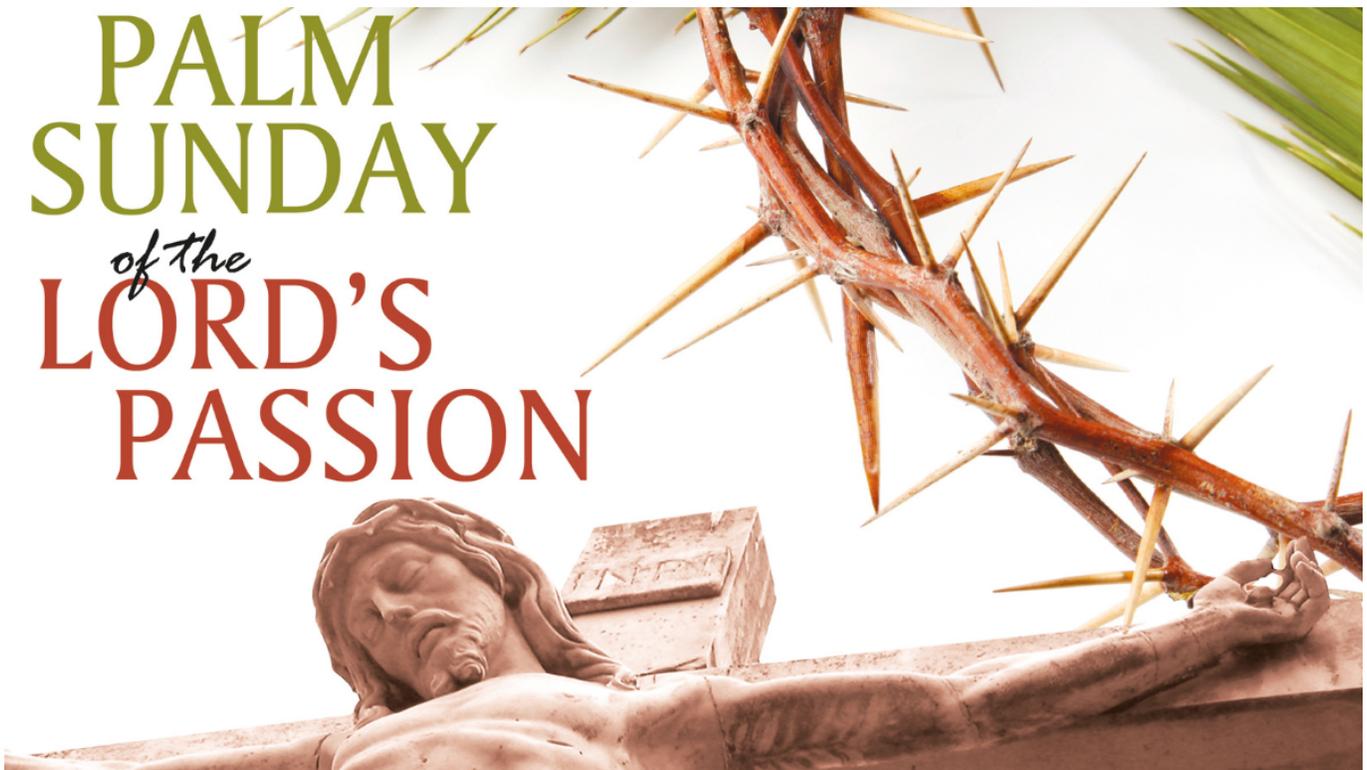


PALM SUNDAY *of the* LORD'S PASSION



Introduction and Context

On the sixth Sunday during Lent we have a unique liturgical feature: two gospels. At the start of the Mass, there is a gospel proclaimed that recalls Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the event we remember as "Palm Sunday." What follows the reading of that gospel is a procession which serves as the entry of the priest celebrant into the sanctuary. The celebration of the Mass continues. Then, as part of the Liturgy of the Word, there is a second gospel proclaimed: the Passion narrative. It is the proclamation of the two gospels that gives the Sunday its formal name. While we often refer to it as Palm Sunday, the correct title of the celebration is "Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion."

In year A of the Lectionary cycle, the Palm Sunday reading is taken from [Matthew 21:1-11](#). The Passion reading is taken from [Matthew 26:14—27:66](#) (there is a shorter form available: Mt 27:11-54). There are many events that are recorded between the entrance into Jerusalem (Mt 21) and the events described in the Passion (Mt 26-27). Many of the passages will be quite familiar:

- Cleansing of the Temple
- Cursing of the Fig Tree
- Dialogues and controversies with the Pharisee and Scribes
- Parables: Two Sons, the Tenants, and the Wedding Feast of the King's Son
- The question of paying taxes
- Questions about Resurrection
- Which is the greatest commandment?
- Denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees
- Destruction of the Temple foretold and Signs of the Calamity
- The Great Tribulation
- Lessons of the Fig Tree
- The Faithful or Unfaithful Steward

Parables: the 10 Virgins and the Talents
The Great Judgment (Mt 25)
The Conspiracy against Jesus
The Anointing at Bethany

This brings us to the events described in the Passion Narrative

The Betrayal by Judas
Preparations for the Passover
The Events of the Last Supper
...and then the events of the Passion.

The Gospel narratives of events from Palm Sunday to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry take up Matthew 21–28, (with parallels in Mark 11–16; Luke 19–24, and John 12–21); the last week of Jesus' life occupies roughly one third of the total Gospel materials. It has been said that the Gospels are passion narratives with extended introductions, and this is only a slight exaggeration.

The entire time of Jesus' public ministry has seen various forces begin to array and conspire against him, yet he did not resist doing the will of the Father despite the suffering that would be involved. Ironically, the very religious leaders who opposed and sought to destroy Jesus were the unwitting instruments God used to fulfill his plan to exalt Jesus.

