RITE OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION OF ADULTS

Self-study session for Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday)

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How to use the self-study material

1. Participate in the Live-streaming of the Mass for Palm Sunday (Passion Sunday).
2. Listen carefully to the Scripture readings and the homily.
3. Select a suitable day in the week to study the lesson.

INTO THE UNKNOWN

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for Your blessings and protection on my life. I have been blessed by You in so many ways and today, I wish to acknowledge Your kindness and mercy for me. As I prepare my myself to study this lesson, I pray for the Holy Spirit to guide me and to teach me. Help me to listen to His voice so that I may learn to know and love You more each day. I pray in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

OUR LIFE EXPERIENCE

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a sense of uncertainty among many of us. We are uncertain if we will truly be safe from the virus. Each time we have to leave our home, we feel insecure about our surroundings. We are cautious about where we go, how closely people stand beside us, what we touch, or whenever we hug the people close to us. We are uncertain whether there will be sufficient food items and other necessities. We wonder if the Movement Control Order will be extended after the 14th of April. There are those who are anxious about their work or business, and finances in general. Most of all, we are not exactly sure when the pandemic will end.





In the Church, it has been decided that the Holy Week liturgical celebrations (including the Easter Vigil), would proceed without the participation of the lay faithful. As an individual participating in the RCIA process, we too may feel a sense of uncertainty in this time. We may be wondering if these decisions would delay our reception of the Sacrements of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, and if so, by how long?

Questions for reflection

- In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Movement Restriction Order, are you feeling anxious? If so, why? If not, why not?
- How do you feel knowing that your reception of the Sacraments of Initiation or acceptance into the Catholic Church has been put on hold?

Life is full of uncertainties. When we are uncertain or uneasy about someone or something, it is normal for us to feel anxious or worried. It is as though we are facing the unknown. In these instances, how do we respond in light of our feelings or emotions? How do we respond as followers of Jesus?

In this study lesson, we are going to reflect on the gospel reading for Palm Sunday, which is also known as "Passion Sunday". We are going to spend some time reflecting on the scripture text, and allow the words to teach us how to respond to moments of uncertainty and anxiety.

SCRIPTURE READING AND REFLECTION

For the Palm Sunday Mass, there are two readings from the Gospels.

The first reading is a passage from the Gospel of Matthew 21: 1-11. It describes the entry of Jesus into the holy city of Jerusalem, and how the people welcomed him. Usually, this passage is read by the priest at the beginning of the Mass as he gathers with the people outside, or at the entrance of the church. After the reading, the priest blesses the palms which are handed to the people. Then, led by the priest, the people, in procession, enter the church to continue the Mass.

The second gospel reading is from Matthew 26: 14-27: 66. It is a long scripture passage describing the events leading to the Passion (suffering) and death of Jesus on the cross. This passage helps us to anticipate and understand as to what is going to happen to Jesus in the coming days. In this way, both the gospel readings of the Palm Sunday Mass prepare us for the celebration of Holy Week, and especially for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

For this study lesson, we will focus on the first gospel passage, that is, 21: 1-11. Before we begin, let us pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we prepare to read the scripture text:

"Come, Holy Spirit, come and guide me as I prepare my mind and heart to read the words from the Bible. You are my counsellor and guide. Speak to me and teach me, so that I may receive spiritual food from you, and know how to live as a follower of Jesus. Thank you, dear Holy Spirit. I make this prayer through Christ our Lord.

Now, read the passage in Matthew 21: 1-11 slowly and meditatively. After reading the passage, reflect on the questions below.

Questions for Reflection

- Why did the people gather to welcome Jesus?
- How do you think Jesus would have felt, from the way he was received by the people as he entered the city of Jerusalem?
- What did the writer of the gospel mean when he wrote "And when he [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil"?

[Try not to read the information on the next page until you have completed the reflection]



When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the annual Jewish Feast of the Passover was beginning. The Passover is the most important religious celebration for the Jews, as they recall and celebrate how God had freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and had led them to the Promised land. Since the Jewish Temple was located in Jerusalem, thousands of pilgrims from different parts of Israel, as well as from other nations, would have come to the city at that time.

Among the people, news would have spread that a special man would be coming to the city. This is a man who teaches about God in a way that was different from all other teachers. He heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, cures lepers, makes the lame walk and even raises the dead. Some say he is a great prophet, while others even claim he is the long-awaited Messiah promised by God. Such news caused a great amount of excitement among the people. After all, if you knew there was someone very special coming to your city or town, wouldn't you feel excited too?

