

This is a rock I picked up in Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives, right by the traditional route Jesus took on Palm Sunday. This rock is the same rock that the walls of Jerusalem are made of, a pinkish-yellowish limestone. As you stand on the Mount of Olives, less than half a mile away is another hill, with a small valley in between. On that other hill, you see in front of you the Temple Mount, the site of the old Jewish Temple where Jesus taught during Holy Week. Below you in the valley, you see the ancient olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed before his betrayal and arrest. And in the distance beyond the Temple Mount, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away, you see the dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

We are now at the point where switch our focus from Palm Sunday to the Passion. We go from the Triumphal parade on the Mount of Olives, to Gethsemane, and eventually to hill of Golgotha, Calvary, the place of Jesus' Crucifixion. As is our custom every year, we will read the Passion Gospel together in various parts, including parts for the congregation. This year, we're reading Matthew's version.

Before we start, I wanted to make a few comments about a couple things that are unique to Matthew's Passion. Each of the Gospels has different perspectives, different things to say. Here are a couple of things we'll encounter that are unique to Matthew. This is not an exhaustive list, but just a few highlights. I want to look at them slightly out of order: beginning, then end, then middle.

In the garden, at Jesus' arrest, Matthew records a wonderful statement from Jesus that shows his willingness to go to the cross. Jesus says to his disciples, "Do you not think that I can appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" Jesus is saying, 'I could put a stop to this. I could ask God and in a heartbeat he'd send 60,000 angels to rescue me.' But Jesus doesn't do that. He willingly walks the way of the cross.

Later, at the crucifixion, Matthew adds another unique detail. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all speak of the premature darkness that occurs during the Crucifixion. But when Jesus dies, Matthew alone mentions an earthquake. This is a reminder of how truly earthshaking the death of Jesus is for all of us. The significance of his death is reflected in the skies above and in the earth below.

Finally, I want to mention a few things that are unique in Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate. Matthew alone mentions Pilate's wife who has a dream about Jesus, and asks Pilate to spare him. A few verses later, Pilate tries to literally wash his hands of Jesus' death. He tries to say, "I am innocent of this man's blood." And yet he's not. Pilate is simply responding to political pressure; he shows moral cowardice in condemning an innocent man simply to please the crowd. Right after that, we have one of the most chilling statements in any Gospel:

Pilate says, "I'm innocent of this man's blood," even though he isn't.

And the mob responds, "His blood be on us and on our children." In other words, 'we'll take responsibility.' For centuries Christians have used this verse as an excuse for anti-Semitism.

And yet, the mob in Jerusalem speaks for all of us. All of us are responsible for Jesus' death. Jesus died because of all our sins. And thank God his blood is upon us. Thank God that Jesus shed his blood on our behalf. Thank God that we have been washed and made white as snow in the precious blood of the Lamb of God.

As we read the Passion in parts, remember your part in the Passion. Jesus died because of you. Jesus died for you.

Give thanks for his sacrifice. Give thanks for his death. And give thanks for the earth-shattering, earth-shaking blessings that come from his cross.