

ENCOUNTERING THE PEOPLE OF THE PASSION

Stretching out Thy divine hands upon the Cross,
You have joined together
that which before was divided,
and by Your mediation
You have offered as a gift to the Father
the nature of mortal man,
that was under condemnation.
Therefore we sing the praises
of Your sinless Crucifixion.
St. Joseph the Studite-
Eastern Prayers for the Great Lent



We remind ourselves that we are in the presence of the Lord.
We will take refuge in His loving heart.
He is our strength in times of weakness.
He is our comforter in times of sorrow.
We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You
because by Your holy passion and cross,
You have redeemed the world.

As we read the accounts of the
passion of Jesus as found in
Matthew 26:3 - 27:66

Mark 14:26 - 15:47

Luke 22:39 - 23:56

John 18:1 - 19:42

we meet a number of people who were
were involved with Jesus.
Let us reflect on these people who either
willingly or unwillingly were intimately
connected with Jesus in His last hours.
And as we pray, let us remember our
brothers and sisters in the Holy Land
who suffer this day.



(This service is meant to be used over several days and not all at one time.)

EXCERPTS FROM THE LETTER of the PTRIARCH of JERUSALEM

Brothers and Sisters,

The grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

We are entering the Lenten season. With Jesus we go to the desert of Jericho which, today, is telling us two things: first, that the desert which still surrounds it is the same one where Jesus went to fast and pray before bringing his message to the world; and second, that Jericho is a small prison city, like all the other Palestinian cities, a symbol of the conflict situation that has become the context in which we live, generation after generation, and day after day.

On the one hand, during this Lenten season, we want to pray and encounter God in solitude, and on the other hand, we want to meet people in order to overcome the conflict and to see the face of God in everyone.

To be sure, this life comprises trials, "Whoever wishes to come after me must take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34), but it also includes a love that makes life abundant: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (John 10:10; John 13:35).

We fast in order to enable us to reconcile ourselves with God, as St. Paul tells us: "Let yourselves be reconciled with God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). And reconciliation with God cannot take place without reconciliation with all of God's children, our brothers and sisters, friends and enemies.

We fast in order to renew our acceptance of the faith with all of its liberating force and its demands because the vocation to be leaven, salt and light is a vocation to a difficult life. But Jesus also told us: "If you have faith, you will be able to move mountains" (cf. Matthew 21:21). Authentic faith, fully accepted and lived, makes up for small numbers, drives fear away, and enables believers, even if they are alone in their society, to contribute to the common work of building up that society.

The vocation to be leaven in the dough of Jesus' own land requires that we stay in this land, even though life in other lands might be easier. The vocation to be leaven is a vocation to live the commandment of love in order to forgive, while at the same time demanding all the rights that have been lost, and in order to transform life into a sharing of goods and sacrifices. This sharing can make all of us, with all of our differences in religion and nationality, true builders of the new society that must arise in this Holy Land for all of us, Jews, Druze, Muslims and Christians.

We are called to a difficult life in the midst of a conflict that still continues in Palestine, and that has repercussions in the other countries of our diocese, Israel and Jordan, [and the] occupation and all that it implies: the restrictions on our freedom, the wall, the military checkpoints, the deprivations, the Israeli soldiers who, at any time, enter our Palestinian cities, kill people, take prisoners, uproot trees, and destroy houses.

And add to that, the lack of vision within Palestinian society, and the lack of security which is exploited by some who permit themselves to disobey the laws and to oppress their brothers, especially those who bear arms and who use them to oppress and to steal the money of others, and the internal struggles that are not going away.

Added to that, the non-response or the inability of the international community to respond to the many voices in this region that are calling for peace. And the numerous prayers that are taking place everywhere and that continue to be made in this time of trial: In them and in all people of good will we place our hope.

In the face of all this, Lent reminds Christians that this situation can be one of death or of new life, and that they are called to transform it into a situation of new life. In this context, the purpose of our fasting is, first of all, to meditate and search for the will of

God and his Providence in the midst of the trials we are undergoing, and secondly, to renew our love for one another.

