was both his and God's great act of love for humanity. Jesus was not spared or rescued from dying. Death, on the other hand, is a permanent state of being alienated from God, God who is life and love clear through the middle. Jesus was saved from that. At no point had Jesus ever been abandoned by God although, when darkness covered the earth for last three hours of Jesus' earthly life, it must have felt so. While it may have felt like abandonment, the truth is that nothing came between Jesus and the love of God. Similarly, St. Paul makes the same bold claim about us when he wrote to the Christian community in Rome that nothing can come between *us* and the love of God. God did not rescue Jesus from dying but he did transform his death into life. Similarly, God does not rescue us from dying, but transforms our deaths into life.

In the Passion reading we just heard, there is lots of mocking going on. The religious authorities mock Jesus, Pilate mocks Jesus, the soldiers mock Jesus, and the angry crowd mocks Jesus. They all want Jesus to prove, on their terms and on

their terms alone, that he is the Son of God. The mocking all has to do with rescue. The chief priests and scribes have their tried and true theology to turn to. It works like this. If someone proclaims to be revealing God's purposes and there is a dispute, then the people in authority are obligated to test him by putting him in a perilous situation and wait to see if God rescues him. If God rescues him, he is vindicated. But if he dies, he was a pretender and a false prophet. Jesus will not get into their game, for he has already told us in the temptations he faced in the desert, "Do not put the Lord, your God, to the test." Jesus is living, and invites us to live, by a different set of values. He is living not by human values or by bread alone. He is living, instead, by every word that comes from the mouth of God. And what is the word that comes from the mouth of God? "YOU ARE MY BELOVED."

The so-called "righteous" leaders talk among themselves. They have no problem admitting Jesus cured illness and exorcised demons. "**He saved others,**" and here comes the taunt, "**he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down from the Cross now** (on our terms) **so that we may see and believe.**" What is this taunting basically saying? It's saying that unless you can prove yourself to me on my terms, I have the right to dismiss you as a fake and a phony. Unless you bend to my rules, and meet on the conditions that I set out, I reserve the right to dismiss you as a nobody.

On the first Sunday of Lent, this year, we didn't get the full version from the Gospel of Mark of the classic temptations of Jesus in the desert. In the fuller version, Jesus is tempted, or you might say taunted with, "If you are the Son of God turn these stones into bread and feed yourself, after all, you must be so hungry." The lie is that unless you are full and satisfied 24/7 around this place, you are not the Son of God. Bend to my terms of reference and turn these stones into bread and do it now and prove you are God's son. Jesus will not get into that game. He will not take privilege for himself or as St. Paul told us, "**though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.**" Jesus can put hungering and being God's Son together. This hungering doesn't eradicate the truth that we are God's beloved son or daughter.

The second temptation is that the devil takes Jesus to the top of the Temple and tells him to jump. He says, "If you are the Son of God, surely God won't let you get harmed on the jagged rocks below." Jesus responds with the fact that at many times in his life he will be in danger, but that danger does not erase the fact that he is God's beloved son. Jesus can put being in danger and being beloved together.

The third temptation is a temptation to grab power. Jesus is shown the powers of the world and is told they can all be his if he would just bow down and worship the devil. He is told that if he truly is God's son, then he should never be powerless. Never. However, Jesus lives by a deeper truth; he's grounded in God's truth. The deeper truth reminds Jesus that there will be times in his life where he will experience powerlessness. But just because he is powerless doesn't eradicate for one millisecond that he is God's beloved. He can put being powerless and being God's beloved together.

At the end of the temptations, Jesus tells the devil to "bugger off." ***Having exhausted every way of putting Jesus to the test, the devil left him, until the opportune moment*** (Lk. 4:13). Scholars believe the opportune moment was the crucifixion. The devil doesn't return in physical form at the crucifixion but the temptations, the taunting is taken up again in the taunts of the religious leaders, the soldiers, and the "bad" thief. "If you are the Christ, the Son of God, come down from the cross now. Prove yourself and do it on our terms."

The Passion is not a story about Jesus, our hero, who has superpowers that enabled him to overcome temptations and taunting. Rather, it is a story of how Jesus unites himself to every human being who has ever felt hungry, endangered/vulnerable, and powerless. In the middle of the voices of taunts he encourages us to hear the deeper truth that can never be eradicated that you are God's beloved son, that you are the daughter of Divine love. And don't ever forget it.

I don't presume to know last thing Jesus heard on the Cross before he died. My hunch is that in the midst of the taunting, he heard the words from the Song of Songs (a.k.a. The Song of Solomon). ***“Come then, my beloved, my lovely one, come. For see, winter is past, the rains are over and gone. Flowers are appearing on the earth”*** (2:10-12).

When you are hungry, in danger, or powerless to change a situation for the good, still yourself long enough and hear these words for yourself, “Come then, my beloved, my lovely one, come!”

*~Fr. Phil*