Matthew's narrative of Jesus' suffering is prefaced with the stories of the Temple conflicts with the religious leaders (chs 21–23) and the Olivet discourse (chs 24–25). In both of these sections, Matthew's material is more extensive than either Mark's or Luke's. When it comes to the passion narrative proper (chs 26–28), Matthew and Mark are parallel for the most part, with Luke and John, especially, contributing unique material. The general flow of Matthew's material is as follows:

Preparation of the disciples (26:1–46)
Arrest at Gethsemane (26:47–56)
Trial before Caiaphas (26:57–68)
Peter's three denials (26:69–75)
Trial before Pilate (27:1–2; 11–26) *with interwoven account of Judas' suicide (27:3–10)*
Jesus mocked and crucified (27:27–56)
Jesus buried by Joseph of Arimathea (27:57–61)
Jesus' resurrection and its denial (27:62–28:15)

Turner and Bock (p.234) note several events and elements in Matthew's passion narrative (some form entire portions) that are unique to his Gospel and that presumably indicate his special literary and theological emphases:

1. Jesus reminds the disciples of his impending death (26:1–2)
2. The amount of money paid Judas is specified as thirty pieces of silver (26:15; cf. Exod 21:32; Zech 11:12)
3. Judas asks Jesus if he is the betrayer (26:25)
4. Jesus' blood is presented as being poured out for the forgiveness of sins (26:28)
5. The second prayer in Gethsemane is presented as a direct quotation (26:42)
6. Jesus' words to Judas after the kiss (26:50)
7. Jesus' comments after the high priest's servant's ear is cut off about violence, the availability of angelic help, and scriptural fulfillment (26:52–54)
8. The high priest's demand before God that Jesus speak (26:63)
9. Sarcastic reference to Jesus as Messiah (26:68)
10. Jesus is described as a Galilean (26:69)

11. Peter's second denial includes an oath (26:72)
12. The purpose of the morning consultation is already decided: execute Jesus (27:1)
13. Pilate describes Jesus as the one who is called the Messiah (27:17, 22)
14. Pilate's wife recounts a dream and calls Jesus innocent (27:19)
15. Pilate washes his hands and the crowd took responsibility for Jesus' death (27:24–25)
16. The sign at the cross specifies the name of Jesus (27:37)
17. Emphasis on Jesus as the Son of God (27:40, 43)
18. Allusion to Psalm 22:8 (27:43)
19. Account of the earthquake and opening of the tombs (27:51–53)
20. Joseph of Arimathea is called a disciple (27:57)
21. The Jewish religious leaders get Pilate to guard Jesus' tomb (27:62–66)

There is a lot going on. And as you have read the preceding lists you will have, no doubt, wondered “where are the two thieves” or other familiar vignettes? They are parts of the Passion account that are unique to Mark, Luke or John. As Christians familiar with all four accounts, we do have a tendency to compile them into one narrative.

With all that in mind, let us move to looking at the details of the text itself

Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus

¹⁴ Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and said, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver; ¹⁶ and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over. (26:14-16)

There is only one previous reference to Judas (10:4) – even there we were informed that Judas betrayed Jesus. In these few verses we discover the nature of that betrayal: (a) it is at Judas' initiative, and (b) Judas asks for money. The text gives no reason for the betrayal, but the actions stand in stark contrast to the woman (26:6-13) who has just anointed Jesus' head – something Jesus identifies as a preparation for burial – which Judas is seemingly arranging.

R.T. France (1989, 267-8) notes that Judas' actions are a “cold business proposition. The reason for his action can only be guessed. John 12:6 tells us that he had an eye for financial gain, and the sum involved (equal to 120 *denarii*) was not inconsiderable, but few have been able to believe that this was enough to cause such a radical volte-face. If he was the only Judean in the group he may have resented the leadership of the Galilean fishermen, but even cultural pride would hardly turn him against one whom he still believed in. More likely he was disillusioned that Jesus' idea of Messiahship (just graphically confirmed in v. 12) was not that for which he had joined the movement; with the threat of imminent official reprisals instead of the triumphant leadership of Israel he may have been hoping for (cf. 19:28), it was time to get out before it was too late. He may even have concluded sincerely (as did Saul of Tarsus) that Jesus was after all a false prophet, who must be destroyed. Whatever the reason, Matthew does not present him as a reluctant informer.”

The Disciples Prepare Passover

¹⁷ On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?” ¹⁸ He said, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The teacher says, “My appointed time draws near; in your house I shall celebrate the Passover with my disciples.’” ¹⁹ The disciples then did as Jesus had ordered, and prepared the Passover. (26:17-19)

Despite the intrigue, these verses show us Jesus in charge of the situation. He knew the priests' purpose before they had formulated it (v. 2), and he is already well aware of Judas' role (vv. 21–25). He now initiates the process which will lead without interruption to its climax on the cross. Its context, we are not

allowed to forget, is the Passover, and it is with Jesus' 'Passover' meal, giving startling new meaning to a familiar ritual, that the process begins.

Jesus possibly has already made an arrangement with the owner of the house for the use of a large room as such a room was unlikely to be available in Jerusalem at Passover time without prior arrangement. In any event, Jesus announces that "*My appointed time [kairos] draws near.*" In Matthew *kairos* often refers to an appointed, climactic moment, the time of fulfillment or consummation (e.g. 8:29; 13:30; 21:34). Like the Johannine references to Jesus' 'hour' (John 2:4; 7:30; 12:23; 13:1; etc.) it shows Jesus' conscious fulfillment of a predetermined plan.

Jesus Predicts the Betrayal

²⁰ *When it was evening, he reclined at table with the Twelve.* ²¹ *And while they were eating, he said, "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me."* ²² *Deeply distressed at this, they began to say to him one after another, "Surely it is not I, Lord?"* ²³ *He said in reply, "He who has dipped his hand into the dish with me is the one who will betray me."* ²⁴ *The Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born."* ²⁵ *Then Judas, his betrayer, said in reply, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" He answered, "You have said so."* (26:20-25)

Matthew's description of the entire Last Supper is sparse and to the point. There are two conversations: (a) one about the betrayer and (b) the other institutes the Eucharist. The reader already knows that Judas will betray Jesus – but this is the first time that the inner circle becomes aware that the traitor is in their midst. Many see an allusion to Psalm 41:10 (*Even the friend who had my trust, who shared my table, has scorned me*) where the righteous and just man is betrayed. In any case, the disciples' reaction is immediate. The reaction seems to be, not one of outrage, but a confident rejection of Jesus' statement, yet they also seem to need reassurance. But none is forthcoming from Jesus. He simply mentions that one *who has dipped his hand* (v.22) is the betrayer. Since the meal was eaten from a common dish into which all those present would frequently dip their hands, this is no more specific an identification. It is hard to imagine that, if Judas had been openly identified as the traitor, he would have been allowed to leave the room unhindered. Matthew's intent here seems to be christological, i.e., Jesus' announcement serves to let the reader know that Jesus is aware of events and his own fate.

There have been recent works that have leveraged the expression "*as it was written*" to indicate that Judas' role is fated and that he was divinely predestined to this role. But the phrase refers not to Judas but to the *Son of Man* – and indeed it is the divine will that this unique person, Jesus of Nazareth, fully God and fully man, would be betrayed as a prelude to his redemptive death.

