



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**The Liturgy of the Passion**  
**March 28, 2010**

We begin Holy Week by hearing the story of the end of Jesus' life, his closing hours. The early Christians did not have beautiful buildings. They didn't hear sermons. They simply gathered together, they sang songs, they prayed and they heard the story of Jesus read out loud. They believed the story. They trusted the story, its power and its truth. "Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear." It's a hard story. It's a story of good against evil, of life against death, of truth against lies, of hope against despair. It is the story of love. The story as we hear it today begins with Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Sometimes we may think about whether we like communion or not or how it's served or whether we were moved by the service or not, but let us be very clear, on the last night of Jesus' life, he sat down and shared a meal with his closest friends. And when he did so, he said to them and thus to us *Do this in remembrance of me*. As you hear the story, I would invite you to find yourself in the story. One of the disciples betrayed Jesus, but it could have been any one of them who handed Jesus over. Find yourself in the story; find God in the story, the one who was handed over, and the one who loved so much. It's his story we hear this day.

First Reading: The Last Supper – Matthew 26:14-27

In the story, Jesus offers himself up for us, so it is appropriate that we offer ourselves to Him. It is appropriate that on this day we have Mission Madness and send volunteers all over this community to reach out to those in need. It is appropriate that we share our tithes and our offerings. Money does figure in this story, the mention of 30 pieces of silver. It seems that Judas was one who loved money more than he loved the Lord Jesus, and the amount of 30 pieces of silver is fascinating because that is the price that was required in those days to set a slave free. So the price on Jesus' head is the price that was required for those who were in bondage, for those who were shackled, to be liberated, to become free. This story is about Jesus' coming to set us free. So let us offer ourselves generously as he has offered himself to us. Many important things happen to us in our lives. The most important thing ever to happen to any one of us has already happened. It happened outside the city of Jerusalem when Jesus knelt down and prayed, and he prayed *Not my will but your will be done*. And because he prayed this, you and I can pray and God listens and God cares. So let us, because of Jesus, bow our heads and pray together:

Almighty and gracious God, you created a massive marvelous universe that staggers the mind. At the epicenter of it all is one man outside a city who prayed to you. He had come to bring healing to those who are sick, to raise the dead for those who grieve, to say "No more swords" for those who yearn for peace, to bring justice for those who hated injustice. He loved the unloved, even though his own friends left him alone, and he died for the life of the world. For this, Jesus we give you thanks and praise not just for ourselves and those whom we love but for those who have no one to pray for them. We offer all of them up into your loving arms.

In Jesus' life, he prayed often and those who followed him around admired his prayers so much so that one time they said "Lord, teach us to pray." In that moment he taught them the

prayer that we treasure so much that we call The Lord's Prayer, and so we pray His words now together:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

After that supper, Jesus went out to a place, a place that to this day has very ancient gnarled olive trees. Jesus came to this place and knelt under the trees and prayed. Those trees were made of the same kind of wood that would be fashioned into his cross, the instrument of his own death. The captain of Sianna called the wood of the cross a bridge into heaven. Jesus invites us to cross that bridge with him.

As we hear the story, I want you to listen. I want you to listen to the disciples sleeping. Then I want you to hear the clashing iron of armaments, men of violence coming out to arrest Jesus. Then I want you to hear a barely audible kiss as Jesus was handed over, and I want you to hear what Jesus called the one who handed him over. He called him 'friend' and I don't think there is any sarcasm in his voice – 'friend' – because the gospel is this *Greater love has no man than this than to lay down his life for his friends*. They rose up in violence and Jesus quelled the rage, said *No, I've come for peace, to bring peace among us*, his friends.

#### Second Reading: Jesus Arrested – Matthew 26:45-56

In the next scene, I would advise you to listen to Jesus, to listen to the silence of Jesus. God loves silence, and when Jesus was silent, he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah Chapter 53. He had no form or beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. As one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised. Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. He was oppressed, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he opened not his mouth. He did no violence. There was no deceit in his mouth. He makes himself an offering for sin. Therefore, I will divide with him a portion with the great because he poured out his soul to death and bore the sins of many. As you hear the silence of Jesus, I would ask you to notice the contrast with the volume of the people. Their loud racket tries to drown out the silence of the Lord Jesus as they handed him over. And we unwittingly find our voices united with them in saying *Crucify Him*.

#### Third Reading: Jesus Before Pilate – Matthew 27:11-26

Along the roadside in the central region of Israel is a bush. It's a pretty bush until you get close to it and touch it. It's called Ziziphus spina-christi. That's vines with thorns that are amazingly sharp, that pierce the skin very easily, and their tips bear some poison, and not only is the skin pierced, but a whelp rises and stays for a long time. Jesus laid aside his crown of glory and instead, in its place, he donned a crown made of this Ziziphus spina-christi – the pain. The soldiers mocked him and said he was a king and thought there was such sarcasm. I'm sure they doubled over in laughter, thinking about

the way they were making fun of him, but God, I believe, in heaven, even in the thick of God's grief in this moment, had to have smiled a little bit over the irony for Jesus truly was the king, a different kind of king, one whose scepter is humility and whose reign is love. They wagged their heads at him and said "If you're the son of God, save yourself." We will think about this on Friday, Good Friday, of this week. It's a day to check your watch, at 9:00 in the morning and think about Jesus being on this sham trial, at noon, think about the rising sun, Jesus feeling the piercing, the nails, the ridicule from the bystanders, at 3:00 when Jesus is breathing his last, the pain, the darkness gathering overhead. At this moment, Jesus prayed a prayer. It's a prayer that his mother had taught him when he was just a little boy *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* His mother watched him as he prayed this prayer one last time. Did she think back to when she taught him those words? Did she recall, as we might imagine, that they prayed that prayer together, her and Jesus when Joseph, her husband, breathed his last? *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* For any of us who have ever felt forsaken by God, Jesus joins his voice and his heart to ours as he gives himself up for us, one, with us, in our suffering.

#### Fourth Reading: The Crucifixion – Matthew 27:32-54

When St. Francis of Assisi thought about this story, the suffering and death of Jesus, he prayed a prayer. I would ask you to join with me now as we bow our heads and join our voices to that of St. Francis:

My Lord, Jesus Christ, two graces I ask of you before I die. The first is that I may feel in my soul and body that sorrow which you, tender Jesus, underwent in the hour of your most bitter passion. The second is that I may feel in my heart the abundance of love with which you, Oh, Son of God, were inflamed so as willingly to undergo such a great passion for us sinners.

Amen.