

## St Mary's Concord A Reflection for Passion Sunday

*The readings for Passion Sunday in Year A are Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; and Matthew 26:14 – 27:66. Each year the celebration of Passion Sunday begins with the blessing and procession of palm branches to recall the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1-11). The focus of the liturgy then moves to the Passion. Each Gospel has its own particular emphasis. This year we reflect on Matthew's account. The following reflection highlights some of the distinctive features of Matthew's Passion.*

*To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic all churches were closed from 23 March 2020 and will remain closed until further notice. We cannot gather to celebrate the Eucharist but we can encounter the Risen Lord in the Word of God.*

The story is familiar to us. Through the centuries it has been told in many ways: the Stations of the Cross, Passion Plays, movies and it has been set to music in works such as *Matthew's Passion*, the sacred oratorio written by Johann Sebastian Bach in 1727.

Clearly the memory of what happened to Jesus had a deep impact on his disciples and they kept retelling the story. And as they retold the story, they tried to understand not only what happened but the meaning of the death of Jesus for them.

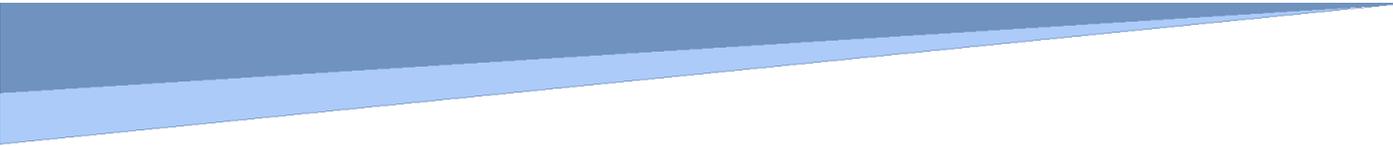
The different evangelists began to focus on different aspects of the story as they searched to understand more deeply who Jesus was for them and their communities.

Matthew took up Mark's account, but he added elements that reflected his focus and the questions that were facing his community. Among Matthew's additions are the following:

- His focus on Judas as the betrayer and on Judas' remorse
- The role of Pilate and his wife's warning that leads Pilate to deny responsibility
- The earthquake and the appearance of dead persons at the death of Jesus
- The story of the placing of guards at the tomb

All those additions contributed to what many later saw to be a central message of Matthew's account - the responsibility for the death of Jesus is placed firmly on the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people. One of the very real consequences of that interpretation was antisemitism, the persecution of the Jewish people throughout the centuries.

We now better understand that Matthew was reflecting on what was happening in his own community. Why do we need to understand that context? Firstly, because it helps us to understand Matthew's insight into the meaning for us of the death of Jesus. It also prevents us falling into the same attitude that led so many in the past to justify their racism and prejudice by claiming that it was based on Matthew's Gospel.



As we read again Matthew's Passion, we need to place it clearly within the wider story of his Gospel. It is difficult to gain a sense of Matthew's focus from the short passages we hear proclaimed on the Ordinary Sundays of Year A. That is why we need to remember that Matthew was writing for his own community. The challenge is that we know very little about that community. Our insights about their concerns come from trying to work back and, as it were, read between the lines.

Why is that important for us? Because Matthew's Gospel can help us to find answers to the questions facing all those who are disciples, "Who is Jesus for us?" and "What does it mean to be a disciple?"

Matthew helps his community to answer those questions by including five long passages in which Jesus teaches his disciples. Before we began this season of Lent, we were reading from the first passage, the Sermon on the Mount. It is not possible to cover every detail, but one example may help us to understand Matthew's approach.

All the Passion narratives include the scene in the garden of Gethsemane, although John's Gospel merely mentions it and does not include the prayer of Jesus. For John that is covered in a much longer prayer at the Last Supper.

In Matthew's account Jesus withdraws from the disciples and the prayer of Jesus echoes the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:9-13). For Matthew the model of prayer that Jesus taught was about coming to understand the Father's will. To make that clear, in the garden of Gethsemane Matthew has Jesus withdraw three times from Peter, James and John.

In those three moments of prayer Jesus moves from "Father...let this cup pass me by" to "My Father... your will be done." Each time he returns to find the disciples are asleep and he tells Peter, "you should be awake and praying not to be put to the test", another echo of the Lord's Prayer, "do not put us to the test".

As we reflect on the prayer of Jesus, we are reminded that we often struggle to understand what is happening in the world around us and what is God's will for us. In the face of the global upheaval caused by the pandemic, our prayer is that we may come to that moment of trust when we too can pray, "Father, your will be done."

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