Jesus Inaugurates the Eucharist

²⁶ *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body."* ²⁷ *Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you,"* ²⁸ *for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.* ²⁹ *I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father."* ³⁰ *Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*(26:26-30)

As Joachim Jeremias and other scholars have shown in looking at all the received Eucharistic traditions (Paul in 1 Corinthians and the synoptic gospel writers), Jesus follows the form and outline of the Passover Seder. The thanksgiving over the bread and the cup recorded in vv. 26 and 27 are a regular part of the main section of the Passover meal (making this the third of the four cups of the Passover), and we may reasonably assume that Jesus used the traditional words of thanksgiving. But it is worthwhile to point out that *said the blessing* refers to blessing God, not blessing the bread. The Catholic liturgy retains the blessing in its Eucharistic prayers: "*Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the*

bread of life.” Matthew, taking these well-known words for granted, records only the startlingly unfamiliar words which Jesus added – words that were spoken when none were to be said: “*Take and eat; this is my body.*” The Passover ritual had its own words of explanation for the food and drink, relating to the events of the deliverance from Egypt; but now Jesus gives a new interpretation in terms of a new and greater deliverance.

In describing the broken bread as *my body* Jesus makes unmistakably clear that he is to be violently killed; any hopes his disciples may still have cherished, that he did not mean what he said about going to Jerusalem to die, are now dramatically dispelled. That was no doubt hard enough to accept, but in commanding them specifically to *eat* (and in v. 27 to *drink*—only Matthew includes these imperatives, making more explicit the ‘Do this’ of 1 Cor. 11:24–25) he goes further, and introduces the concept of a personal participation in the effects of that death, a concept more powerfully spelt out in John 6:48–58. If the eating of the Passover meal served to identify the Israelite with the redemption from Egypt, so does this ‘eating’ and ‘drinking’ convey the benefits of Jesus’ paschal sacrifice to those who share his table.

The words over the cup fill out this idea. *Blood ... shed* is unmistakably sacrificial language. The word which the NAB translates as “shed” is *ekcheō* which means to “pour out” [EDNT 1:424]. This is the preferable translation because it captures the sealing of Covenant which always includes a pouring out of the sacrificial blood on the altar. The phrase *for many* (v.28) identifies that pouring out as that of the Servant of God of Isaiah 53:10-12, who “*gives his life as an offering for sin.*” With this reference, the whole idea of vicarious suffering for the sins of God’s people which runs throughout Isaiah 53 underlies these words. Matthew makes this even more explicit by adding for the forgiveness of sins (v.28). And that last phrase, together with the mention of the covenant, echoes Jeremiah’s prophecy (31:31–34) of a ‘new covenant’ leading to the forgiving and forgetting of the sins of God’s people. The phrase *blood of the covenant* (echoing Exod. 24:8) recalls that God’s relations with his people had always depended on the sacrificial shedding of blood, and this new covenant is no exception.

So these words, rich in Old Testament associations, indicate that Jesus’ death will inaugurate the new relationship between God and his people to which the prophets looked forward. To speak of a covenant is to speak of a community of the people of God. From now on this community will be constituted by the sacrifice of Jesus and celebrated in the Eucharist. The Passover which brought about the formation of the nation Israel under the Sinai covenant (cf. the allusion to Exod. 24:8) now points forward to a new redemption constituting a true Israel in distinction from the merely national community of the old covenant.

Jesus’ words over the bread and the cup have focused on death. Again the Matthaean phrase *ap’ arti, ‘from now on’* serves to mark a point in time which separates the two situations of “now” and “one day;” a new day is now dawning – for beyond the impending death lies life, *in the kingdom of my Father*. The companionship of Jesus with his disciples, so soon to be broken by death, will be restored in his Father’s kingdom. So the emphasis on death in the preceding words leads to a sense not of somber finality, but of joyful anticipation of new life through death.

Eugene Boring makes several points worth noting in his commentary [472-3] regarding the “trajectory” of Matthew’s account:

- The meal points backward from Matthew’s time to the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and to the life of Jesus marked by table fellowship with his disciples – and to sinner alike.
- The meal points forward to its fulfillment in the kingdom of God.
- The meal points inward as a call for self-examination on the part of anyone who would participate in the Eucharist and as well as to the conditions for the possibility of wholeness and completeness in the sharing of Christ’s life.
- The meal points upward to the heavenly realm where Christ is enthroned and exalted.

- The meal points outward to the whole church and to the whole world

Jesus Predicts Desertion and Promises Reunion

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, “This night all of you will have your faith in me shaken, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed’; ³² but after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee.” ³³ Peter said to him in reply, “Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be.” ³⁴ Jesus said to him, “Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” ³⁵ Peter said to him, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.” And all the disciples spoke likewise. (26:31-35)

One of the curious “tests” that some scholars apply to a passage regarding “authenticity” (by which they really mean historicity) is “would it embarrass the early church?” If it would, then it must be so “authentic” and compelling that the sacred writer includes it even though it is embarrassing. Jesus’ prediction that all the disciples would abandon him in his hour does not reflect well on the future leaders of the nascent Christian movement.

The NSRV says “You will all become deserters [*skandallisthēsesthe*]...” – and though it more literally means to “fall away” “be caused to stumble” – there is something scandalous that will shake their faith to the very core. This is the word that Matthew uses to describe the hometown folk, the Pharisees, and those who profess belief in Jesus but who stumble when the world or persecution arises on account of Jesus’ word (13:21).

And because of the events soon to unfold, they will indeed desert Jesus. As serious as this desertion would be, it was not final, since Jesus promised to meet the disciples in Galilee after he was raised from the dead (cf. 28:7, 10, 16). Perhaps the picture of Jesus going ahead of the disciples to Galilee is intended to cause the reader to picture a shepherd going ahead of his sheep (cf. John 10:4). The shepherd image has already been raised with the reference to Zech 13:7 where it is God himself who strikes the shepherd, scattering the flock

Matthew has consistently portrayed Jesus as a messianic king who will shepherd God’s people (2:1-6), who has compassion on the people as sheep without a shepherd (9:36), and who understands his mission as regathering and reconstituting the lost sheep of the house of Israel into the saved community of the people of God (10:6; 15:24). So too the disciples will endure their own scattering and be regathered by the risen Jesus who *goes before* them.

Where previously Peter had spoken for the group, now the group is breaking down and Peter boldly speaks for himself – the others speak for themselves – and already the sheep are scattering. Peter has yet to learn the weakness of his faith without the Good Shepherd leading him.