At the same time, however, the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem also caused uneasiness and anxiety among certain people, especially the Jewish political and religious leaders. They too have heard about him. They have heard that he does not respect the laws of the Sabbath day, that he mixes with sinners, such as prostitutes and tax-collectors, and worse, that he claims to be the Son of God. And so, questions and doubts arise. Who is Jesus? Is he a true or false prophet? Is he a holy man or a troublemaker? Is he a blasphemer or the Promised Messiah? What trouble would he cause when he comes to the city? No wonder the city was in turmoil.

But whoever they thought he was, a large number of people had heard that Jesus was someone very important, and were eager to see and welcome him. One of the ways people of that time showed honour to an important person, was to spread their coats or palm leaves upon their path. Some would have waved the palms. In this way, they welcomed Jesus with joy and praised God.

For Jesus, coming to Jerusalem at this sacred time had an important meaning. Jesus knew His mission was almost complete. The time had come for Jesus to claim His title as *Messiah* – the Saviour promised by God. However, Jesus wanted to do this differently from other important men. Traditionally, when a king or a ruler entered the city, they would do so on horses, as crowds of people greeted him.

Jesus, however, intentionally chose to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, an animal usually associated with the common people. In this way, Jesus showed the people that He was the one who was prophesied (foretold) by the prophet Zechariah hundreds of years ago: *"Look, your king comes to you; he is humble, he rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden"* (See: Zechariah 9:9). Jesus comes as a humble king to bring peace and to serve with humility.

Also, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus had told His disciples that He would soon be put to death, and after three days He would rise again. It meant that Jesus was aware He would claim His title only if He underwent suffering and death. He knew from His own understanding and reflection of His mission, that the Messiah would be put to death. Jesus, therefore, was aware that going to Jerusalem would mean He would be killed. He could have decided not to go there as a result. He could have kept away. But He decided to go on into the unknown.

What does it mean that Jesus decided to go into the unknown? Today, two thousand years later, we know the whole story about Jesus' life on earth. We also know how the story will end. That is, Jesus was put to death and three days later, He rose again. But if we honestly place ourselves in the shoes of Jesus at that time, how would Jesus have felt? Unlike us, Jesus did not know the full story. He knew by faith that He is the Messiah sent by the Father. He knew by faith that the Messiah would have to suffer and die. He knew by faith that the Messiah would rise again. Therefore, it was His faith in the Father which kept Jesus going. It was His faith in the Father that led Him to enter Jerusalem.

But let us not forget too, that Jesus was also human like us. Questions would have risen in His mind: "How will all these happen?" "How much suffering will I undergo?" "How and when will I be put to death? "Will it be very painful?" "Is death the only way?" "Will I remain faithful to the end?" "What if I decide not to go through with it?" And perhaps the most frightening of questions: "Will I rise again as promised by my Father?"

What would Jesus have thought and felt as He approached Jerusalem even as the crowds welcomed him with joy and honour? While Jesus believed fervently in His Father and was ready to fulfill the mission He has been entrusted with, the path before Him was paved with questions. As such, His entry into Jerusalem on that day was for Him, also an entrance into the unknown.

OUR RESPONSE

In spite of the uncertainties before him, Jesus entered into Jerusalem and into the unknown. What kept Him going was His faith and willingness to be obedient to His Father. Nothing could cause Him to doubt his Father or turn away from His mission. He trusted in His Father completely, and went into the unknown with courage, hope and faith.

Take some time to reflect on the following questions before responding:

- What lessons can you learn from Jesus about facing the uncertainties of life?
- How can I live my life in such a way, that reflects my trust in Jesus as the king of my life?

Write down your responses in your journal.

CONCLUSION

Palm Sunday marks the start of Holy Week. Over the next few days, Catholics will journey towards the Sacred Triduum (the three holy days) which reaches its high point on the Easter Virgil. We will not be able to be present for these celebrations in person, but we can participate in the Holy Thursday Mass, Good Friday service and the Easter Vigil Mass that are live-streamed, and be one with the whole Church. Remember, at this time, you are not alone. Mother Mary and all the saints intercede for you. The whole Church prays for and with you. Importantly, the Blessed Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit - is with you.

Pray three *Hail Mary's* asking for the intercession of Mary, Our Blessed Mother, for family members and friends who may be facing anxieties or uncertainties about their well-being, work or finances.