

Matt. 21:2–9/St. Matthew Passion
Palmarum
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 24, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is Palm Sunday. This remembrance of our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and hailed as a king, is the start of Holy Week. From now until Easter Sunday, we will focus each day on different aspects of our Lord's suffering, on His death for the sins of the world and His resurrection from the dead. Besides Palm Sunday, today is also known as Passion Sunday since we hear the entire passion account from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. The word "passion" simply means "suffering." Throughout Holy Week, you have the opportunity to hear the passion account, the story of Christ's suffering and death, from each of the four Gospels. Today we heard from St. Matthew, tomorrow we'll hear from St. Mark, Wednesday from St. Luke, and on Good Friday from St. John. Hearing the accounts from all four Gospels allows us to meditate on the Passion of Christ in its entirety and to reflect on the distinctions between each account. Today, we focus on a part of the Passion narrative found only in St. Matthew's Gospel: the blood curse.

So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. (Matthew 27:24–26)

At Passover, there was a custom for the Roman governor, in this case Pontius Pilate, to release a prisoner for the Jews. Barabbas is called a notorious prisoner. His name, Barabbas, literally means "son of the father." Barabbas was a robber and a murderer, an anti-Roman

revolutionary. Barabbas actually committed the crime Jesus was being accused of: insurrection. But Jesus is not a revolutionary. He is the Prince of Peace. Now the crowd gets to decide: Barabbas, the son of the father, or Jesus, the Son of God the Father. Influenced by the priests and the elders, the crowd handed over Jesus. As the hymn "My Song is Love Unknown" puts it: "A murderer they save, the Prince of Life they slay. Yet cheerful He To suffering goes that He His foes from thence might free." Pilate asked: "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?" They all said "Let Him be crucified!" When Pilate asked what evil Jesus had done, they shouted all the more: "Let Him be crucified!" The cries of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" on Palm Sunday, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" turned into cries of "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

Pontious Pilate washed his hands in a symbolic way before the crowd, saying: "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Pilate recognized that Jesus was innocent. His wife had a dream that same day and sent word to her husband: "Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream." Pilate heard how the priests and the elders were arguing. They had no evidence against our Lord. Pilate heard the anger of the crowds. He feared an uprising, so he gave into their demands and handed Jesus over for torture and crucifixion. Pilate could agree with the High Priest Caiaphas: it's better that one man should die for the people than for the whole nation to perish (John 11:50). In his role as a public servant, Pilate thinks he has to sacrifice Jesus for peace. But as an individual, he wants nothing to do with this sham trial. Then comes the blood curse.

All the people answered: "His blood be on us and on our children!" The people were willing to take this guilt upon themselves. That's how deluded they were. They handed over an innocent man in place of a murderer and were willing to accept whatever consequences in this

world or in the next. The phrase “his blood be on us and on our children” is similar to the curse found in the Old Testament at the beginning of 2 Samuel. An Amalekite stumbled across King Saul, who was badly wounded in battle against Philistine archers. According to the Amalekite, King Saul asked for mercy lest he fall into the hands of the uncircumcised. And the Amalekite obliged. When David heard this, he said to the Amalekite: “How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?” David then had the Amalekite executed, saying: “Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, ‘I have killed the Lord’s anointed.’”

The mouth of the Jews testifies against them. They have killed the Lord’s anointed, Jesus Christ. “His blood be on us and on our children!” they cried. Historically this has been seen as the reason for God’s destroying of the Temple and all of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans in A.D. 70. As Jesus said earlier, at the end of Matthew 21, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” Jesus is the stone the builders rejected and He has become the cornerstone. “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” There are grave consequences in this life and in the next for those who reject Jesus Christ.

Of course, this passage has often been misused throughout history. Many Jews have suffered at the hands of Christians who use this passage in an unchristian way. For example, on this day, March 24th, the church used to commemorate Simon of Trent, who lived in what is today northern Italy. Simon was a three year old boy who went missing on Maundy Thursday in the year 1475. On Easter Sunday, a cook found the body of Simon in the ritual bath of a local Jew. The entire Jewish community was rounded up and forced to confess, under torture, that they used the blood of the child for ritual purposes. Fifteen Jews were sentenced to burn at the stake

and pogroms against the Jews spread into the neighboring regions. There's a distinct possibility the Jews were framed for the crime, seeing as an itinerant Franciscan preacher had just preached a sermon series against the Jews of Trent. The blood curse was often invoked to stir up fear and violence against local Jewish communities.

In the end, it's up to God to mete out justice, not for Christians to take justice into their own hands. In fact, when you look at the crucifixion of Jesus as a Christian, you recognize God was working through this entire situation to appease His righteous wrath against sin. We must always remember during Holy Week that it wasn't the Jews who crucified Jesus or the Roman soldiers or Pontius Pilate. They were all involved. But ultimately, it was our sin that led Jesus to the cross. There He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon Jesus Christ was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with the bloody stripes upon His back we find healing.

In this light, the blood curse of the Jews can be seen for what it truly is: a blessing for those who would believe in Jesus among all nations. "His blood be on us and on our children!" Yes, in fact, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). The Jews who shouted this didn't realize what they were saying. Later, after Jesus rose from the dead, some of them would hear the Apostle Peter's sermon at Pentecost: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." When they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself." Some 3,000 souls were added to the church that day.

“Let His blood be on us and upon our children.” What was intended to be a curse God turned into a blessing. Jesus was nailed to the cross for your sins. The guilt is yours. But Jesus took your sin, your guilt and your shame, upon Himself on the cross and when He rose from the dead, your sins, your guilt, and your shame were no longer there. Jesus forgives the most heinous of criminals. The Son of the Father takes the punishment that you might go free, that you might truly become sons of God the Father in Holy Baptism. So draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience by the blood of Jesus and with your bodies washed with pure water, not with the cowardice of Pilate washing his hands, but in the confidence that Jesus washes away all your sins in Baptism. May the blood of Jesus Christ be upon you and your children and all those who are far off, not for a curse but for cleansing from all sin. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.