Jesus Prays and Is Arrested

³⁶ Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ He took along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to feel sorrow and distress. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.” ³⁹ He advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.” ⁴⁰ When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, “So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? ⁴¹ Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ⁴² Withdrawing a second time, he prayed again, “My Father, if it is not possible that this cup pass without my drinking it, your will be done!” ⁴³ Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open. ⁴⁴ He left them and withdrew again and prayed a third time, saying the same thing again. ⁴⁵ Then he returned to his disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand when the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up, let us go. Look, my betrayer is at hand.”

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a large crowd, with swords and clubs, who had come from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ His betrayer had arranged a sign with them, saying, “The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him.” ⁴⁹ Immediately he went over to Jesus and said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and he kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Friend, do what you have come for.” Then stepping forward they laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ And behold, one of those who accompanied Jesus put his hand to his sword, drew it, and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his ear. ⁵² Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But then how would the scriptures be fulfilled which say that it must come to pass in this way?” ⁵⁵ At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to seize me? Day after day I sat teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me. ⁵⁶ But all this has come to pass that the writings of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled. (26:36-56)

This remarkable narrative gives perhaps the most intimate insight into the nature of Jesus’ relationship with his Father, as well as into the cost of his Messianic mission. It blends together the reality of his humanity with the uniqueness of his position as Son of God. At the same time it illustrates the weakness of the disciples, and prepares us for their subsequent failure.

The three who accompanied Jesus at the transfiguration are with him now apparently simply for companionship. But it may be significant that it is these three who have explicitly declared their readiness to share Jesus’ fate (20:22; 26:35); they are now called to share with him in preparing for it, and even at this level they will fail. To *feel sorrow and distress* (v.37; *lypeisthē*; vexed) hardly does justice to the Greek verbs which suggest an anguish of wretchedness. *My soul is sorrowful* (again a weak translation of the uncommon word *perilypos*, ‘deeply grieved’) is an echo of the LXX translation of the refrain of Psalms 42–43, ‘*Why are you cast down, O my soul ...?*’, the lament of a righteous sufferer who knows his hope in God will ultimately be vindicated. The phrase *even to death* probably indicates the scale of his grief, but may also define its cause—it is grief as he approaches death. In this emotional turmoil Jesus wants company; that the Son of God should want the ‘moral support’ of three fishermen (and that he should be disappointed, v. 40) is a wonderful illustration of the paradox of the incarnation.

While others sometimes fell on their faces before Jesus (17:6; cf. Luke 5:12; 17:16), this is the only time Jesus is said to have prostrated himself. The posture indicates the strength of the emotion which leads to prayer. But the address *My Father* (cf. on 6:9; 11:25–27) lifts the whole episode from that of an abject appeal to the intimate communion of the Son of God with the Father. The issue is not whether or not Jesus should accept the Father’s purpose, but whether that purpose needs to include the cup (cf. 20:22) of suffering, or whether there is some other way. Hence the blend in this verse of a clear request with the acceptance that that request might not be granted—a blend which could well be imitated in much of our praying, with its often peremptory demands. The only issue that matters is what are the limits of the will of God. Jesus’ prayer is an exploration of those limits, but never attempts to break outside them.

Meanwhile the disciples wrestle with their humanity: a willing spirit but a weak flesh – and they miss Jesus’ wrestling with the same humanity, but with a different result. Jesus moves from praying for deliverance from death (v.39) to trust and commitment to God’s will (v.42) – all while using the identical words that Jesus has taught his own disciples in giving them the Lord’s Prayer (6:10).

And the Father’s will becomes evident as Judas again enters the narrative (vv.46-7) – although he had never clearly left in Matthew’s narrative. Judas arrives with a generically described “*large crowd*.” Scholars conjecture that since they were sent, in part, from the *chief priests and the elders* that the crowd includes Temple police/guards. In such a context, hardly friendly, Judas’ overture “*Hail, Rabbi*” is met with “*Friend*.” Some have speculated that “friend” is said to remind Judas that he had shared table

fellowship with Jesus; others see a politely cool generic form of address to some unknown (or in this case who has separated himself from the community of believers).

The phrase that we have as “*do what you have come for*” can also be translated as a question (What have you come for?) or the command – the normal translation option as it indicates Jesus’ sovereignty.

John supplies the names of both the disciple (Peter) and the high priest’s slave (Malchus), and Luke tells of the restoration of the ear. But Matthew simply tells the bare facts in order to draw out Jesus’ sovereign control of the events even if he appears as the helpless victim. The disciple who tried armed resistance had simply misread the situation. Jesus is not a helpless victim, needing any human help available. He is being arrested because he chooses; if he wanted help he could call on far more than a few swords. His refusal to thwart his enemies’ plans either by evasion or by supernatural power derives from his repeatedly voiced conviction that his mission must be one of rejection and suffering (see on 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19, 28). Behind these earlier predictions it has not been hard to discern *the scriptures* as the source of Jesus’ conviction; now that source is made explicit. And for Jesus there is no other option but that *the scriptures be fulfilled*. That issue had been settled in Gethsemane.

As the scene closes the sheep are now truly scattered: *the disciples left him and fled* (v.56).

The Jewish Trial Before the Sanhedrin

⁵⁷ *Those who had arrested Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.* ⁵⁸ *Peter was following him at a distance as far as the high priest’s courtyard, and going inside he sat down with the servants to see the outcome.* ⁵⁹ *The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death,* ⁶⁰ *but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward* ⁶¹ *who stated, “This man said, ‘I can destroy the temple of God and within three days rebuild it.’”* ⁶² *The high priest rose and addressed him, “Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?”* ⁶³ *But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, “I order you to tell us under oath before the living God whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”* ⁶⁴ *Jesus said to him in reply, “You have said so. But I tell you:*

From now on you will see ‘the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power’ and ‘coming on the clouds of heaven.’”

⁶⁵ *Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! What further need have we of witnesses? You have now heard the blasphemy;”* ⁶⁶ *what is your opinion?” They said in reply, “He deserves to die!”* ⁶⁷ *Then they spat in his face and struck him, while some slapped him,* ⁶⁸ *saying, “Prophecy for us, Messiah: who is it that struck you?”* (26:57-68)

R.T France (2007, p.1016) writes, “This is the point at which Jesus’ death is sealed; all that follows involving the Roman prefect is only the formal implementation of a verdict already decided by the Jewish authorities.” This is a conflict that has been growing unabated since the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and has reached the point where the religious authorities are simply looking for the basis upon which they can seal Jesus’ fate. But for the moment he is in their power and he Jesus has precious little to say. The events unfold and Jesus appears as helpless before the hearing by Jewish religious leaders. It is not likely that this is a formal trial that occurs at Caiaphas’ house, but rather an *ad hoc* meeting of senior people to agree on, first, the need to have Jesus executed (this being a matter of *Jewish law*), and secondly, an appropriate tactic to induce the Roman governor to impose the death penalty (which would, of course, require a charge of which Roman law could take cognizance). The formal Jewish trial begins, as suggested by 27:1, later when the whole Sanhedrin has assembled. Whatever the official status of the gathering, the Evangelists leave us in no doubt that it was not an unprejudiced hearing, but was convened specifically to ‘*put him to death.*”

Yet it is in this scene of apparent helplessness that Jesus provides the climatic statement of who he is in response to the authorities' urgent demand for Jesus to tell them plainly if he is the promised Messiah or no. Jesus does not answer the question in the direct manner the authorities desire, his answer in v.64, far from retracting any messianic claims, escalates them to a level that the judges cannot ignore – even if they had been inclined to do so.