By adding the weight of the concerns of our brothers to our own, God becomes present among us, because as Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). We are therefore three to carry our concerns: ourselves, our brother, and God. With that, we become stronger and the burden becomes lighter.

Thirdly, with the presence of God in our midst, we will come to see the meaning of the events we are experiencing; we will see how to transform trials and oppressions into love for each other, which will give us more strength, a strength that will unite us more and that will allow us to carry out a true resistance whose purpose will not be to destroy the adversary, or to fill our hearts with rancor against him, but to put an end to the evil of occupation, with all of its oppression, and in this way to begin a new life for everyone, the occupied as well as the occupiers.

Brothers and sisters, I ask God to grant you his grace and blessing. May he bless and accept your fasting and may it be a source of renewal for you. I ask almighty God to grant you the gift of loving life despite the difficult circumstances in which he sent you to build a new life and a new society for all. Amen.

Archbishop Michel Sabbah, Patriarch



JUDAS

According to the four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Judas Iscariot agreed to betray Jesus by handing him over to the chief priests to be murdered. In the Gospel of John, Judas Iscariot agreed to lead the chief priests to Jesus and identify him with a kiss on the cheek. In return, the chief priests gave Judas 30 pieces of silver.

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Judas goes to the chief priests, he asks: “What will you give me if I deliver [Jesus] to you?” (26:15). This verse suggests Judas betrayed Jesus out of greed. In the Gospel of John, after Jesus gives Judas the piece of dipped bread, “Satan entered into him” (13:27). This verse suggests Satan’s spirit entered into Judas and caused him to do evil.

Did Jesus know that Judas was going to betray him?

Yes. Jesus knew he would die and that he would be betrayed by one of his own. At the Last Supper, Jesus reveals this fact to his 12 apostles: “Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me” (Matthew 26: 21). In the Gospel of Matthew, when his apostles ask who it is, Jesus replies: “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me, will betray me” (v. 23). When the apostles take turns asking who, Judas asks, “Is it I, Master?” Jesus answers, “You have said so” (v. 25). The Gospel of John provides a more detailed account. Jesus reveals Judas is his betrayer by saying: “It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it.’ So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot...Jesus said to him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly.’ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him” (John 13:26-28, NRSV). While it’s assumed that the other apostles did not know about Judas’ betrayal, Jesus definitely knew.

What did Judas do after Jesus died?

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Judas repented his betrayal (27:4 - “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood”) and tried to return the silver to the chief priests, throwing the coins on the Temple floor. He then committed suicide by hanging himself.

The chief priests took the “blood money” (v. 6) and bought a potter’s field for burying foreigners. The field eventually became known as the “Field of Blood” (v. 8).

REFLECTION

How do I betray Jesus in my own life and for what reason?



THE SOLDIERS

There was the crowd of soldiers who arrested him, the crowd of hangers-on at the High Priest's house, the mob ringing the Praetorium as Pontius Pilate debated whether to grant clemency to a terrorist or to the Son of God, the cruel soldiers, just doing guy stuff, just having good clean fun with Jesus and a crown of thorns, and finally the real die-hard enemies of Christ, hanging out by his cross, waiting to see him die casting lots for His clothing. And from their hearts and lips poured that hatred and venom and blood lust that always bubble to the surface when cold hatred is fanned into a mob's white-hot rage. The soldiers were here to offer Jesus the cheap wine on the hyssop, to thrust a spear into His side, and later to guard the tomb. There is one mention of a guard's recognition of the crucifixion event:

“And the centurion who stood by over against him, when he saw that he had expired having thus cried out, said, Truly this man was Son of God.”

REFLECTION

How do I stop myself from inflicting hurt and pain on others?
Do I even know that I am doing it?



Three men meet Jesus. One meets Him walking towards Calvary's hill, another meets Him hanging on a cross, and the last one meets Him at the foot of the cross.

