

Palm Sunday – Sunday of the Passion, April 9

How will we preach this Sunday? Children are dying in our communities, of drug overdoses and suicides. Families are falling apart. We are afraid. The political system seems to be completely broken down. Hundreds of children died this week in Syria. Terrorists are bombing subways and goodness knows what else. How many of our people are not suffering silently with some quiet tragedy which they have not articulated. We are pointing this week to a most peculiar solution?

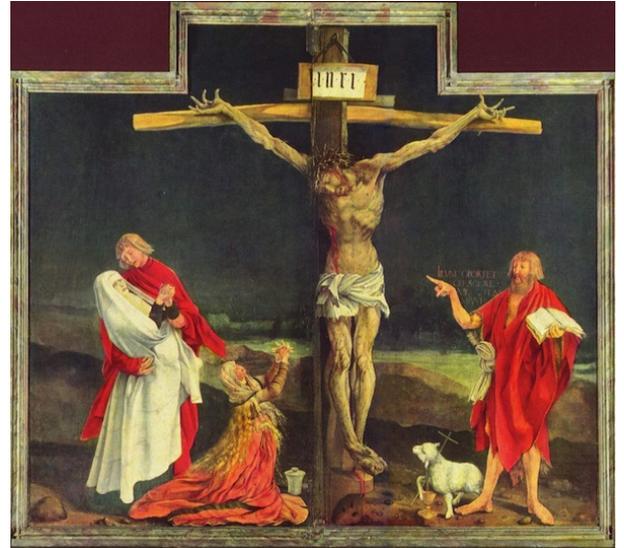
We point to a terrible miscarriage of justice. A corrupt city council, abusive law enforcement. An imperial machine which puts collecting taxes before the life of a man. We hear a crowd shouting, “Kill him!” in a square and a governor backing down and signing the death warrant. Friends betray and community breaks down as Peter denies he even knows Jesus. Finally Jesus died a tortuous death on a cross.

We are going to say that this is the solution. God’s solution. Almost makes prosperity gospel sound appealing, doesn’t it!?

Do we need to shock our people to see this strangely again? We tend to yawn and say, Yadda, yadda, yadda. Is our world, largely because of immediate news coverage, so shocking that we are incapable of being shocked? Films used to be reticent about showing human death, but no more. Has the Passion Week story lost the ability to shock us? Is that bad? Does that say something terrible about what we have become? Are we no longer able to be shocked? God’s Word is still potent, but are we numb to it?

I am not sure that this is accurate, however. In the medieval period the Black Death killed a quarter of the population in Europe. They did not have to look on the news for shocking things, they looked out the window and saw dead bodies piled up. The movies were not gory, life was. And they turned to the passion story and focused on it. Francis introduced the piety of the crucifix with the body of Christ on the cross as the primary object of devotion.

The picture on the right comes from Isenheim, a facility for people with a terrible skin disease at the time of Luther. This picture hung over the altar where they worshiped. The Jesus here is huge, nine feet tall. He has the same sort of skin lesions the patients had. The medieval church said that the solution was not God taking away the Black Death or whatever problem they had, but it was found in God taking that problem to himself. Like Moses in the wilderness raising up a bronze serpent. The people had prayed that God take the snakes away, instead they were called on to look at another serpent, the very problem. And in looking at it they were healed.



Palm Sunday and the Sunday of the Passion can have so many things going on that a sermon can feel superfluous. Indeed, the wise preacher will let the story carry the weight today, constraining his message to a “therefore...” sort of theme. For that, I would really recommend the Philippians text and we will spend a little time with that.

A little liturgical history might be in order here to make sense of all this. It appears that the commemoration of Passover for the first Christian communities was a significant event. We can only imagine that this had a specialized Christian piece for the first Jewish Christians who would have already observed the Passover as Jews. We know that Paul makes mention of Passover and Pentecost in his letter to the Corinthians and does not explain them, which would suggest that this largely gentile congregation was at least familiar with the concept. It is also possible that John’s arrangement of the first and second chapter of his Gospel is intended to reflect an early version of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter morning.

After that, we don’t get a lot of information about the liturgical calendar throughout the first and second century. It rather shows up with Easter as a fixed festival, at least as an important festival in the year. The fixation of the festival into its current form was a matter of significant controversy in the early church. A small but important group wanted to celebrate the feast according to the Jewish calendar which would have meant that it did not always fall on Saturday, but always on the 14th day the Jewish month. This meant the celebration of Easter floated around the week much like Christmas does, on the 25th of December regardless of which day of the week.