But even then the judges miss the point. Jesus is not concerned with earthly judgment, his words in v.64 point to heavenly judgment and authority, and to the day when Jesus will come as judge of all. The climax is not here, but anticipates that moment when Jesus proclaims, “*All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me... (28:18) – from now on (26:64).*”

While the authorities may have missed the point, they do not lack decisiveness. France (1989, p.386-7) writes: “*Blasphemy in the Old Testament carried the death penalty by stoning (Lev. 24:10–23); it was therefore in Jewish law a sufficient ground for a capital conviction. The ritual tearing of robes (see Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:5) marked its seriousness, as this action was otherwise expressly forbidden the High Priest, even in a context of personal mourning (Lev. 21:10). Just how Jesus' words constituted blasphemy is disputed. He had carefully avoided pronouncing the divine name (see on v. 64), which was the later strict definition of blasphemy (Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:5). To claim to be Messiah was hardly in itself blasphemous—it might after all be true! But to claim to be God's anointed in such an improbable situation (helpless, deserted by his followers, rejected by the leaders of God's people) might well be seen as 'taking God's name in vain', especially when the title 'Son of God' has been included in the claim, and when the words of v. 64 are added to this (sitting at God's right hand in glory), the total claim does indeed constitute 'an offensive encroachment on the prerogatives of God'—unless, of course, it was true. Jesus' words thus left only two choices open to the authorities, either to accept his claim or to condemn him for this 'blasphemy'. They apparently did not find the choice difficult.*”

Beyond this, the proceedings descend into undignified abuse. Some scholars have noted that the robe-tearing, spitting and slapping are symbolic acts of disassociation. In this the authorities join the disciples who in fact have and will disassociate themselves with their Lord and Savior.

Peter's Failure

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. One of the maids came over to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." ⁷⁰ But he denied it in front of everyone, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about!" ⁷¹ As he went out to the gate, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus the Nazorean." ⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man!" ⁷³ A little later the bystanders came over and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; even your speech gives you away." ⁷⁴ At that he began to curse and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately a cock crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had spoken: "Before the cock crows you will deny me three times." He went out and began to weep bitterly. (26:69-75)

Jesus' bold confession before the highest authorities contrasts with Peter's failure to do the same before their servants. In the background stand Jesus' words about the importance of acknowledging him before men (10:32–33). In the foreground is the progressive aggravation of Peter's sin, both in the increasingly public nature of the challenge (one girl—one girl speaking to the bystanders—the bystanders as a group) and in Peter's response (evasion—denial under oath—cursing Jesus). The importance of the story is that even the great Christian leader of the church failed – and that even the one who denied and curse the Christ repented and became a faithful disciple, entrusted with the mission of Christ.

Jesus Is Transferred to Roman Authority

¹ When it was morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. ² They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, the governor. (27:1-2)

At the conclusion of their all-night hearing the religious authorities must now find a way of having their verdict implemented. The death penalty could be imposed only by order of the Roman governor and a charge of 'blasphemy' would carry no weight with him. It was therefore necessary that the elder *took counsel* over an appropriate charge, and also, no doubt, over appropriate persuasive tactics. They could not expect an easy time of it, as *Pilate the governor* (AD 26–36; his official title was 'praefectus') was notorious for his obstinacy in refusing to accommodate to Jewish prejudices, his portrait in non-Christian Jewish sources being considerably less flattering than that in the Gospels (See Josephus, *Ant.* xviii. 55–62, 85–89).

The Death of Judas

³ Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, deeply regretted what he had done. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? Look to it yourself." ⁵ Flinging the money into the temple, he departed and went off and hanged himself. ⁶ The chief priests gathered up the money, but said, "It is not lawful to deposit this in the temple treasury, for it is the price of blood." ⁷ After consultation, they used it to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. ⁸ That is why that field even today is called the Field of Blood. ⁹ Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of a man with a price on his head, a price set by some of the Israelites, ¹⁰ and they paid it out for the potter's field just as the Lord had commanded me." (27:3-10)

This story interrupts the sequence of Jesus' trial. It can hardly fit chronologically between the decision to hand Jesus over to Roman authority (which is apparently its immediate cause) and its sequel in vv. 11ff., as it shows the priests apparently in the temple, with leisure to debate the buying of a field. But Matthew has appropriately inserted here the tradition of what happened to Judas, perhaps in order to form a suggestive contrast with the fate of Peter. Each is thus seen to have fulfilled Jesus' prediction (26:24 for Judas; 26:34 for Peter), but Peter's bitter weeping (of repentance?) contrasts with Judas' despairing remorse and suicide. Matthew's focus on Judas (26:14–16, 21–25, 47–50) is thus brought to its climax in

a grim warning of the results of deliberate apostasy (as opposed to Peter's temporary lapse under pressure).

The modality of suicide, hanging, is nowhere else mentioned in the NT – there is however a notable OT hanging: Ahithophel, King David's friend who betrayed him when the Davidic kingdom was under attack (2 Sam 17:1-23). For Matthew, the story becomes another expression of the conflict between kingdoms and the lot of those who cast themselves with the wrong side – here it is Judas who has chosen other than the kingdom of the Son of David.

Even though Judas seemingly died in private despair, he stands apart from the high priests who sought to kill Jesus, collected false witnesses, but have no remorse or regret. At least Judas knew he had chosen wrongly.

One interesting bit of language revolves around the priests' decision to buy *the potter's field* with the *price of blood*. The expressions provide a suggestive derivation for the traditional name Akeldama, *Field of Blood*, which Acts 1:18–19 also associates with Judas' death, though in a different way. The traditional site of Akeldama is in the valley of Hinnom, which was a source of potter's clay (hence the previous name, 'potter's field'?) If Matthew knew this location, the association with Jeremiah 19:1–13 would be obvious, since that passage is about burials in the valley of Hinnom, which has become a 'place filled with innocent blood', to be called the 'valley of Slaughter', the whole scene being focused on a 'potter's earthen flask'. But the *potter* also appears mysteriously in Zechariah 11:13, as the recipient of the thirty pieces of silver 'in the house of the LORD'.