Three men meet Jesus. Three men from different backgrounds: an African farmer, a thief, and a Roman centurion.

Three men meet Jesus. Simon, the compelled one; the thief, the crucified one; and the Roman centurion, the calloused one.



SIMON of CYRENE, THE COMPELLED ONE

“As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross” (Matthew 27:32). Who was this Simon? Mark gives us a clue: “A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross” (Mark 15:21). Simon, then, was married and had two sons. Mark mentions their names because Alexander and Rufus must have been familiar to the Christian community at the time he was writing the Gospel that bears his name.

The streets of Jerusalem are filled with worshipers. It's the Passover season. All of Jerusalem is astir with the crucifixion of a Man who's been tried—a so-called Messiah who's condemned to death. In rounding a corner in a crowd-filled street of Jerusalem, Simon comes face to face with Christ, crushed under the oppressive weight of the cross. And Jesus' eyes and Simon's eyes meet, only for a moment. Simon's heart is drawn out in compassion, tenderness, and love. And a rude Roman soldier pointing to Simon says, “If you have such compassion on Him, pick up the cross. Take it upon your shoulder.”

The Scripture says that Simon did not take the cross by choice. The burdensome, agonizing weight of the cross was forced upon Simon's shoulders. Bending over, he picked up the cross and stumbled under its weight as they climbed the hill called Calvary. I suppose the splinters of the cross rubbed his shoulders raw. I see him there, his back stooped. I hear his panting. I see the beads of sweat stand out on his forehead. I listen to his grunts and his groans in agony. I watch as his knees buckle. I see him stumble.

REFLECTION

How do I express my compassion for others?



THE THIEF, THE CRUCIFIED ONE

The thief meets Him. The cross of Jesus was placed between two thieves. The two thieves represent all humanity and all humanity is faced with the choice about this Christ. One thief says, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” (Luke 23:39). One thief thinks only of himself, only of the here and the now. The other thief thinks of eternity. As one thief is mocking Him, the other thief looks at Him and says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

Who was this thief? Obviously he wasn’t a Roman. Had he been a Roman, he would not have been crucified.

REFLECTION

In my daily thoughts and activities which thief do I more resemble? Why?



THE ROMAN CENTURION, THE CALLOUSED ONE

Standing beneath the foot of the cross, a Roman centurion found Jesus. Who was this Roman? I can imagine the official order that came to his post of duty that morning: "Execute this man in the usual manner. But make sure there are no riots in Jerusalem today. So whether you need a hundred Roman soldiers or 200 or 500, they're at your disposal. Get rid of Him!" It was all in a day's work. And while the Son of God was dying for the world, a calloused centurion stood beneath the cross.

But as the Roman centurion hears the dialogue between Christ and the thief above the mocking shouts of Christ's enemies, as he listens to His agonizing prayer, and as he observes the thick darkness that unexpectedly covers Calvary, something mysterious and marvelous happens to him. Mark writes, "When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39).

REFLECTION

Is being a committed Christian something I take for granted or do I first realize it when a thunderbolt strikes me?



PILATE

The official residence of the procurators was the palace of Herod at Cæsarea; where there was a military force of about 3,000 soldiers. These soldiers came up to Jerusalem at the time of the feasts, when the city was full of strangers, and there was greater danger of disturbances, hence it was that Pilate had come to Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion. His name will be forever covered with infamy because of the part which he took in this matter, though at the time it appeared to him of small importance.

Pilate is a type of the worldly man, knowing the right and anxious to do it so far as it can be done without personal sacrifice of any kind, but yielding easily to pressure from those whose interest it is that he should act otherwise. He would gladly have acquitted Christ, and even made serious efforts in that direction, but gave way at once when his own position was threatened.

THE LETTER OF PONTIUS PILATE, which he wrote to the Roman Emperor, concerning Jesus.

Pontius Pilate to Tiberius Cæsar the emperor, greeting.

