



Palm Sunday of our Lord's Passion April 1, 2012 B

THE HOLIEST WEEK OF THE CHURCH YEAR Commentary on the Passion according to Mark

This weekend we begin the holiest week of the church year. Mother Church tells us that our celebration of the Triduum is the “culmination of the entire liturgical year.” The Triduum is not so much three distinct rites (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil) as *one* continuous celebration with three parts to it. The *unitive* nature of the three liturgies is underlined by the omission of a concluding rite on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. These two liturgies are “left hanging,” so to speak, incomplete without that which follows, as if the liturgies of Holy Thursday and Good Friday are saying to us, “*We are not done yet... to be continued.*”

Mark's account of the Passion of Christ (14:1-15:47)

This year, being Cycle B in our liturgical calendar, we listen to Mark's account of the Passion of Christ.

The suffering and death of Jesus are the centerpiece of Mark's Gospel. Hints of the Passion are found already in chapters 1-2, and by chapter 3, a plot against Jesus is being planned. Halfway through the Gospel, Mark has Jesus predicting three times the details of his Passion. In chapter 11, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem for the events which this Sunday's liturgy enacts ritually. Six of the 16 chapters of Mark are devoted exclusively to the last week of Jesus' life. This has led scholars to call Mark's Gospel a “passion narrative with an extended introduction.” Following are two central themes to watch for in Mark's Gospel:

There is a sharp contrast between *Jesus' fidelity* to God and his mission no matter what the cost, and the *infidelity* of the disciples and crowds. Jesus has no desire to die. He prays three times that God would spare him, but if fidelity to God and his mission involves embracing the cross and death, he is willing to do this. This fidelity is expressed in his wonderful prayer of surrender, “*Not my will but your will be done.*” In stark contrast, we notice weakness and infidelity in the disciples. They fall asleep when Jesus needs their support in the garden. Peter, the leader,

denies Jesus. Judas betrays him. At the time of his arrest, they “*all fled and left him.*” At the time of his trial, the crowds who have previously sang his praises now chant: “*Crucify him! Crucify him!*” But not all are unfaithful. A few women remain faithful. One anoints him; others keep watch as he dies on the cross.

Mark's Passion presents us with a very *human* picture of Jesus. In the garden, he begs the Father three times to free him from dying. We can *feel* Jesus' disappointment when he finds his beloved disciples asleep—not just once but three times. What must he have felt when all his disciples “fled and left him”? How painful it must have been for Jesus to hear the crowds demand the release of the criminal Barabbas and call for his crucifixion. Then consider the scourging of his body, the crowning with thorns, the crucifixion and, most of all, the sense of his Father abandoning him: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” This is a cry of one steeped in human agony. Jesus pays the ultimate price for fidelity to his call.

AN EXTENDED COMMENTARY ON MARK'S PASSION

A Woman and a Betrayer

Mark's Passion opens with a beautiful story of a woman showing tender love for Jesus. This story is sandwiched or bracketed by two ugly scenes: the chief priests looking for a way to arrest Jesus and Judas plotting with them for a way to hand Jesus over to his enemies. There is a strong contrast between the two scenes.

Betrayal within the Eucharist

Using his characteristic bracketing technique, Mark places a conversation about betrayal in between the preparation for the Last Supper and the actual Last Supper.

Gethsemane

After the Last Supper, Jesus goes out to Gethsemane with Peter, James and John. Peter has just said how he will stand by Jesus no matter what. Earlier in the

Gospel, James and John assert that they can “drink the cup of suffering” with Jesus. Now we see the vast difference between words and actions. They fall asleep when Jesus most needs their support. Later, they will all flee and Peter will deny Jesus. In contrast, Jesus remains faithful to God but not without a struggle. He hopes against hope for a way other than the way of the cross. In the end, he surrenders to God’s will (“*not my will but your will ...*”). In John 4:34, the Apostles offer Jesus food, to which he responds: “*My food is to do the will of Him who sent me.*” In the Passion event, it is important for us to remember that God is *not* demanding that Jesus die a cruel death. Rather, he wants Jesus to be faithful to his mission even if it means a cruel death. It is in truth the sin of humanity that brought about Jesus’ sufferings and death.

The Arrest of Jesus

In this scene we witness further the abandonment of Jesus. We just read how Jesus is abandoned through the human weakness of Peter, James and John. Now, we have the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. He treats Jesus as a friend by kissing him and, at the same time, plants the kiss to point Jesus out to the authorities. Then Mark tells us, “*all fled and left him.*” Jesus is now left alone with his enemies. Not one of his friends shows faithful discipleship. In contrast, Jesus shows himself to be fearless and speaks up with dignity to those who come to arrest him.

Peter’s Denial and the Trial of Jesus

The trial of Jesus is a farce. Trials are not allowed at night. False witnesses fail to agree with each other. During his trial, Jesus continues to show himself to be courageous and confident. When he declares himself to be the Christ, the Blessed One, he knows he is signing his own death sentence and yet he does it. Then follows the threefold denial of Peter. These two stories are another example of *contrast* so strong in Mark’s Passion. As two examples of behavior under pressure, Jesus shows us what to do and Peter shows us what *not* to do. Jesus exemplifies courage; Peter cowardice. Jesus, while losing his life through steadfast witness, ultimately saves it; Peter, trying to save himself, in fact, condemns himself. Readers are called to follow Jesus. We notice that during his trial, Jesus does affirm that he is the “*Christ, the Son of the Blessed One.*”

Jesus before Pilate

Then Jesus is brought before the Jewish and Roman authorities. Both share in the brutal humiliation of

Jesus. Pilate believes Jesus to be innocent but he is too much of a crowd-pleaser to let him go free. He shows himself to be a coward just as Jesus shows himself to be fearless and strong, the innocent sufferer who identifies with all who are unjustly and falsely accused. The crowds also fail Jesus, choosing a criminal over him.

The Crucifixion

Jesus is led away to Golgotha to be crucified. A stranger named Simeon is forced to help Jesus carry his cross. After Jesus is crucified, the bystanders mock and verbally abuse him. Darkness covers the land for three hours. In this time of darkness, Jesus even feels abandoned by God (“*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*”). Sin separates us from God. Having taken the weight of the sin of humanity upon his shoulders, Jesus experiences separation from God.

“*The veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom.*” This is the veil that separates people from the Holy of Holies into which no one is allowed to enter except the High Priest. The veil is torn back and the way to God is now wide open to all and not just to the High Priest. Then a Gentile soldier, a most unlikely one, recognizes the true identity of Jesus: “*Truly this man is the Son of God.*” We notice the presence of the women who continue to follow Jesus after all his male disciples have fled.

The Burial

In the early days of Christianity, some may have claimed that Jesus never really died. So it is important for Mark to include an account of Jesus’ burial so that people will know that Jesus really died. Dying is an essential dimension of being a human person. Joseph of Arimathea, a devout Jew and a member of the Council, shows himself to be an admirer of Jesus by asking Pilate for his body so that he can give it a proper burial.

Reflection question

Which scene in the Passion speaks to you the most? Why?

Have a blessed Holy Week,