The larger group said that it was the Sunday closest to that date which should be celebrated because Jesus rose on a Sunday. There were several things at stake here, and to modern ears this sounds like a nitpicky fight. It really wasn’t and you can read more about it if you like, but suffice it to say that the Sunday crew eventually won out after a protracted struggle. The upshot of it was that the week is what is sanctified. The Sunday as a holy day in the week is firmly established in this little battle. This is why we say that every Sunday is a little Easter.

But the celebration of Easter was not just on one day, it was a three day festival, often referred to as the Triduum (usually but not always pronounced “tri-doo-um”). This was a single service spread over three days. It started on Maundy Thursday with the re-membering of the Last Supper, the observance of Good Friday, and then it concluded with the great Vigil of Easter of which our sunrise services are but a vestige. The great feast of Easter was predicated on the Triduum. It only made sense if one had gone through that ordeal/service.

Fast forward 1500 years today and we find that most of our parishioners are not attending the Holy Week services. This is not just Lutherans but across the board. The advent of 24 hour shopping, schools that don’t take holy week off, etc., means that our folks often cannot be there, and many more simply opt not to be there. Yet Easter remains one of the best attended services of the year.

Starting in the middle of the 20th century, Roman Catholicism began a migration of the Passion observance to the Sunday prior to Easter. This is how Palm Sunday came to have two names, Palm Sunday/Sunday of the Passion. The reason is really Pastoral – there are a bunch of folks in church on Palm Sunday who are not going to be in Good Friday or Maundy Thursday services, and if they are to make sense of the Easter tidings, they have to have the Good Friday piece in place. So, we read the Passion Narrative.

The wise preacher and worship planner has a feel for his people on this. Some communities have very good attendance at Maundy Thursday and Good Friday events. In that case, you can down play the Passion piece. Others of us do not and will want to highlight the passion piece.

Since the John Passion is read on Good Friday, I always tended to read the Synoptic account for the year, in this case, Matthew. I also tried to read the whole thing. That, however, requires something of a distortion of the liturgy and homily if one is to make any accommodation to current sensibilities about service length. Most folks will start checking their watches after sixty minutes or so; although, I have found the west coast's more relaxed attitude means I had a little more leeway in this regard.

Here is the format of this that seemed to work for me. I would start with a Palm Sunday procession, usually having the congregation meet outside. We would sing "All Glory Laud and Honor" as we came in. If it took longer than the song, we just started over on the song. Once we were in, I greeted the congregation with the liturgical verse and the collect.

If you are using LW, the Agenda has a good outline of this. If you are using LSB, The Altar Book does a really good job of outlining this for you on page 502 and I am sure that service builder has this too. This ends the service of Palm Sunday, and then the Service of the Passion of Our Lord begins.

This second service focuses on the reading of the Passion. Again, LSB very nicely breaks this up into 12 sections and also offers suggestions for doing this with multiple readers. You can find this on page 504 of the Altar Book. I have found having multiple readers for this very long reading works very well, so does the technique of breaking the reading up with verses of familiar hymns such as "My Song is Love Unknown" or "Go to Dark Gethsemane" et al. I have not found the dramatic reading in which you break up the parts among various people nearly as effective as simply blocking out the text by paragraph or section among two or three readers.

Collect of the Day (Palm Sunday)

Almighty and everlasting God, You sent Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself our flesh and to suffer death upon the cross. Mercifully grant that we may follow the example of His great humility and patience and be made partakers of His resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer is obviously pulling off the Epistle lesson for the day, this is another reason I usually preach that lesson. For the person who is heading into holy week, this prayer and the readings are sobering. We are called to the same humility and patience which Jesus exhibited as they cruelly mocked, scourged, and finally killed him. Anyone who hears that call seriously cannot but be shaken a little by it. It is an altogether awesome call.

The other end of the story, however, is also in view. We patiently endure because he rose from the dead. Even this Sunday is still a little Easter. The redeemed children of God will not forget that.

Humility is a most interesting word. We often use it to describe the whole descent of Jesus from the throne of heaven through the incarnation and finally to a tomb and hell itself. It is contrasted with exaltation, the resurrection, ascension and return to that position at the right hand of God. We recognize that we get on that roller coaster on the descent. We cannot stand by and choose to jump on at the point of the ascent. Perhaps Jesus does indeed call some to join him only in their last moments of life, but God has called us to shoulder a burden, a cross, and follow Jesus now. To us is given the great joy and honor of participating with Christ in the salvation of the world. Through our suffering, sacrifice, and even death, the Kingdom of God comes to many, the precincts of heaven are filled.