Upon Jesus Christ, whose case I had clearly set forth to you in my last, at length by the will of the people a bitter punishment has been inflicted, myself being in a sort unwilling and rather afraid. A man, by Hercules, so pious and strict, no age has ever had nor will have. But wonderful were the efforts of the people themselves, and the unanimity of all the scribes and chief men and elders, to crucify this ambassador of truth, notwithstanding that their own prophets, and after our manner the sibyls, warned them against it: and supernatural signs appeared while he was hanging, and, in the opinion of philosophers, threatened destruction to the whole world. His disciples are flourishing, in their work and the regulation of their lives not belying their master; yea, in his name most beneficent. Had I not been afraid of the rising of a sedition among the people, who were just on the point of breaking out, perhaps this man would still have been alive to us; although, urged more by fidelity to your dignity than induced by my own wishes, I did not according to my strength resist that innocent blood free from the whole charge brought against it, but unjustly, through the malignity of men, should be sold and suffer, yet, as the Scriptures signify, to their own destruction. Farewell. 28th March.

REFLECTION

For what reasons do I “see out” Jesus?

How do I go about being a person of hope and seek forgiveness?



MARY

The words spoken by Simeon to Mary at the presentation of the Child in the temple "And your soul a sword shall pierce" (Lk 2:35) remind us that Mary will be intimately associated in the redemptive work of her Son. The sword of which Simeon speaks expresses the participation of Mary in the suffering of her Son: it is an unspeakable pain which pierces her soul. The Lord suffers upon the cross for our sins; such are the sins of each of us as also to have forged a sword of sorrow to pierce her heart.

The "sword" which pierces the soul of Mary is the sword of immense pain linked both to the passion and death of her Son.

"Standing by the cross of Jesus" (Jn 19:25), Mary shares in the gift which the Son makes of himself: she offers Jesus, gives him over, and begets him to the end for our sake.

The "yes" spoken on the day of the Annunciation reaches full maturity on the day of the Cross, when the time comes for Mary to receive and beget as her children all those who become disciples, pouring out upon them the saving love of her Son: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!'" (Jn 19:26)

She stood at Calvary, in accordance with the divine plan (cf. Jn 19:25), suffering grievously with her only-begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart to his sacrifice, and lovingly consenting to the immolation of this victim which she herself had brought forth.

REFLECTION

How do I live out Mary's response to the angel: "Be it done to me according to your word"?

Can I accept the trials and sorrows of this life and unite my suffering with that of Jesus or do I just complain?



JOHN

John was the son of Zebedee and Salome, and the brother of James the Greater. In the Gospels the two brothers are often called after their father "the sons of Zebedee". From James being thus placed first, the conclusion is drawn that John was the younger of the two brothers. In any case John had a prominent position with the Apostles. Peter, James, and he were the only witnesses of the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37), of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1), and of the Agony in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). Only he and Peter were sent into the city to make the preparation for the Last Supper (Luke 22:8). At the Supper itself his place was next to Christ on Whose breast he leaned (John 13:23, 25). According to the general interpretation John was also that "other disciple" who with Peter followed Christ after the arrest into the palace of the high-priest (John 18:15). John alone remained near his beloved Master at the foot of the Cross on Calvary with the Mother of Jesus and the pious women, and took the desolate Mother into his care as the last legacy of Christ (John 19:25-27). After the Resurrection John with Peter was the first of the disciples to hasten to the grave and he was the first to believe that Christ had truly risen (John 20:2-10). When later Christ appeared at the Lake of Genesareth John was also the first of the seven disciples present who recognized his Master standing on the shore (John 21:7).

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REFLECTION

How much do I really love the Lord?
How do I show it?



