

April 9, Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4-9a; Matthew 26:14-27:66; Philippians 2:5-11

by [Christine Chakoian](#) in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue

Read the author's column on [the liturgy of the Palms](#).

The lectionary passage from Isaiah gives honor to the “tongue of a teacher.” Throughout his life, Jesus has carried the roles of prophet and priest, healer and even king. Yet it is his identity as rabbi, as teacher, that marks his last days. While the Gospel of John is known for Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples, Jesus is no less a teacher at the end of his ministry in Matthew—though in attitude and action as well as in word.

As the beginning of the end unfolds, Jesus self-identifies as teacher (*didaskalos*). Through each interaction that follows, he teaches us. He shows us how he himself keeps learning, keeps his ears open to “listen as those who are taught”—not for his own benefit but so that he may “sustain the weary with a word” (Isa. 50:4). He models humility without humiliation, insult without disgrace. Each scene in the last chapters of Matthew offers hard-won lessons in the life of faith.

At the Passover meal, Jesus takes on the hard truth that it is not just the scribes and Pharisees, political rulers, or fickle crowds who will betray him. Over the sacred supper that celebrates God’s faithfulness, Jesus faces his closest disciples and announces that he will be betrayed by one of them. When each of them asks, “Surely not I, Lord?” Jesus answers with silence. He responds only to Judas, leaving the responsibility in Judas’s hands: “You have said so.” Yet in the next breath, Jesus announces that God is providing a new covenant. As the unleavened bread sustained our ancestors, so now God provides Christ’s body to sustain us. As the blood of the Passover lamb once secured release from death, so now God provides Christ’s own blood to rescue us—even in our ignorance and betrayal.

The first lesson is this: sooner or later, each of us will face the consequences of our choices, whether or not we are prepared to embrace them. Yet God's kingdom is larger than our failure, and God's covenant is stronger than our brokenness.

At the Mount of Olives, Jesus predicts that all his followers will desert him, even Peter. Indeed, the desertion begins even as Peter, James, and John are tapped to accompany Jesus in prayer. Three times—as Jesus is pouring his heart to God in grief and agitation—his companions succumb to sleep; three times Jesus rebukes them. The desertion continues as Judas betrays Jesus to the armed crowd. But Jesus rebukes only the unnamed disciple who responds with violence.

The second lesson is this: Christ does not pretend that we will be more faithful than we are. Instead, he points us to the trustworthy faithfulness of God in the midst of our struggle—a faithfulness more powerful than all the violence of the world can conquer.

At the hall of Caiaphas, Jesus faces the power of false witnesses—yet stays silent. And when Jesus is asked directly whether he is the Messiah, the Son of God, he answers, “You have said so”—modeling passive resistance, allowing others’ words to reap what they sow. Then he takes those words and reclaims them according to God’s intentions: “the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power.”

Similarly, before Pilate, Jesus again is confronted with a question—“Are you the King of the Jews?”—and again he answers, “You say so.” Again he is accused by the chief priests and the elders, and again he does not answer. Pilate tries repeatedly to free Jesus but is thwarted. Finally he washes his hands of responsibility, caving to the voice of the crowds. In the end, Pilate’s people behave no better than the chief priest’s. The high priest’s retinue struck Jesus and spat on him; now Pilate’s own soldiers do the same and more.

Yet in the face of gross degradation, Jesus teaches us this third lesson: we can choose the path of Isaiah, “I gave my back to those who struck me . . . I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.” We can choose the path of peaceful resistance, turning others’ intended humiliation into humility and even power.

Jesus’ final lesson for us comes at Golgotha. He is mocked by the soldiers, chief priests, scribes, and elders; he is taunted even by the bandits crucified with him. The words of Psalm 22 are fulfilled: “They divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots,” and “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

‘He trusts in the Lord,’ they say, ‘let the Lord rescue him.’”

Yet Jesus responds not by denying God but by citing that very psalm as his prayer of lament: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” For he knows the verses that follow as well:

You are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame . . . I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. You who fear the Lord, praise him! . . . For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. . . . All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

This is the final lesson of the teacher. Now it is up to us, as we enter Holy Week, to seek to have what Philippians calls “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus . . . who emptied himself” in his faithfulness, who emptied himself for our sake.