

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Matthew 26:1-27:66

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Year A - Palm Sunday, Text: Matthew 26:1-27:66
Year A - Palm Sunday, Text: Matthew 26:14-27:66

Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with His disciples, and shares His new Holy Supper with them (26:14-29). During the course of the meal, Jesus names Judas as the one who will betray Him (26:25). He also tells the disciples that, although suffering and death await Him, His message and ministry regarding the Kingdom of God will be vindicated in the Resurrection. He will then share a new table fellowship with them at the Banquet of the Eternal Kingdom (26:29).

Jesus and the disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives (26:30). Jesus tells the disciples that they will all soon desert Him, and Peter will deny Him three times (26:31-35). The “third watch” — or end of a three-hour time block — of the night was called cockcrow. Jesus engages in fervent prayer, seeking His Father’s help to cope with the agony that is now only a matter of hours away (26:36-46). While Jesus prays, the disciples sleep!

Judas leads a large crowd armed with swords and clubs to where Jesus is praying. Matthew makes no mention of Roman soldiers being among those who go to the Garden of Gethsemane to capture Jesus (26:47). Passover would have been a difficult time to find and arrest Jesus. Jerusalem was crowded. Judas solved the problem for those seeking Jesus’ whereabouts.

The entire Sanhedrin, with Caiaphas presiding, participates in the first trial at night (26:57-68). Among other things, Jesus’ opponents accuse Him of blasphemy (26:65), the punishment for which was death by stoning (Leviticus 24:10-16). Note that according to the Mishnah (produced in written form about AD 200), any person who pronounced “the Name itself” (Yahweh) was guilty of blasphemy. It is significant that in 26:64, Jesus does not use Yahweh, but a surrogate, “the Power.”

Also according to the Mishnah, the trial narrative contains elements contrary to the Jewish code of Law: trial on a feast day, a night session of the court, pro-

nouncement of a verdict of condemnation at the same session at which testimony was received. However, it is debatable whether these laws were in force at the time of Jesus’ trial. If they were, it is possible that the Jewish leaders were so angry with Jesus that they were prepared to ignore them. They wanted Jesus dead — at any cost and as soon as possible.

Peter, who is present in the courtyard of the building in which the trial is being conducted, denies Jesus three times — and then weeps bitterly (26:69-75).

Judas repents of his actions, returns the money to the chief priests and elders, and hangs himself. The money he returns is used to buy a potter’s field (27:3-10).

After being tried by the Jewish leaders, Jesus is tried by Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator. Only Pilate could authorize an execution (27:1-2; 11-26). Pilate offers the Jewish leaders a choice: free either Barabbas (meaning, “son of the father”) or Jesus (the true Son of the Father).

Although Pilate’s wife (a Gentile) tells her husband to have nothing to do with “that innocent man,” and although Pilate washes his hands before Jesus’ accusers, he nevertheless hands Jesus over for crucifixion. (According to Deuteronomy 21:1-8, when dealing with a murder when the killer is unknown, the elders of the city nearest to where the body is found must wash their hands and declare, “Our hands did not shed this blood.”)

Roman soldiers mock and abuse Jesus (27:27-31). Note: The term “cohort” in 27:27 usually denoted 600 soldiers. Although Jesus answers back to Satan during His temptation, He does not do so to the Roman soldiers who abuse Him. Among other things, the soldiers place a crown of thorns on Jesus’ head, and place a mock scepter in His hand (27:29).

They then lead Jesus to the place where He is to be crucified (27:26-31). Along the way, they compel

Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross — most likely, the cross bar only (27:32). After placing Jesus on His cross, they offer Him a drink designed to make it easier for Him to endure the pain, but He refuses it (26:33–34).

In keeping with what was usually done when executing a political rebel, the soldiers divide Jesus' clothing among themselves. Jesus is crucified naked! The soldiers put a sign above Jesus' head, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (v. 37), and keep watch (v. 36). Ironically, a sign meant to mock Jesus declares the truth about Him.

While Jesus is on the cross, He is mocked by the two bandits (most likely Zealots) who are crucified with him, and by those who surround the cross, and the chief priests, scribes, and elders (27:38–44).

However, when the centurion and his associates observe what is taking place — including an earthquake — they are terrified and say, "Truly, this man was God's Son!" (27:54). Indeed, if God cannot get a true confession from the lips of His own people, He will get it from the lips of Gentiles!

As also in Mark and Luke, darkness covers the land at midday; three hours later Jesus breathes His last (27:45–50). Like Mark, Matthew quotes only one statement from the cross, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (27:46). According to Matthew 27:50 (and also John 19:30), Jesus finally gives up His spirit and dies. Several women observe what is taking place (27:55–56).

After Jesus' death, the earth shakes, rocks split open, tombs are opened, and those in the tombs appear to many in Jerusalem after Jesus resurrection (27:51–53). These events reflect Ezekiel 37:1–14 and declare that, through Jesus' ministry, passion, and resurrection, the long-awaited Kingdom of God has broken into history.

The Jewish leaders looked forward to the coming of a Messiah who would defeat the Romans. They now look up at a "Messiah" who seemingly has been defeated by the Romans. How wrong they are! The Messiah has conquered the real enemy — Satan, and the kingdom and power of the demonic! The age of death is over! The true Messianic Age has begun!

Joseph of Arimathea (a town 5 miles or 8 km north of Jerusalem), also a disciple of Jesus, obtains Pilate's permission to take Jesus' body down from the cross, wraps the body in a clean linen cloth, places it into his

own new tomb (hewn out of rock), rolls a stone across the entrance of the tomb, and goes away (27:57–60). Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" observe what Joseph of Arimathea does and where he does it (27:61). They know the location of the tomb in which Jesus is buried!

The next day, the chief priests and Pharisees seek Pilate's permission to have Jesus' tomb sealed and guarded. The burial in Joseph's tomb and the presence of Jewish (and possibly some Roman) guards set the scene for the explosive events that follow on Easter Sunday morning (27:62–66)!