John 12:12-19 (Processional Gospel)

¹²The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" ¹⁴And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵ "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷ The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

We will not likely preach this passage, but we could, especially if we are not really hitting the passion theme of the day. If your folks are coming to the midweek services faithfully, you may want to address this. A sermon on Palm Sunday fruitfully plays on Jesus' masterful fulfillment of prophecy and sense of marketing and message manipulation.

In the first two thirds of the first century, the city of Jerusalem was a boiling caldron of religious fervor, fear, and unrest. That unrest would boil over in the year 68 with a Jewish rebellion which

would result in the destruction of the Temple. It is important to remember that in the first century Jews had a very different reputation than they do today. If you dare to think about a stereotypical Jew today, you often think of a well educated, almost bookish sort, frequently a professional like a doctor, lawyer, or you think of a successful business type, often in very creative fields. There are many Jewish people who are executives in the entertainment industry, for instance. This was not so in the first century. Jews of the first century were known in the Roman Empire for their religious zealotry and their maniacal, never-surrender, prowess on the battle field. This actually made them much in demand as mercenaries. The Romans were actually a little afraid of them.

This altered understanding of the Jewish populace and the complexity of the situation in Jerusalem in the first half of the first century means we have to pay close attention or risk making some serious interpretational errors. Thus, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, it is important to keep a list at hand of who is there and notice how they react to this.

1. *Romans – Pilate hated Jerusalem. He thought it was a smelly, awful place filled with religious nutcases. He spent 51 weeks a year out on the coast, in an administrative palace in Caesarea. But once every year he gathered up every soldier he could get and rode into Jerusalem to sit on the boiling cauldron of passions which came together for Passover week. There are lots of Romans in Jerusalem this week and everyone is a little nervous about that, including the Romans. They have weapons, and they are quick to use them in this situation.*
2. *Sadducees – These are the guys who run Jerusalem the rest of the year when Pilate is enjoying the sun and sea breezes on the coast. They are the wealthy and entrenched politicians of the local community, led by the high priest. They are collaborating with the Romans and have the most to lose if the Romans have to put down an insurrection. They are terrified that a rebellion will erupt and the Romans will strip them of their power, wealth, and, most importantly, their ability to make more wealth. They are portrayed as cynical, only interested in maintaining power, but we really don't know much about their personal piety. This includes the priests.*
3. *Pharisees – This group has been maligned so much one almost has to defend them at this point. They were the religious leaders of their day, the interpreters of the Torah for the community. They were legalistic, but we don't know that they were always so. We think, but don't know, that this group would become the Rabbis of the Jewish movement you see today. They are not yet sure what to do with Jesus. Some are opposed, others are not yet sure. At the time, Jesus was likely seen as a speaker within this movement, a competing interpreter of the Torah. It will be Jesus' claim to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel about a Son of Man who descends on the clouds that tips their opinion against him.*
4. *Temple Workers – The biggest money making machine in all Jerusalem is the temple itself. Paul Maier estimates that 20% of the year round population of Jerusalem (about*

50,000 people – so roughly 10,000 of them) made their living from the temple. Some were simply the janitors and the water bearers and the guards who were necessary. But many of the wealthiest were extremely corrupt. Because Roman coins had an image of the emperor on them and this offended their proscription against idolatry, the Jews had a special dispensation to create an economic zone around the temple with its own currency. The money changers had extremely favorable exchange rates. Those who sold animals to sacrifice, guaranteed to be blemish free as the law required, often sold them at exorbitant inflationary rates, and only if you used the temple shekel, which you had exchanged at the money changer's booth. It was a lucrative racket which often took advantage of vulnerable people. Did Mary and Joseph pay too much the turtle doves they brought when Jesus was presented in the temple and Simeon sang? Quite likely. When Jesus clears the temple of these people, the pilgrims who had long resented this system all cheered. But it will likely be these temple workers who will fill the square outside of Pilate's palace early on Friday morning. They are mad enough to kill him because he has threatened their jobs.

5. Pilgrims – The city of Jerusalem would swell to four or five times its normal population for Passover. These folks were largely people from Judea but also a large number of Galileans who had witnessed Jesus ministry. These folks who had witnessed Jesus ministry in Galilee were likely the ones waving palm fronds on Palm Sunday and acclaiming him the blessed son of David.

