

The Sunday Next Before Easter

<i>Mattins 1</i>	Exodus 9
<i>Mattins 2</i>	Matthew 26
<i>Introit</i>	Psalm 61
<i>Epistle</i>	Philippians 2:5-11
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 27:1-54
<i>Evensong 1</i>	Exodus 10
<i>Evensong 2</i>	Hebrews 5:1-10

EPISTLE AND GOSPEL

This Sunday is popularly known as Palm Sunday, so it may come as a surprise that the 1662 eucharistic lectionary does not appoint a reading with our Lord's entry into Jerusalem. But that is the historic pattern followed by the Western church for more or less fourteen centuries. Since at least the 600s in Rome, the gospel for this day was the Passion narrative from St. Matthew's gospel. During the Middle Ages, a blessing of the palms was widely adopted, but it was an observance prior to the mass. At mass, the gospel was two ample chapters, Matthew 26 and 27, and that practice was retained in the Roman lectionary until the late twentieth century.

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer modifies this pattern in two ways. First, it breaks up the epic length of the gospel, with chapter 26 assigned to Mattins and chapter 27 as the gospel. Remember that the services are designed to be a single sequence of Mattins-Litany-Holy Communion, so both chapters were still expected to be read on this Sunday.

Second, the gospel ends with verse 54. There are two evident reasons. One is to use with maximum rhetorical force to the statement of the Roman centurion and those with him: "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54 KJV). This identification of Jesus as God's Son expresses a central truth about how the lectionary approaches the death

of Christ: “In the liturgy, the passion is never proclaimed without at least an undercurrent of triumph. Jesus’s death is in fact his victory.”¹

The other reason for ending the gospel with verse 54 is that most of the rest of the chapter, the verses about the burial of Christ, will be read the following Saturday (i.e., Easter Even). This trimming is a pattern in the revision of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662: “The readings for the week leading up to Easter were subject to small but painstaking changes in sequence to create a careful narrative order, incorporating the different versions in the synoptic gospels, each reading having its own crescendo and proper climax. The readings in some places were cut from 1549 in order to restrict all reference to the burial of Christ to Easter Even.”² In short, the historic practice of reading St. Matthew’s Passion on this Sunday is retained in the Prayer Book, but with an accommodation for the hearers – who would otherwise be standing for a 141-verse gospel – and a more emphatic conclusion.

The center of attention for today’s readings, then, is the Passion of our Lord. That is why this day has been called “Passion Sunday” (a name also sometimes applied to the previous Sunday), and the following week has been called not only “Holy Week” but “Passion Week” and “Passion-tide.”³ The Passion narratives of the other three gospels will be read over the following days, but this is the only Sunday of the year in which an account of our Lord’s Passion is read. The other readings on this Sunday offer vantage points from which to see the Passion.

The epistle offers an incarnational view. God himself became a human being, and not a great and exalted one, “but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness” (Philippians 2:7 NRSVue). The motive for this self-emptying is divine love, what the collect calls “thy tender love towards mankind.” That phrase was intended by Archbishop Cranmer to be a point of emphasis: he added it to a collect that had already been used for about a millennium by his day. This humility demonstrated by our Savior’s incarnation and death has ethical implications for the Christian, again a theme in the collect of the day. Yet with this humility is also exaltation, again reflecting the theme that the death of Jesus is the victory of Jesus.

Set on this day, the introit gives us the interior life of Jesus from Gethsemane to Golgotha, with notes of determination, trust, and confidence that God has heard his desires and will grant him life. To paraphrase a famous sermon, it's Passion Sunday, but Easter's coming.

PROPER LESSONS

The Sunday first lessons continue the readings from Exodus. Thematically, these readings cast the death and resurrection of Jesus as the great deliverance, the Exodus of the whole human race. And there are other points of specific contact with the Passion narrative from Matthew, including the resistant ruler (Pharaoh/Pilate) and the descent into darkness.

Finally, the second lesson at Evensong offers a theological meditation on the cross: Christ the priest, Christ the sacrifice. It obviously connects with the Passion narrative, but it also has themes of exaltation (like the epistle) and the grant of the Messiah's desires (like the introit).

On this first day of Holy Week, we have two of the choirs (narrative types of deliverance, New Testament reflection on the significance of the cross), and two of the soloists (St. Matthew, and our Lord's voice in the psalms). The missing voice is the choir of Old Testament prophets, but they are about to begin.

HYMNS

<i>Mattins 1</i>	Safe in the shadow of the Lord
<i>Mattins 2</i>	Alone thou goest forth
<i>Epistle</i>	At the name of Jesus
<i>Gospel</i>	Sing my tongue the glorious battle
<i>Evensong 1</i>	O day of God, draw nigh
<i>Evensong 2</i>	The head that once was crowned with thorns

ENDNOTES

- 1 Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 191.
- 2 Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 766.
- 3 Philip Pfatteicher writes: "Holy Week begins with the Sunday of the Passion. Now, Passiontide begins, the intense and exclusive concentration on the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ." Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God*, 174.