Jesus Is Condemned

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor, and he questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." ¹² And when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. ¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they are testifying against you?" ¹⁴ But he did not answer him one word, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

¹⁵ Now on the occasion of the feast the governor was accustomed to release to the crowd one prisoner whom they wished. ¹⁶ And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called (Jesus) Barabbas. ¹⁷ So when they had assembled, Pilate said to them, "Which one do you want me to release to you, (Jesus) Barabbas, or Jesus called Messiah?" ¹⁸ For he knew that it was out of envy that they had handed him over. ¹⁹ While he was still seated on the bench, his wife sent him a message, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I suffered much in a dream today because of him." ²⁰ The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus. ²¹ The governor said to them in reply, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They answered, "Barabbas!" ²² Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus called Messiah?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" ²³ But he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Let him be crucified!" ²⁴ When Pilate saw that he was not succeeding at all, but that a riot was breaking out instead, he took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves." ²⁵ And the whole people said in reply, "His blood be upon us and upon our children." ²⁶ Then he released Barabbas to them, but after he had Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified. (27:11-25)

(Note: 27:11 is where the "short form" of the Passion reading begins)

This is the official trial of Jesus, and yet the description sounds less like a formal judicial hearing than an example of oriental bargaining. Pilate, as prefect of Judea, had the sole authority to acquit or to condemn, and to determine the sentence. There is a perfunctory attempt at a formal examination of the prisoner, but increasingly the dominant force is not the official role of the governor but the demands of the Jewish leaders, backed by 'the people'. It is here that the focus of Matthew's attention falls, so that Pilate's role is as a cast extra on the movie set whose sole role is at best a catalyst which helps to define unequivocally the people's stance towards the Messiah.

It is clear that Pilate has been given a charge by the religious authorities and so asks “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” The charge cleverly incorporates Jesus’ admission of his messiahship in a formula with the maximum political innuendo – and one that carries a death penalty. The title *King of the Jews* is used in Matthew only by Gentiles (2:2; 27:29, 37; in 27:42 the Jewish leaders substitute ‘King of Israel’). In the sense in which Pilate presumably understood the title, Jesus could quite properly have disclaimed it. But it expressed a theme of Old Testament prophecy which Jesus had come to fulfill, and had indeed deliberately enacted in 21:1–9. Jesus therefore uses again the formula of ‘qualified assent’ used already in 26:25, 64. Beyond that Jesus is silent, echoing the image of the Suffering Servant of Isa 52:14–15, 53:7.

The amnesty practice’s historicity is questionable but that is perhaps secondary to Matthew’s narrative purpose to ironically paint the people’s choice. They would rather have Barabbas (lit. “son of the father”) than the true Son of the Father. Once again two kingships stand in contrast. One represented by the criminal Barabbas, one represented by the Righteous One.

Only Matthew mentions Pilate’s *wife* and her *dream*, and nothing is known of her from other sources, but she is hardly the sort of figure legend might be expected to invent. She may have been one of the many Gentile women who had a secret interest in Judaism, hence her interest in the case of Jesus. At any rate Matthew has clearly inserted this verse together with vv. 24–25 in order to heighten the impression of Jesus’ legal innocence—even a pagan woman can see it! But while she is open to the voice of God (from whom dreams come; cf. 1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22), the Jewish leaders are deaf to it.

Undoubtedly the Jewish leaders ensured that the crowd was selected and knew their part in the script. For a general population of people, the cry *Let him be crucified!* is remarkable because crucifixion was a sign of Roman oppression and was hateful to the average Jew. The necessity of the method of death was the necessity of Roman authority – and crucifixion was the regular method of Roman execution for provincial rebels.

But Matthew’s reporting of the incident is different. In the period before Jesus’ arrest Matthew seems to have carefully distinguished between the people as a whole (‘the crowds’) and their leaders. Now there is no difference; all together are calling for Jesus’ death. Undoubtedly Matthew intends us to notice a change in the popular reactions to Jesus; those who were previously undecided, even inclined to favor Jesus, have now decided against him, influenced no doubt by the news that their religious leaders had judged him a blasphemer.

Pilate’s dramatic gesture and the corresponding cry of ‘all the people’ (v. 25) are found only in Matthew. The effect of the whole complex is to underline in the strongest way the responsibility of the worldly kingdoms for the death of Jesus. The symbolic *washing of hands* recalls the ritual prescribed in Deuteronomy 21:6–9, and the metaphorical language of Psalms 26:6; 73:13. It is sometimes argued that this act makes sense only in a Jewish context, and that it has no precedent in Graeco-Roman culture. But the symbolism is obvious enough, and the removal of blood-guilt was a major concern in much pagan literature. In using the same formula of disassociation as in v. 4, *Look to it yourselves*, Pilate aims to exonerate himself from what he clearly regards as an unjust killing.

France notes the following about v.25:

Pilate’s disavowal of responsibility is balanced by the apparently enthusiastic acceptance of it by *all the people*, ‘*His blood on us and on our children!*’ No verb is expressed in the Greek, and the addition of ‘be’ in RSV, NEB, NIV, making the declaration into a wish, is unjustified. The sentence is rather a statement accepting what Pilate has just said—‘the responsibility is ours’. Jesus has been ‘convicted’ under Jewish law, and they will therefore be answerable for his death to Rome or to anyone else. (For a parallel formula of acceptance of responsibility, cf. Josh. 2:19; and for the metaphor of ‘blood’ being ‘on’ a person, cf. Deut. 19:10, 13; Ezek. 18:13; 33:4–6; Acts 18:6.) To read this declaration as an eternal ‘curse’ on the Jewish race is

therefore to press the language beyond its biblical context. In recording these solemn words, and in particular the phrase *and on our children*, Matthew perhaps had particularly in mind the fate of the Jews of ‘this generation’ in the Jewish War of AD 66–70, a fate already foreshadowed in 23:35–39 as a result of the rejection of God’s final messenger. It was a fate which would fall on the nation as a whole, and would signal the end of its privileged status (see on 21:43). It is perhaps for this reason that Matthew attributes the cry to *all the people*, using now not the general term for ‘crowds’ as in vv. 15, 20, 24, but *laos*, the name particularly used in the LXX for God’s chosen people, and so used generally also in this Gospel. The same phrase occurs in the LXX of Jeremiah 26:8–9 for those who attacked Jeremiah and thus risked bringing ‘innocent blood’ on themselves (v. 15), a parallel Matthew probably had in mind. Of course it was only a small number of the nation who were there, and to read into these words a ‘curse’ on all Jews for ever is ludicrous (after all, Matthew and his fellow-apostles were Jews!); but Matthew wants his readers to understand that the loss of Israel’s special status which is so evident in his Gospel is to be interpreted in the light of their rejection of Jesus.