Jesus was aware of all this and he deftly manipulates these various factions when he arrives in Jerusalem. The Gospels are all clear on this. He does not naively ride into Jerusalem and get caught up in some larger machinery as a victim. He is pushing buttons and manipulating this situation so these people will kill him on Friday; that is what he came to do.

When he rides into Jerusalem he is fulfilling a prophecy, but a rather obscure one which would have generally only been known to the pious Jew from Zechariah 9. The Pilgrims who see him on a donkey all are excited. They want this new king to seize power. The Pharisees are troubled by it, but they seem to retain some doubts. The Sadducees are beside themselves with fear. They are terrified of what this means. The Romans simply see another Jewish guy riding on a donkey, not a terribly formidable sight by any estimation. The temple workers will discover just what sort of a king this is when Jesus makes a whip and drives them out of the temple to the cheers and jeers of the pilgrims they have been defrauding every year since anyone can remember.

The preacher who chooses to preach Palm Sunday will likely want to proclaim the Jesus who sets the stage for his own sacrificial death, the Jesus who has all this in mind, and sets in motion the series of events which will result in his death for the sins of the whole world. It is a sermon which defines Christ, especially when we couple that with his great love which drives these events. This sermon is really preparing for Easter the following Sunday by remembering what it is that Jesus has done.

A couple of sermon ideas for this text. If you want to preach the processional Gospel and the Palm Sunday festival.

- 1. Hosanna! - If we follow the liturgy, we sing the words of those people every time we approach the altar for the sacrament. The Sanctus (Holy, holy, holy) starts with Isaiah's vision and the seraphim's song but quickly transitions into the song of the people who welcomed Jesus. This sermon would put the hearer into that crowd of folks who sang Jesus into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. We welcome Jesus every time we come to this place. He "arrives" to save us too. They did not understand who it was they welcomed, but their acclamation was accurate nonetheless. He was the son of David, he was the promised deliverer. They mistook the problem from which he came to deliver them, but God still heard and received their praise. Does that describe us too? We sing these words, perhaps never thinking about them, but they are critically important. Like the confirmation vows we probably took when we were 14 and had little idea what we were promising, these sorts of things have a way of coming true. We welcome the promised Son of David in this sacrament. We sing his praise, as is right and good, but we cannot think that we control this salvation or that he has come to be our pet savior. His grace, mercy, Word, and kingdom are far beyond our control and that is good.*
- 2. We are the Donkeys of the Lord! The Lord rides a humble beast into Jerusalem. Likewise he arrives today, borne upon the humble lives, bodies, words, deeds, and relationships of his people. This sermon might be a vocational and incarnational sermon. Jesus has not changed his methods, he might use a slightly different humble beast, but he still comes to this benighted world borne on humble servants.*

Zechariah 9:9-12 (1 yr. Series)

⁹Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your king is coming to you;

righteous and having salvation is he,

humble and mounted on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war horse from Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall speak peace to the nations;

his rule shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

¹² Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
today I declare that I will restore to you double.

¹³ *For I have bent Judah as my bow;
I have made Ephraim its arrow.*

*I will stir up your sons, O Zion,
against your sons, O Greece,
and wield you like a warrior's sword.*

I have included the thirteenth verse because I think the preacher misses this at his peril. Judah is the bow, Israel (Ephraim) is the arrow aimed right at the heart of Greece. We have often so spiritualized these texts we forget that they are embedding stark political and other realities not that different from our own.

Of course, this is the passage the Gospel writers have in mind when they make sure to tell us that Jesus rides in on a donkey. Zechariah was speaking of a hope for his people and it remains a hope for us as well. We have seen the Messiah ride in that donkey but we still wait for the battle bow to be cut off and his rule to spread from sea to sea. Or have we seen it? Is not the gracious rule of Christ proclaimed in every nation this morning? Do not God's children gather to hear his pronouncement of forgiveness, the authoritative act of the kingdom of God?

Does not the forgiveness we preach stop the conflict? Is the kingdom of God actually spreading one conversion at a time, not in some political act but in the loving transformation of sinners into saints? His rule is from sea to sea – no nation in the world does not have a Christian numbered among its people. Every people counts among its citizens a man or woman or thousands or millions who have been released from the waterless pit of sin and death.