PETER

In spite of his firm faith in Jesus, Peter had so far no clear knowledge of the mission and work of the Savior. The sufferings of Christ especially, as contradictory to his worldly conception of the Messiah, were inconceivable to him, and his erroneous conception occasionally elicited a sharp reproof from Jesus (Matthew 16:21-23, Mark 8:31-33). Peter's irresolute character, which continued notwithstanding his enthusiastic fidelity to his Master, was clearly revealed in connection with the Passion of Christ. The Savior had already told him that Satan had desired him that he might sift him as wheat. But Christ had prayed for him that his faith fail not, and, being once converted, he confirms his brethren (Luke 22:31-32). Peter's assurance that he was ready to accompany his Master to prison and to death, elicited Christ's prediction that Peter should deny Him (Matthew 26:30-35; Mark 14:26-31; Luke 22:31-34; John 13:33-38). When Christ proceeded to wash the feet of His disciples before the Last Supper, and came first to Peter, the latter at first protested, but, on Christ's declaring that otherwise he should have no part with Him, immediately said: "Lord, not only my feet, but also my hands and my head" (John 13:1-10). In the Garden of Gethsemane Peter had to submit to the Savior's reproach that he had slept like the others, while his Master suffered deadly anguish (Mark 14:37). At the seizing of Jesus, Peter in an outburst of anger wished to defend his Master by force, but was forbidden to do so. He at first took to flight with the other Apostles (John 18:10-11; Matthew 26:56); then turning he followed his captured Lord to the courtyard of the High Priest, and there denied Christ, asserting explicitly and swearing that he knew Him not (Matthew 26:58-75; Mark 14:54-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-27). This denial was of course due, not to a lapse of interior faith in Christ, but to exterior fear and cowardice. His sorrow was thus so much the greater, when, after his Master had turned His gaze towards him, he clearly recognized what he had done.

The Risen Lord confirms Peter's precedence. In spite of this weakness, his position as head of the Apostles was later confirmed by Jesus, and his precedence was not less conspicuous after the Resurrection than before. The women, who were the first to find Christ's tomb empty, received from the angel a special message for Peter (Mark 16:7). To him alone of the Apostles did Christ appear on the first day after the Resurrection (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). But, most important of all, when He appeared at the Lake of Genesareth, Christ renewed to Peter His special commission to feed and defend His flock, after Peter had thrice affirmed his special love for his Master (John 21:15-17). In conclusion Christ foretold the violent death Peter would have to suffer, and thus invited him to follow Him in a special manner (ibid., 20-23). Thus was Peter called and trained for the Apostleship and clothed with the primacy of the Apostles, which he exercised in a most unequivocal manner after Christ's Ascension into Heaven.



MARY MAGDALEN

Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, wasted the great beauty that God had given her in a life of sin, but one day she saw Christ and was touched by grace. On the day of our Lord's crucifixion, she stood with the Mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross. At early dawn on the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene and other women who had ministered to Jesus went to the Lord's sepulcher. Two angels said to them, "He is not here, but is risen....Go, tell his disciples." Mary Magdalene ran to tell the Apostles what she had seen and heard. Then Peter and John, hastening to the sepulcher, saw and believed.

She was the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus, His most ardent and loving follower. She had stood with Mary at the foot of the Cross on that brutal Good Friday afternoon and had been by the side of Mary during these difficult hours. On Easter morning, she went with the other women to the tomb and it was there, in the garden near the tomb, that Jesus appeared to her. It was she who brought the news of the Resurrection to the Apostles, and Peter and John raced to the tomb to see what had happened.

She was from Magadala, a small fishing town on the Sea of Galilee, between Capernaum and Tiberius. She was known to be a "great sinner," a woman of the streets who heard Jesus speak of the mercy and forgiveness of God and changed her life completely. Her matter-of-fact witness to the Resurrection moved Peter and John to go and see for themselves: "I have seen the Lord and these things he said to me." Jesus had chosen her to bring the news to them and she simply told them what had happened.

She has always been the example of great love and great forgiveness, one of those close to Jesus who grasped the truth of God's love for human beings and spent her life bearing witness to that love.

