

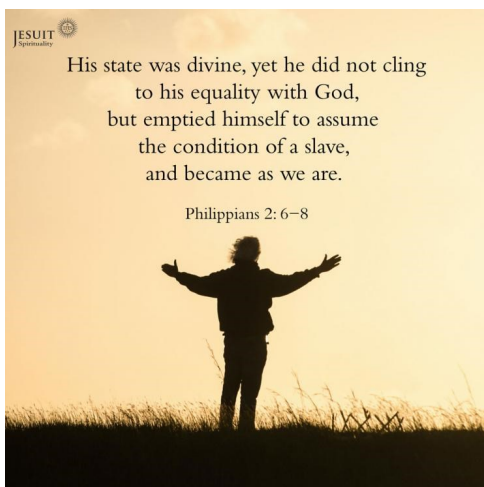
PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD – YEAR B

Second Reading **Philippians 2: 6–11**

Philippians is Paul's most joyful letter, even though he wrote it from prison. He seems to have been under house arrest, perhaps in Rome or Ephesus, at the time. The sudden changes in tone and disjointed character of the epistle have led some to believe it is in fact a collection of three different letters.

Paul is aware of divisions within the community in Philippi, and just before the verses read today, he urges the Philippians to show humility and put the interests of others before their own.



To encourage them, he quotes this beautiful 'hymn to Christ', one of the best known and best loved descriptions of the graciousness of Christ. The words have been quoted ever since. They may well draw on a pre-existing hymn from Christian liturgy. This theology of 'who Jesus was' is a very exalted one, which scholars refer to as 'high Christology'.

The hymn consists of two stanzas (vv. 6–8 and 9–11): the first showing the mindset of Jesus, and what he did for humanity (he emptied and humbled himself); and the second what God did for Jesus (he raised him and gave him the name of Lord).

Being humble was not seen as a virtue in Paul's time. His society accorded great importance to social and professional status. But in the words of the great scriptural scholar Fr Raymond Brown, 'The Philippians are to have the mind of Christ, who showed that the way to God is not by grasping at a higher place on the ladder, but by becoming humbly obedient to God, even death on a cross.' (*An Introduction to the New Testament* (1997), 493)

Gospel Mark 15: 1–39: shorter version

The trial and death of Jesus

The account of the Passion of Jesus is the culmination of Mark's Gospel. The account covers two chapters (14 and 15); some 119 verses. Given its length, we focus here only on Chapter 15, which constitutes the shorter gospel alternative this Sunday.

Jesus before Pilate

The *Sanhedrin* is the Jewish supreme court, made up of 71 members: elders of the main family clans, high priests and Scribes, who were mostly Pharisees. They decide to take Jesus to Pilate's house. Pilate governed Judea, Samaria and Idumaea for ten years (26–36 AD). Although based in Caesarea Maritima he came to Jerusalem, c. 70 miles away, during main festivals.

The Jews needed Pilate to carry out the decision they had taken: i.e. to execute Jesus. However, according to Roman law, they could not implement this themselves. Mark clearly shows the Jewish authorities, and the chief priests in particular, as the prime movers with regard to Jesus's death.

'Are you the King of the Jews?'

This title has clear political overtones. The accusation is not one concerning blasphemy, but sedition.

At the time, being silent when asked a question during a trial was equivalent to assenting to the proposition. With his silence, it could be said that Jesus claims the status of Messiah as described by Isaiah in the Song of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 57: 7).

Barabbas

The custom of releasing a prisoner during Passover is not found in any other documents of the period. The literal meaning of the name *bar-abba*, Son of the Father, is somewhat ironic. It is possible that Barabbas is mentioned only to account for the presence of the crowds.

Jesus is scourged

This was done with leather whips bearing pieces of bone or metal.

Mockery and degradation

This takes place in the *Praetorium*, the official name of the Governor's residence in Jerusalem, in front of the whole *cohort*, some 300–500 Palestinians or Syrian soldiers recruited by the Romans.

The purple cloak

This colour is reserved for kings. In fact it was probably the soldiers' own cloaks that were scarlet.