We are prisoners of hope. There is a great sermon in that little phrase. We are imprisoned yes, just as Paul was when he wrote the letter to the Philippians, but we have not lost hope. But we are also, in another sense, captive or imprisoned by our hope. These are sweet chains. For we look to God to restore to us double for what was lost. Eden twice over again! Can we ever return to the shallow and meaningless hope which the world offers us? Eat right, exercise and you can live ten years longer. Save enough and you can have a comfortable retirement. Do well in school so you can attend the right sort of college. Is that really all there is to life? Is that all I have to look forward to? Jesus offers us so much more.

Psalm 118:19-29

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.

- ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
- ²³ This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵ Save us, we pray, O LORD!
O LORD, we pray, give us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has made his light to shine upon us.
Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,
up to the horns of the altar!
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.
- ²⁹ Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever!

OR

Psalm 31:9-16

- ⁹ Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.
- ¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my iniquity,
and my bones waste away.
- ¹¹ Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,
especially to my neighbors,
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
- ¹² I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
- ¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—

as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴ But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."

¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!

¹⁶ Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!

Philippians 2:5-11

¹So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If we preach this text on the feast of Palm Sunday, how exactly does it connect to that event? Paul's exhortation to humility might be the very best way to do this. Jesus is descending to Jerusalem, he is the only human being in the world who would talk that way, Jerusalem sits on a mountain and those who enter it always speak of ascending. But Jesus, who is not only man but also God, is actually descending from Heaven's throne.

The text lays upon the Christian an exhortation to an amazing humility, but does so in a very Gospel way. Our mind is transformed by the great Gospel deed so that it too is filled with that same humility and patience which Christ exhibited. The verses immediately before this are important. Paul wrote this letter to a congregation of people living in an imperial city, Philippi. The Roman Empire was built on the concept of competition and boasting. It was not considered a vice to tell everyone what you had done; it was considered a normal thing for a Julius Caesar to write a book which recounted his exploits as a general in Gaul. For him not to do so would almost have been considered unpatriotic, and certainly shirking from his responsibility. Boasting about things which were not true was roundly condemned, but to boast about what you have done, that was considered appropriate and even laudatory. There was no sense of being quiet about yourself and letting others sing your praises.

Paul posits a radically different world in which our boasting is not in our selves but it is in Christ. We do not trumpet our own accomplishments, but we trumpet what he has done in and through us, especially through his death on a cross. For the Roman this was most odd. Death by crucifixion was the most humiliating way to die, reserved for the slaves and non-citizens. This is counter-cultural for the first century. The idea that one goes up by going down in society was utterly odd to a Roman. Paul says it is the only way to heaven, it was modeled by Jesus and it is our way as well.

Considering that we have so much of a Gospel reading, this is often the text that I have preached. Sometimes I have even profitably even had a brief reflection on the preposition “for.” I mention all the things we talk about today, the triumphal entry, the betrayal, the last supper, the garden, the humiliation, the passion, the death, the burial, and after each one I repeat the phrase “for you.” It can communicate very quickly, in less than five minutes, what you really want to say.

This text is very interesting for a number of reasons, not all of which should make it into a sermon. These words were the occasion of a significant dispute in the early days of the LCMS, often called the Kenosis controversy after the word in the text which was the center of the dispute. Just what does Paul mean when he says that Jesus “emptied” (kenosis) himself? How empty was he of God’s power. An early LCMS theologian went a little far on that and caused something of a ruckus. While I am not one to long for a fight, I wish sometimes that we could have a good fight about what we say about Jesus instead of the crap we usually find to squabble about.

This appears to be another use by Paul of a first century song. What makes this so interesting is that the focus of the song is Jesus. We know that the first century Christians sang songs about Jesus, not just the Psalter. They were making up songs about Jesus. These songs universally include a strong and high Christology. Jesus is called Lord and God regularly.

Another interesting facet of this song is that it roughly tracks the same path as the second article of the Apostles’ Creed. They both start out with Jesus as God, then he descends through incarnation to death and burial, and then re-ascends to heavenly glory. Some have suggested that this song is in fact a proto-creed, perhaps even the proto-creed which would form the basis of the Apostles Creed whose roots we otherwise are unable to track.

The preacher who uses this text for a full sermon on this day may want to really develop the military metaphor which Paul uses at the end of chapter 1. Philippi as a retirement colony of Roman soldiers would have been familiar with this. When they had advanced in a line as a legion, they had been forced to depend on the guy holding the shield next to them, and they knew that the other guy was counting on them. They had to stand there and fight their opponent, their buddy next to them counted on them. Our own military knows this and develops strong unit cohesion. This is what Paul means when he exhorts us to put the needs of the other before our own.

