

## Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

Another school shooting has marred the character of our country. We have one of the most favored nations on earth, but something seems very wrong in our fascination with guns and violence. This attack targeted a school that also serves as a church. The suspect could be charged with a hate crime against Christians. Hate crimes against Jews and persons of color in this country have already proliferated beyond what should be tolerable. Attacks against individuals may derive from the aggressor's hatred against groups.

The crucifixion of Jesus was less a hate crime against a group than an attack on one person. This inhumanity also remains all too common. In Jesus' case, hostile foes arrested him, his friends fled, and he was left alone to suffer—and not any ordinary suffering, but a cruel torture. He suffered physical and emotional pain. He suffered spiritual pain. From the cross, his very human self cried aloud, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

That verse opens Psalm 22, a prayer Jesus already knew, and which we just sang as our responsorial. The lectionary gives us several important verses today, but praying the entire psalm gives a better sense of its long reach from the depths of despair to the assurance of salvation. In this psalm, haters have arrived on the scene like feral dogs. Foreshadowing the suffering of Jesus, the wicked have cast lots for the robe of the victim, and foreshadowing the crucifixion of Jesus, the wicked have torn holes in their victim's hands and feet. Later, in New Testament times, as these horrible events happened to Jesus, people saw in the inspired words of Psalm 22 God knew long ago what was coming.

What kind of God is this? The wicked in Psalm 22 taunt their victim with the demonic belief that there is no hope of rescue, not even from God: The wicked say of their victim, “He trusted in the Lord, let him save him; let [the Lord] release him, for in him he delights.” You can imagine the same temptation whenever things go wrong: “Where is the Lord in whom I trust? Why is he not here? Are the wicked correct? Has my faith been wrong?”

We may think Jesus had the same feelings because of his cry from the cross. But he does not ask those standing around him to stop. He does not curse his fate. Instead, he talks to God. He quotes the bible. He does not doubt that God is. He asks where God is. He calls out, “my God,” and calls for him twice. If Jesus had thought God were absent, it would have made no sense for him to pray. Yet even here, in the midst of torment, surrounded by doubters, Jesus sensed God's presence and prayed.

Psalm 22 opens with the cry of an individual surrounded by enemy nonbelievers, and it concludes with words of praise for God who answered the prayer, provided strength, and came in haste to help. The same victim who was tempted to despair now stands among friends who believe. He calls on them to praise the God of glory.

When we are tempted to despair about the violence in our country or the emotional and physical torment we each endure, we can recall Psalm 22—all of it, not just the first verse. God is never absent though we may mistakenly think so. He will come with rescue to those who keep faith.