

PALM SUNDAY – April 10, 2022

Every year during this Holy Week we read two accounts of Jesus' Passion, his suffering and death. On Palm Sunday, we read from the gospel of St. Matthew, Mark, or Luke (this year it is St. Luke's turn); on Good Friday we always read the account from St. John's gospel. And it never fails: it always seems so utterly useless for me to say anything after hearing about the suffering and death of the God-Man Jesus Christ. What more could I or anyone else possibly say to add to this most central event in all of human history??

But during the various liturgies of this Holy Week, which I strongly encourage you attend (check the bulletin for dates, times and places), it would be worthwhile for us to focus for just a few moments on one of Jesus' own words that the gospels preserve for us. This will allow us to enter at least a bit more seriously into the most amazing mystery and gift that Jesus' words present us ...and thus the most amazing mystery and gift that Jesus himself is for us.

St. Luke's account of the Passion gives us many of Jesus' words from the Last Supper through his agony in the garden and the rest of his suffering until his last breath on the cross. Today's word comes soon after Jesus is nailed to the cross when he prayed: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Luke is the only gospel writer to preserve these words, and what utterly astonishing words they are! Remember what Jesus had already endured: after his fearful agony in the garden, he was arrested—mocked, ridiculed, beaten, crowned with piercing thorns, made to carry a very heavy piece of wood to which his body would literally be nailed...the list of the horrors of crucifixion goes on and on and on. In fact, the Romans came up with this method of execution precisely to be as horrifying and hideously painful as was humanly possible. If any of you ever saw the movie "The Passion of the Christ", you saw those details displayed in all their ghastly detail. When I watch it I have to turn my eyes away at the scourging of Jesus at the pillar and when he nailed to the cross—it's simply too much to take.

But then, Jesus speaks those words from the cross: "Father, forgive them". How is that even possible?? How could Jesus possibly pray for the forgiveness of those who did these satanically evil things to him? It seems so impossible, so insane to us. But that is precisely why Jesus—God the Son—became one of us in Mary's womb: to be the means by which we are reconciled to God. He is the very mercy and forgiveness of God by means of which we can hope for the eternal life and joy of his kingdom, that great gift from which our sins and selfishness would otherwise have rightly kept us.

Think of how easily and stubbornly we hold grudges against those who have hurt us or offended us; think how petty we can be in holding on some hurt, however big or small, and doing so for years or even decades after the fact. Then think of Jesus praying: "Father, forgive them" who had committed this most evil of all possible sins against him. As we do so, let's also remember our own refusal to forgive...how do we not hang our heads in shame?