This is modeled by Christ, indeed, it is more than modeled, it is empowered by Christ. He has done this. Jesus comes in humility, not putting his needs first, but our needs. Jesus rides into Jerusalem today, immediately pushing the buttons of the folks in that city so that on Friday they will kill him.

Paul, as we make ready to walk that difficult road to Calvary, exhorts us to have the same mind as Jesus, the same heart. He walks this road because he is humble. He walks this road because he loves us. Now, by virtue of the fact that we have been joined to him in his death and resurrection, (Baptism!), we also have his heart and mind as well. We can love with his love, we can serve with his servant heart. We can put the needs of the other before our own.

Matthew 26:1-27:66 or Matthew 27:11-66)

The Matthew account of Jesus passion is different than the accounts in Luke and Mark for a number of reasons. You might want to look for some of these:

Watch for the Jewish character of this. Matthew will portray Jesus as a better Jew than the Pharisees and the Saducees. He also will portray the trial of Jesus as a gross travesty of Jewish law. Matthew is also concerned to demonstrate to his audience that Jesus' sacrifice is the fulfillment of the OT sacrificial prophecy of which every lamb ever brought to the temple was a part. He will record the splitting of the temple to convey that. He also will want his first century Jewish Christian hearers to know that Jesus is superior to the Jewish hope.

Wonderful tidbit. On the 10th of Nisan according to Jewish tradition the father of a house was to choose out a lamb and examine it for 4 days to make sure that it was indeed a lamb without fault. After four days he was to declare that this was the right one. The tenth of Nisan would be Palm Sunday. Pilate says after the 4th day, "I find no fault with him."

From the DVD/book bible study Feasts of the Bible by Dr. Sam Nadler

¹When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, ²"You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified."

³Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, ⁴and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.⁵But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

⁶Now when Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, ⁷a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table. ⁸And when the disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? ⁹For this could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor." ¹⁰But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. ¹¹For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. ¹²In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. ¹³Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her."

¹⁴ Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver.¹⁶And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him.

¹⁷ 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?" ¹⁸He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" ¹⁹And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

²⁰ When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. ²¹And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²²And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" ²³He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. ²⁴The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." ²⁵Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' ³²But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." ³³ Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." ³⁴ Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." ³⁵ Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." ³⁷And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."³⁹And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴²Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ⁴³And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. ⁴⁵Then he

came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

⁴⁷ 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. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." ⁴⁹ And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. ⁵¹ And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" ⁵⁵ 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. ⁵⁶ But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.

⁵⁷ Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸ And Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. ⁵⁹ Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, ⁶⁰ but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward ⁶¹ and said, "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'" ⁶² And the high priest stood up and said, "Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, ⁶⁸ saying, "Prophesy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." ⁷¹ And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster

crowded. ⁷⁵And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

¹ When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ²And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.

³Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, ⁴saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." ⁵And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. ⁶But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since it is blood money." ⁷So they took counsel and bought with them the potter's field as a burial place for strangers. ⁸Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. ⁹ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by some of the sons of Israel, ¹⁰and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You have said so." ¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. ¹³Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" ¹⁴But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

¹⁵ Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. ¹⁶And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. ¹⁷So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" ¹⁸For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. ¹⁹Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." ²⁰Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. ²¹The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." ²²Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

²⁴So 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." ²⁵And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" ²⁶Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified.

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. ²⁸And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right

hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ³⁰And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him and led him away to crucify him.

³²As they went out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. They compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots. ³⁶Then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." ³⁸Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. ³⁹And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads ⁴⁰and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." ⁴¹So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ⁴²"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. ⁴³He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" ⁴⁴And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way.

⁴⁵Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.

⁵¹And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴When 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!"

⁵⁵There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

⁵⁷When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud ⁶⁰and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of

the tomb and went away. ⁶¹Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶²The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate⁶³and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'⁶⁴Therefore order the tomb 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." ⁶⁵Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." ⁶⁶So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Sermon Ideas

1. Sermon idea: Humility. (That the Holy Spirit would define the hearer as a Jesus person, who looks a little and more like him in love and service.)

Jesus surprises the world by not seeking his own good but the good of the very world which has turned against him and would kill him. Strangely their rejection of him becomes the very mechanism of salvation. But this upside-down state of affairs is hardly the end of this. He turns our world upside down as well. He does not enjoin us to lives of glory and fame but lives of service and humility which are patterned after him. Jesus gives all to his broken world and in so doing takes up that place at the center of our loves (that is not a typo – I mean “loves” not just “lives). Being the center of our loves in turn reorients our lives around him and reorients our lives into lives of similar service.