REFLECTION

Do I realize Jesus' great love and concern for me?
How do I live as a "forgiven" person?



JOSEPH of ARIMETHIA

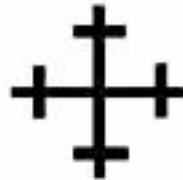
All that is known for certain concerning him is derived from the canonical Gospels. He was born at Arimathea -- hence his surname -- "a city of Judea" (Luke 23:51). He was a wealthy Israelite (Matthew 27:57), "a good and a just man" (Luke 23:50), "who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43). He is also called by St. Mark and by St. Luke a bouleutes, literally, "a senator", whereby is meant a member of the Sanhedrin or supreme council of the Jews. He was a disciple of Jesus, probably ever since Christ's first preaching in Judea (John 2:23), but he did not declare himself as such "for fear of the Jews" (John 19:38). On account of this secret allegiance to Jesus, he did not consent to His condemnation by the Sanhedrin (Luke 23:51), and was most likely absent from the meeting which sentenced Jesus to death (cf. Mark 14:64).

The Crucifixion of the Master quickened Joseph's faith and love, and suggested to him that he should provide for Christ's burial before the Sabbath began. Unmindful therefore of all personal danger, a danger which was indeed considerable under the circumstances, he boldly requested from Pilate the Body of Jesus, and was successful in his request (Mark 15:43-45). Once in possession of this sacred treasure, he -- together with Nicodemus, whom his courage had likewise emboldened, and who brought abundant spices -- wrapped up Christ's Body in fine linen and grave bands, laid it in his own tomb, new and yet unused, and hewn out of a rock in a neighboring garden, and withdrew after rolling a great stone to the opening of the sepulcher (Matthew 27:59, 60; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:38-42).

REFLECTION

How far am I willing to "stick my neck out" as a Christian?

Soul of Christ, sanctify me,
body of Christ, save me,
blood of Christ, inebriate me,
water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me:
hide me within your wounds
and never let me be separated from you.
From the wicked enemy defend me,
in the hour of my death, call me
and bid me come to you,
so that with your saints I may praise you
for ever and ever.



REFLECTION

Like all symbols, the cross evokes more than one can explain. It condenses death and life into one symbol. It enfolds some of the deepest fears of humanity--vulnerability, betrayal, pain, forsakeness--and transfigures them into expressions of hope. When Christians proclaim the power of the cross, they are voicing their confidence that death is not the end, that the grip of evil has been broken, and that the powers and principalities who seem to control this world will be banished. When Christians proclaim the power of the cross, they are declaring, albeit often with tremulous voice, that at times one must simply endure suffering that certain things in life must be borne. And they are declaring that in the passion of Jesus we find a model for our fidelity.

The cross is a symbol Christians have been given to image their hope that God is with them even in pain and tragedy and ambiguity. It is a symbol of the longing to give themselves over to a project larger than their own self-interest, and of the faith that pouring out one's life for the sake of another brings new life. It is a symbol that enables Christians to name the hard things of their lives, to express anguish rather than repress it.

In the face of the history that has disfigured the cross, should Christians lay it aside? Should they not repent of the violence it has justified and seek alternative symbols.

The symbol of the cross is too connected to our experience of faith to be laid aside. Rather, we Christians need to think together about this symbol we use with such frequency. We need to be less casual, more mindful about its function. We need to repent of its abuse in order to reclaim its power.



**Receive the sign of the cross on your ears,
that you may hear the voice of the Lord.**

**Receive the sign of the cross on your eyes,
that you may see the glory of God.**

**Receive the sign of the cross on your lips,
that you may respond to the word of God.**

**Receive the sign of the cross over your heart,
that Christ may dwell there by faith.**

**Receive the sign of the cross on your shoulders,
that you may bear the gentle yoke of Christ.**

**Receive the sign of the cross on your hands,
that Christ may be known in the work which you do.**

**Receive the sign of the cross on your feet,
that you may walk in the way of Christ.**