

Thank you for having me today to talk about part of the Jesus story central to the Christian faith. My deepest thanks to Mary for her invitation and to Rufus and George for their musical gifts and leadership as well as Mariko who helped put the leaflet together and Jim for his lovely poem.

Today two readings are heard in most liturgical Christian churches from one of the four Gospels, stories of Jesus' life: the first is always about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with great accolades, wonderful and happy praise from many. Jerusalem has always been a religiously complex place and still is today. These happy people see Jesus as a deliverer. They had for a long time experienced life under occupation of the government of Rome. Rome was not benign, but actually very harsh. And so in Jesus' Jewish context, the people were in a real sense oppressed. For a long time they had looked for freedom and many thought they would find it through a new ruler, in this case, Jesus. Their hopes were high for throwing off the yoke of Rome. And this is where things in the halls of threatened power begin to go wrong, and I might add, still do today. The second reading is a portion from one of what are called the *Passion* Gospels. Again, there are several of these stories so the details vary but basically each is the story of Jesus' path to death. The Passion Gospels are very long readings and usually take the place of a sermon so I have included only a part of one of them for us here. They tell a story within the larger story of Jesus' life and message.

A lot happened between Jesus' triumphal and seemingly happy entry into Jerusalem and what many saw as the tragic end to a life full of wise teaching. The ark of emotion in the liturgy in the Church go from utter joy to utter darkness and despair, paralleling Jesus' journey. In the Church the story is then played out again over the last week of the introspective season of Lent, Holy Week, with discrete services including Maundy Thursday (when we remember Jesus last meal with his friends and his command to serve others), Good Friday (his death), and Holy Saturday (a quiet day of waiting). The whole week is about the remembrance of Jesus' path to death and subsequently from a Christian perspective, his triumph over death through the resurrection after three days in the tomb.

What happened between the Palms and the Cross? How could things have gone wrong and so fast? Details include at the last meal, one of his closest friends, someone he thought he could trust, betraying him to the authorities. Judas gets a bad rap, in part deservedly so. He is known as someone who stole from the purse the disciples kept. But giving him the benefit of the doubt, one wonders if he also felt Jesus' enterprise was doomed so why risk the lives of so many other people? Expedient for him to be turned over to authorities before others were hurt and so he betrays Jesus, as the scripture say, "with a kiss." Jesus goes to a quiet place to pray and asks his friends to pray with him but they are too tired – again he is left alone. After Jesus' arrest, his friend Peter is questioned if he is one of the band of

followers – but as Jesus predicted, in fear, Peter denies he even knows him. Pilate, the Roman ruler in Jerusalem can't put his finger on anything Jesus has done wrong, but political pressure intensifies and so he finally gives in and lets the crowds have their way, who have also turned on Jesus by now – sentencing Jesus to death, not just any death but one that is public and gruesome, and meant to be a lesson to others that they should not mess with the Roman government. I ponder connections with politics of our own day. In the end, most betray Jesus, though I would add that the women who hover in the background were never written into the story as betraying him. In fact, they tend to the body, along with one religious leader, Joseph of Arimathea. How could things have gone wrong and so fast?

There are many interpretations of who Jesus was as well as what his death means. For the later, they range greatly, from God needing a human sacrifice to atone for humanity's sins to Jesus being simply a prophet. That's too much for me to talk about today! However, we all have a sense of how power and politics have enormous sway over how it turns out for those who have the least power in society, and those who try to speak truth to power. In regard to servant leadership, I can say the church hasn't always been perfect in speaking truth to power though sometimes we try. Perhaps this is why some of us say the church is not a hotel for saints, rather a hospital for sinners (variably attributed to Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, and Abigail Van Buren [Dear Abby]) What is meaningful for *me* this

week is the image of Jesus, a servant who suffers for the sake of a world in pain, in essence for the sake of love.

If one's creed is love (as we say each week here in a creed): to love and respect *others*, treat them with dignity *always*, as well as to love, respect, and treat *oneself* with dignity, suffering is almost always involved. It is part of our human experience. Suffering's effect on us can be mitigated by prayer and meditation but I suspect we would be hard pressed to find anyone in this room or outside of it who has not suffered in life, and sometimes even in the cause of love. We find challenges to love and in being loving in our personal lives, communal lives, work and even political lives. The word "gospel" actually means "good news." In our culture, taking in the daily news, good news is hard to find. Today's Jesus story is one of the more difficult to find good news in because it is full of pathos...the triumph and high of the palm parade into Jerusalem culminating in utter betrayal and death of an innocent person.

The good news I find is that the Divine who resides not only *around* us but *in* us, is there to call upon during the most difficult times in our lives: times when others, because their love is not fully formed, end up betraying us. It is good news because God is there with us when *our* love is not fully formed and we end up betraying others. It is good news in that there is a good future for us as we stand firm in the quest for love, as Jesus did, even when it brings suffering.

As a Christian, of course, I believe there is a “rest of the story” as Paul Harvey used to say on his radio show. But even for those who do not believe Jesus’ death was vindicated by resurrection three days later, still in the Passion story we find a powerful reminder of the love the Divine has for us by accompanying and guiding us in our darkest moments. We also find a powerful reminder that it is possible to serve others and that there is redemption in doing so. Serving is not a glorious idea in the eyes of most in our society. It is challenging and difficult. If one is looking only for triumph in life, don’t look past the first lesson of today. But if one is looking for deeper meaning the second story may be helpful. In a society where “quick fix” is the word of the day, this arc of love traveling the distance from acclamation through betrayal and death is harrowing at best. But really... all of us experience it is some way. My prayer is that the Divine is a presence, a comfort, and a companion through our pilgrim days in this life because God, Ultimate Love, is self giving and faithful to us even and especially in our most difficult moments.

I want to share a musical piece with you as a reflection on these passages, on the challenges we face in loving in our world, and as a prayer for God’s presence to be known at all times. It is called: *Prayer from Jewish Life #1* by Ernest Bloch. For me it is a prayer that communicates not only pain, but hope. Thank you for coming today.