The King Is Scourged and Mocked

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus inside the praetorium and gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸ They stripped off his clothes and threw a scarlet military cloak about him. ²⁹ Weaving a crown out of thorns, they placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰ They spat upon him and took the reed and kept striking him on the head. ³¹ And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him off to crucify him. (27:26-31a)

Where the religious trial ends by mocking Jesus as the Christ, the secular trial ends with Jesus being mocked as king with a *scarlet cloak* (a soldier’s cape) parodying the emperor’s purple robe, a *reed* representing a royal scepter, and the *crown of thorns*. Jesus is thus enthroned as king, and offered the homage of *kneeling* which a Hellenistic ruler required. In this scene Matthew continues to redefine what kingship means. If this scene is a coronation, then the cross will be the throne.

Simon Is Compelled to Carry Jesus’ Cross

³² As they were going out, they met a Cyrenian named Simon; this man they pressed into service to carry his cross. (27:31b-32)

In Roman executions, the vertical crucifixion stake was permanently fixed at the place of execution; the condemned man was typically forced to carry the heavy crossbar himself. In this spare rendering of the Way of the Cross, we hear the echo of Jesus’ declaration that everyone – himself included – must carry his own cross (16:24); such is the nature of discipleship. Simon the Cyrene (modern Libya) was pressed into service (*cf* 5:41) to assist in carrying the cross. In the Matthean narrative he is the only person present at Golgotha whose name we know. That a stranger carries Jesus’ cross (a) emphasizes the abandonment of the disciples and (b) anticipates the coming Gentile mission.

Jesus is Crucified

³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull), ³⁴ they gave Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall. But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink. ³⁵ After they had crucified him, they divided his garments by casting lots; ³⁶ then they sat down and kept watch over him there. ³⁷ And they placed over his head the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. ³⁸ Two revolutionaries were crucified with him, one on his right and the other on his left. ³⁹ Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three

days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God, (and) come down from the cross!”⁴¹ Likewise the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him and said,⁴² “He saved others; he cannot save himself. So he is the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him.”⁴³ He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”⁴⁴ The revolutionaries who were crucified with him also kept abusing him in the same way.

⁴⁵ From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.⁴⁶ And about three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁴⁷ Some of the bystanders who heard it said, “This one is calling for Elijah.”⁴⁸ Immediately one of them ran to get a sponge; he soaked it in wine, and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink.⁴⁹ But the rest said, “Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to save him.”⁵⁰ But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit.⁵¹ And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, rocks were split,⁵² tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised.⁵³ And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many.⁵⁴ The centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, “Truly, this was the Son of God!” (27:33-56)

Note: this is where the ‘short form’ ends

Christian preaching throughout the millennia and recent movies such as *The Passion of the Christ* have stressed the grim and cruel details of the scourging and the crucifixion. But the Gospel writers do not do so, and Matthew remarkably passes over the actual fastening to the cross in a bare participle (v. 35a). In the Greek the crucifixion is a subordinate clause of the main sentence. Matthew’s interest is more in the meaning of the event, and his emphasis falls again, as in vv. 27–31, on the element of mockery, not now by Gentiles, but by Jews reviling their ‘king’. Even more remarkably, in this improbable setting some of the highest Christological titles come to expression: King of the Jews, temple-builder, Son of God, King of Israel, and again Son of God. In their very mockery, they ironically reinforce those titles, for it is in the degrading fate of crucifixion that Jesus’ noble mission is accomplished. The shocking paradox of a crucified Messiah could hardly be more sharply underlined.

The drink of *wine mixed with gall* (‘myrrh’ in Mark) is usually understood as a narcotic to reduce the pain of crucifixion, and *Sanhedrin* 43a tells us that such a drink was offered by the noble ladies of Jerusalem to those about to be executed (a practice inspired by Prov. 31:6–7). If so, Jesus’ refusal of it might mean that he was determined to undergo his fate in full consciousness. At any rate, for Matthew its main significance lies in the reminiscence of Psalm 69:22 (heightened by his use of the LXX word *gall*, not ‘myrrh’), which will be echoed again in v. 48. This psalm, together with Psalm 22, will re-echo throughout the account of the crucifixion, thus presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the figure of the ‘righteous sufferer’ of those psalms.

The imagery from Ps 22 begins with the soldiers casting lots (Ps 22:19) an otherwise standard Roman practice. But also here Matthew mentions that from this point on Jesus is guarded by the Roman authorities perhaps to counter later 1st century rumors of Jesus’ escaping death on the cross. It also paves the way for their exclamation in v. 54, which forms the theological climax of the story.

The deep irony of the whole trial, mocking and crucifixion scene is concentrated on the placard placed on the cross. It was intended as a coarse joke, but the reader knows its profound truth as the most fundamental of Christian professions: *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews*. This would-be profession stands in stark contrast to the mocking that follows.

On the cross Jesus is derided by three groups: passersby (v.39), the whole Sanhedrin (v.41), and the revolutionaries (v.44). The narrative recalls taunts from the earlier trials (e.g., *reviled* here is the same as *blasphemed* used in 26:65) while echoing imagery from Ps 22

All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me: "You relied on the LORD--let him deliver you; if he loves you, let him rescue you." (Ps 22:8-9)

At the same time Matthew subtly points back to Jesus' own teaching to the disciples. The challenge for Jesus, who saved others, to *save himself*, while a taunt on the lips of those passing by is ironically Jesus' teaching (*For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.* 16:25). Their last taunt *if you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!*" is paradoxical. It is exactly because he is the Son of God that he is on the cross, to come down would be to repudiate the will of his Father. The Sanhedrin and the revolutionaries join in the same chorus. There are no repentant thieves in Matthew's account. There are none among them who will believe.

Now the picture begins to change, as we see both in the accompanying events and in Jesus' own words and attitude something of the true significance of what is happening. As before, Matthew shows no interest in the physical nature of Jesus' suffering, or the medical cause of death, but by a series of clear allusions to Old Testament passages continues to point to Jesus' death as the moment of fulfillment, leading up in v. 54 to a climactic confession of faith from the most unlikely source.