This homily, and if you are reading the whole Passion narrative, it will need to be brief, suggests that this week, this Jesus whom we adore, has become the pattern of our lives. Not that we do so out of some obligation, but because he has become our very life. His nature, loving, servant, self-sacrificing, has become our nature. So we love, we serve, we give of ourselves.

2. The same mind and heart as Christ (Palm Sunday: Epistle reading - That the Holy Spirit would engender in the hearer the same humility and love which drove Jesus to his death upon a cross for the sake of the whole world.)

This sermon would take us out of our minds. That phrase is frightening. We might think it means that we have lost our mind, but this is a different “being out of our minds.” We are putting on the mind of Christ, or better said, he is putting on ourselves, taken us to himself in baptism, giving us his name, taking up residence in our lives so that our mind is being renewed in Christ (Romans 12) and we take on the mind of Christ.

No, we don't want our people to seek a death by crucifixion, but we want them to have the same heart and mind which Jesus had, which Paul exhorts us toward. We want them to put the other first, to consider the other before themselves. That same heart and mind

will manifest in a variety of ways in the lives of people. The preacher of this sermon will keep in mind the vocation of our various folks.

We might develop the military metaphor that Paul used at the end of Chapter 1 to help us, the soldier who depends on the courage of his comrade and in turn knows that his neighbor depends upon his own courage before the foe. That love for one another in the trenches of warfare is what motivates the folks who earn the Medals of Honor and the Silver Stars, etc. Again and again I have read their stories and they have often said that they know their friends would have done it for them, they were just doing what they knew another would have done for them. This sort of service is not abasement and weakness as some would see it, but it in makes us stronger. The Roman legions were able to subdue the barbarians and conquer the entire Mediterranean basin this way.

If you observe a liturgy, you might sing the Sanctus at the Lord's Supper. You might want to play with that. Hosanna means "save us now." We remember their words, which they may not have understood, but which were really accurate. Jesus is coming to save them and all humanity.

Palm Sunday remembers a day when Jesus came long ago to save the world, we sing that song again remembering that Jesus comes here this day, in this meal, to save us. When Paul exhorts us to have Jesus within us, that is not so far-fetched as you might think. It might happen every time you put your hand out at this rail. Jesus, his heart, his mind, his body, his blood, come to take up residence inside of you.

The preacher might also want to dwell on our baptism, in which we were slain with Jesus, and with him raised to a new life, a life which is defined by him, by his death, by his sacrifice. *That life has a mind, a mind of Christ.* Those words spoken from the cross – forgiveness for the malefactor, the injunction to care for the bereaved mother, the forgiveness even for the one who pounded the nails, those words become words to us and for us in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptized into his death, raised with him to new life, this becomes something of our experience too. *We are now people who sacrifice, serve, love, and give of ourselves. It is not something we do to earn, but something we are.*

What I think the preacher will want to avoid is the notion that this is somehow something that we need to do. Jesus does this. Jesus and his Spirit work this change in our lives. The preacher is describing what Jesus has done, not prescribing to our people what they are supposed to do. Our human activity may feel like we are doing something, but theologically we confess that we are witnessing Jesus at work in our lives. Jesus is most clearly revealed for who he is in the passion, death, and resurrection. That passion, death, and resurrection does show up in our lives too.

That is the exegesis of the Father of which John speaks in John 1:18. Another way to talk about this humility and love is to use the language of the theology of the cross which was found in our texts a few weeks ago.

3. The same heart and mind of Christ (That the Holy Spirit would destroy our human defined ideas and expectations of God's salvation and in their place establish and comfort us with God's much better ideas, promises, and deeds.)

This sermon would use the reading of the passion from the processional Gospel through the crucifixion, as the text is being read, to deconstruct the misbelief that the people of that time and this time have of God's salvation. This is a sermon in many pieces, small bits which are scattered through the reading of the passion narrative. This could be done with psalms and hymn texts, collects and observations which the congregation would read. The crowds were looking for a revolutionary who would expel the Romans and re-establish Jewish rule. Over the next several days those expectations would be smashed. Our ideas, the tame God whom we want to do things our ways, also need to be smashed. We need that Jesus to tap us on the shoulder and show us that the god who lives at the end of our little leash is not really God.

This would be a three – five minute sermon if you just did it, but we will intersperse this with the reading of the passion. The idea here is not to interpret the passion but to give mechanisms for the passion to have its way with us. God does not come to do what we expect or even want. He comes to take the human condition to himself, to win by losing, to be the unexpected and much better savior that we really need.

