

Reflection on the Gospel-Passion Sunday Year A

(Matthew 26:14-27:66)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Capital punishment is abhorrent to most of us, particularly when a just person dies for specious reasons or to political ends. Public executions of convicted criminals were part of life in the ancient Roman Empire. That's what confronts us in today's gospel, although the gospel writers pay little attention to the details of the death and suffering of Jesus. They are much more interested in the meaning of these events.

The Romans execute Jesus outside Jerusalem when the city is filled with Jewish pilgrims who have come there for the Passover festival. For Jesus' friends and followers, every subsequent Passover is celebrated in the light of his death by crucifixion. They share their memories and reflect on the meaning of his death in the light of their sacred traditions. Every element of the Passover story, the ancient story of God's deliverance of their ancestors from slavery, resonates with echoes of the experience of Jesus who is now present to them in a new way. It is not surprising, then, that the final events of Jesus' life were probably the first part of his story to be committed to writing.

Though Matthew draws much of his material from Mark, he fashions the tradition into a new narrative and adds several distinctive features. "To fulfil all righteousness" is Jesus' stated mission (3:15). He has declared "blessed" those who suffer for the sake of righteousness [justice]" (5:10-12). He now embodies his own teaching as the just or righteous one, the one in right relationship with God. The prayer on his lips as he faces death (Psalm 22) is that of the suffering just Israelite who is utterly faithful to his mission and whose trust in God never fails.

There are hints that Jesus' death is not the end, but rather the beginning of the new age of God's empire, a compassionate alternative to the brutality of Rome. In response to the high priest Caiaphas, Jesus points beyond death to his post-resurrection life "at the right hand of power...." Extraordinary signs follow his death: the tearing of the temple curtain; the trembling of the earth; the recognition of the Roman centurion and his companions that this man is of God; and finally, the opening of the graves and appearance of the dead in anticipation of the final resurrection. The story offers the hope of reversal to all who witness the events surrounding Jesus' death. It offers hope to the women who have followed him all the way from Galilee and "ministered to him". It offers hope to the male disciples who have deserted or denied him, to faithful disciples like Joseph of Arimathea, and even to his Roman executioners. It has the potential to bring hope to their counterparts through the ages such as those who keep watch for the condemned on death row or for desperate seekers of asylum.