There could not be a natural eclipse at the time of the Passover full moon. What could account for the darkness? Perhaps it was caused by a dust storm, or heavy cloud cover, but it is more likely to be understood, as Matthew surely intended, as a direct sign of God's displeasure, as in Amos 8:9 (*On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun set at midday and cover the earth with darkness in broad daylight.*)

The scene of Jesus' cry out from the cross is marked by uniqueness within Matthew's narrative – from the use of the word *anaboaō* (*cried out* used only here in the New Testament) to the remarkable address to God: this is the only time in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus addresses God without calling him "Father." The words are, of course, a quotation of the first verse of Psalm 22, a psalm which moves from despairing appeal to triumphant faith, and the Christian reader can, with hindsight, see the appropriateness of this total message. But it is dishonest to interpret Jesus' words as referring to the part of the psalm which he did *not* echo – something we perhaps do to allow us to quickly move beyond the cross. As throughout the crucifixion scene, it is the suffering of the righteous man in Psalm 22, not his subsequent vindication, which is alluded to. But the fact that Jesus can still appeal to 'my God' places his sense of abandonment worlds apart from a nihilistic despair. This moment on the cross, this moment of abandonment – this is the 'cup' which he has willingly accepted from his Father's hand (26:36–46).

Jesus' cry is heard by those nearby as calling for Elijah, understood in Jewish piety as the one who would bring comfort and succor from God to the afflicted one. Perhaps the offer of *wine* was an act of kindness, to which others in the crowd mockingly objected that, if any relief was to be given, it should be given by *Elijah* in response to Jesus' supposed appeal.

But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit. Matthew gives no indication whether the 'cry' is the triumphant '*It is finished*' of John 19:30, or a further cry of agony like that in v. 46, but the use of the verb *krazō* ('cry') may be a further reminiscence of Psalm 22, where this verb occurs in the LXX of vv. 2, 5, 24. The expression '*gave up his spirit*' (translated in other texts as "breathed his last") is perhaps intentionally theological on Matthew's part. He could simply have written "and he died." The Greek *aphiēmi* means "let go, leave, leave alone, release, forgive" coming from the noun *aphesis* release (noun), liberation, forgiveness [EDNT 1:181]. It might be that Matthew intended us to understand that in this point what Jesus gives is redemption, his forgiveness for the sake of not just those nearby who mocked and disbelieved, but to all the world.

At this juncture the eschatological signs witness the great event that has just happened. The tearing of the *veil of the sanctuary*, while perhaps physically caused by the earthquake, is surely understood as a symbol

of the opening of access to God through the death of Jesus. In the light of Jesus' words about the coming destruction of the temple the tearing of the curtain may also be seen as a foreshadowing of the more drastic events to come in 70 AD.

As to the resurrection of the saints from their tombs, France (1989, p.406-7) writes:

Apart from perhaps explaining how the curtain came to be torn, the earthquake is presented as the means by which the tombs were opened. In the Old Testament an earthquake is a symbol of God's mighty acts (e.g. Judg. 5:4; Ps. 114:7-8), especially in judgment (e.g. Joel 3:16; Nah. 1:5-6). This extraordinary sequel to the earthquake is nowhere else recorded outside Matthew. Jewish theology had developed from such passages as Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 a belief in a bodily resurrection in the last days (Ezek. 37:1-14 was interpreted of that eschatological resurrection, and the words used here suggest that Matthew had that passage particularly in mind), and John 5:25-29 records Jesus as teaching that 'the hour is coming, and now is' when this hope would be fulfilled through his agency. This account therefore presents that belief in concrete form, apparently as the result of Jesus' death. *After his resurrection*, however, unless it represents an unexplained delay of two days between the rising of *the saints* and their arrival in *the holy city*, perhaps suggests that Matthew has not recorded these events in strict 'chronological' order, and that the rising of the saints is seen as the sequel not so much to Jesus' death as to his *resurrection*, thus reflecting the view 'that Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of the general resurrection at the end of time', a view picked up in e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:20ff. *The saints* are presumably the people of God in the Old Testament, those who according to Hebrews 11 all died 'in faith' looking forward to resurrection to a better life (Heb. 11:13-16, 35, 39-40); through Jesus that hope now comes to fruition. The theological significance of this event is therefore important for Matthew's analysis of the meaning of Christ's death; it was, in any case, a unique occurrence and is not to be judged by the canons of 'normal' experience.

The effect of these signs is profound. The soldiers are converted and presage the first of the Gentiles who will believe: "*Truly, this was the Son of God!*"

Jesus is Buried

⁵⁷ *When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who was himself a disciple of Jesus.* ⁵⁸ *He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be handed over.* ⁵⁹ *Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it (in) clean linen* ⁶⁰ *and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed.* ⁶¹ *But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb. (27:57-61)*

In Matthew's account, the faithful women have viewed *from a distance*. Their appearance at this point of the narrative emphasizes their key role of witness after all the men have fled. Only later do others appear, namely Joseph of Arimathea (*cf.* John 3), who in Matthew is not mentioned as a member of the Sanhedrin. Thus it is not a sympathetic member of the opposition who buries Jesus, but *a disciple of Jesus*. Jesus is buried in a known place of a prominent man, not a place where there would be confusion regarding its location. And at the end of it all, two women remain, keeping watch.

Jesus' Tomb Is Sealed and Guarded

⁶² *The next day, the one following the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate* ⁶³ *and said, "Sir, we remember that this impostor while still alive said, 'After three days I will be raised up.'* ⁶⁴ *Give orders, then, that the grave be secured until the third day, lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, 'He has been raised from the dead.' This last imposture would be worse than the first."* ⁶⁵ *Pilate said to them, "The guard is yours; go secure it as best you can."* ⁶⁶ *So they went and secured the tomb by fixing a seal to the stone and setting the guard. (27:62-66)*

These final verses begin a new day. The guard, so important in Matthew's account of the resurrection, are not mentioned in the other Gospels. His reason for mentioning them is presumably that a story about the disciples stealing Jesus' body was being used to discredit Christian claims; Justin says that such stories were still being actively disseminated in the middle of the second century (*Dial.* 108). The fact of such propaganda in itself indicates that it could not be denied that the tomb was empty; what was questioned was how it came to be empty.

A Final Thought Matthew's account is devoid of the graphic violence, the blood, and prolonged description of the suffering endured. There is no emphasis on the saving efficacy of the act of crucifixion (as in John and Paul). Matthew's intent seems to be to affirm his most basic themes:

- This truly is the Messiah, the Son of God
- The one who was rejected by opponents and abandoned by disciples – forming humanity's response.
- But Jesus has formed a people called out (*ekklesia*) – Jews and Gentiles alike – who are formed into the people of God in the forgiveness, and
The center of their faith is Jesus, the righteous one who modeled the right relationship with God the Father in life, in word, in act and even in death.

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