4. Obedient unto Death (Epistle lesson – that the Spirit of God would guide the hearer of this Gospel lesson to a faithful hearing of Christ's great gift to us.)

If your congregation is able to tolerate a change like this, consider preaching this homily prior to the reading of the Gospel text. Use these words of Paul to frame or introduce the massive and massively important account of Jesus' passion and death. Prepare them to hear those words by focusing their attention on Jesus words and deeds as an act of obedience to the Father. You want to get them in the mind for hearing those words.

This really will be a homily of sorts. If you have read the whole Gospel lesson, you won't have time for more than that. Five minutes tops. Jesus has been obedient in our place. If you have not read it recently consider picking up FC Epitome Article 3 and the affirmative theses 1-3 or so. There is speaks of our righteousness being in fact the righteousness of Christ. He gives that right-ness to us. He has born the burden we failed to bear. He has led the perfect life and as the perfect lamb died the perfect death.

In so doing he accomplished what God wanted all along, not your obedience really, but you. All along he has really been after you, despite your sin, despite your brokenness. Yes, when he has you, your obedience is what follows upon that and shows up, but that is not really what he was after. He was after you. The obedient action of Jesus, the

completion of this work, is now given to us, so that God accepts and delights in us as his children.

The preacher will likely want to point out the comparison with Adam and Eve. They rebelled, sinned, failed to obey. That reality has afflicted the world and all of humanity ever since. This account of Jesus' passion and death is the account of true obedience to the Father's will, the obedience we could not give, but which he rendered perfectly for us.

Do you see how far he was willing to go to get you? He was willing to empty himself, become a corpse, to hang pierced on a tree, to lie cold in a grave, to be humiliated, mocked scourge. A myriad of angels owed him praise and gave it freely. The homage of the universe was due to him. But he gave that up, ran the human race to save it. Died the human death to break it. Came under the Law and its evil handmaiden death in order to lead you and me out from under its vile reign.

Do you see that? He wanted you. He wanted you to be joyful – that is what Paul's whole letter to the Philippians sought. But that joy was founded not on some act of our will or even an obedience and service which we render out of some sense of duty, but which flows from us because we are his people. The proclamation of Jesus' work on the cross is really the proclamation of the foundation of the Christian life. We are not exhorting people to become something, but to be what Christ has established, to be what he is and he has united himself to them. I have to help the suffering person next to me not because someone is standing over me with a reward or a threat, but because the Jesus whom I see here lives in me. I "have to" help. It is an inner, Christ-driven compulsion to this new obedience.

5. Judas and Peter (That the Holy Spirit would call us to true penitence and firm faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ.)

This sermon will trace the passion narrative through the eyes of two of Jesus' disciples. Both of them really get Jesus right in some respects. They are looking for Jesus to be the political savior of the land. They see that Jesus has great power and could as Jesus says, "call down 12 legions of angels."

We will work on a particular reading of Judas here. Judas' reaction to the death of Jesus suggests that this was not what he wanted. We will imagine that Judas betrayed Jesus because he was attempting to force a confrontation between Jesus and the political powers. He wanted Jesus to come to conflict with them. He imagined that Jesus would pull out the power and finally defeat the oppressors of Judah. To his dismay and shock, Jesus does no such thing. He submits, is scourged, tried, crucified, and dies. Judas is appalled at what he has done and despairs. He suicides.

We will take the more familiar approach to Peter as well. He also misbelieves Jesus. He thinks much the same about Christ and when to his shock and dismay the sword he has wielded in the garden is sheathed and his master is led away, he follows. He sits in the courtyard, wondering when Jesus will call down those thunderbolts from heaven. But Jesus doesn't. Peter denies he even knows Jesus because he loses trust, he is afraid.

What we want to say is that Jesus had nitwit disciples who got this all wrong. But he did not reject them. The people who sang Hosanna did not get Jesus right. But he received their praise. The disciples who betrayed and denied him were still disciples and would eat the Passover with him. Judas despaired but Peter repented – but they were essentially in the same place. Jesus restored his friend Peter, there is no sin which he cannot forgive.

As we come to this Holy Week and the observance of the Passion, we have undoubtedly gotten Christ wrong. We have tried to make him into our pet savior. He will surprise us in what he really does. He won't do what we expect and sometimes we will fail him, indeed often we will weep Peter's bitter tears. But he forgives his foolish and misbelieving disciples. It is what he does and what he always does.