

## **PALM SUNDAY (B)**

### **Mark 14:1-15:47**

Our Scripture passage for this for this Sunday is extensive and covers two entire chapters of Mark's Gospel from 14:1-15:47. In this reading, we hear of Jesus' Last Supper, betrayal by Judas, trial both before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, Suffering, Crucifixion, Death, and Burial. Various details are immersed in this account of our Lord's final hours of earthly ministry. Our reflection this week will focus on only a few of these details and how they affect our lives as disciples.

Mark begins his Passion narrative with the story of the woman who anoints the head of Jesus with a jar of expensive perfume (see Mk14:3- 9). This action of generosity, love, and sacrifice evokes the indignant response of others in the room who question why she did not sell the perfume and give the money to the poor rather than pour it on Jesus' head. Jesus addresses their statements by pointing out her good intentions and the ever-present opportunities they have to express generosity for the poor, which they apparently are not taking advantage of. In doing so, He is not diminishing the importance of practical charity for those in need but esteeming the sacrificial love of God manifested in this woman's action. Our Lord is also pointing out the hypocrisy of those who criticize this woman because they themselves could be helping the poor if they truly desired to do so. The implication is that they were more interested in a reason to discredit the goodness of her action rather than carry out their own works of charity. (Remember the quote of Mark Twain, "Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.") Judas, on the other hand, is presented in stark contrast to the woman. He goes to the chief priests and offers to betray Jesus for which he is promised money (see Mk 14:10-11). Judas is presented as an example of someone who uses Jesus for his self-gain rather than as the opportunity for loving, sacrificial self-giving. Not only does Judas not care about the poor, he doesn't care about Jesus either. The contrast between the woman and Judas could not be more dramatic. Throughout history there has always been a necessary relationship between our love of God and our love of neighbor. It is only through our love of God that we can truly love those in the distressing disguise of the poor and suffering. Our love of God is not to the exclusion of the poor, but rather the first step in our ability to serve the poor. As Jesus approached His Passion, the woman responded with generosity, commitment, sacrifice, and abundant love of God; Judas responded with self-preservation, self-protection, self-gain, and self-interest.

- 1. In what ways can people be critical today of others when they express their love for God through works of lavish generosity?*
- 2. How can criticism of others for their failure to serve the poor become the excuse by which we are tempted to exempt ourselves from serving the poor?*
- 3. When you are in a distressful situation like the Passion of Jesus, do you respond more like the woman (generous sacrificial commitment) or like Judas (self-preservation and self-interest)?*
- 4. During Holy Week, how can you be lavish in your love of God through your gifts of time and talent?*
- 5. How do we seek to discredit other people's good actions in an effort to exempt ourselves from the challenge of doing good?*

When Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mk 14:32 - 42) we see less than stellar examples of discipleship in the persons of Peter, James, and John. In fact, they all appear as examples of failure. Just a few verses before this chapter Jesus had warned His disciples on the need to "Stay awake!" in Mark 13:37. Now they all fall asleep at the most critical hour. Those who were Jesus' closest friends and had been with Him from the very beginning of His ministry (see Mk 1:16- 20) and had been part of His inner circle (see Mk 5:37 and 9:2), now appear disinterested in His distress. James and John, who were so confident that they could "drink from the cup Jesus would drink" in Mark 10:39 now sleep while Jesus prays that the cup may pass Him by. Peter, who claimed that he would be willing to die for Jesus (see 14:31), now appears unwilling to sacrifice even one hour of sleep for the sake of the Lord. It would be bad enough if they had failed once and been reprimanded for their lack of attentiveness and disinterest, but they failed three times in a row. Although they may have been close to Jesus by their physical proximity, their hearts were far from Him in this moment. The reality is that Peter, James, and John are not very different from any of us. It is easy to have great and noble ideas of how we will live out our commitment to God yet find it difficult to do so in daily circumstances. The Good News is that Jesus does not reject the disciples for their failure and disappointing progress. Rather, the Lord gives them a second chance and a third chance, and so on. Sometimes we believe that we are not capable of being great disciples but that is a lie; the only thing that prevents us from being great people of faith is our lack of desire for such greatness. Peter, James, and John will eventually become heroic examples of faith and committed disciples but only because they keep trying. The same is true for us. In our moments of weakness, short-sightedness, and failure, we should not lose hope, but rather realize our need for God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace and renew our commitment to follow the Lord.

1. *How can people today excuse themselves from discipleship because of a personal failure of faith?*
2. *Sometimes we only realize the magnitude of our failure in retrospect. How can the practice of honestly reviewing our lives serve to motivate us to deeper trust and committed discipleship?*
3. *How does the Sacrament of Reconciliation help you to renew your commitment to discipleship despite a moment of failure?*
4. *What self-doubts do you think Peter, James, and John experienced as they looked back on this moment, and how do you think the power of evil tried to manipulate their self-doubts to prevent them from becoming better disciples?*

Jesus' final words in Mark's Gospel are a quotation from Psalm 22:1 when He cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" These are not so much words of complaint and abandonment, but rather the prayer of a just man who suffers. By praying with the words of the Psalms, Jesus is reminding us of some very important truths that we need to know as disciples. These truths are contained in the rest of Psalm 22 that follow after this first verse. Although Jesus only quotes the first line of this Psalm, He is pointing us to it so that we can remember the entirety of the Psalm. In vs.3 we are reminded that even in suffering, God remains "enthroned as the Holy One". In vs. 4 and 5 we are reminded that those who put their trust in God are not disappointed. In vs. 22 we are told that even in suffering we are to praise the Lord. In vs. 24 we are assured that suffering is

not a sign that God despises us and that God does listen to our cries for deliverance. In vs. 28 we are reminded that God is in control of all kingdoms, all nations, and all history. Finally, in vs. 31 we are taught that whatever takes place, even in the suffering of the just, it is to be understood as part of God's plan. There could not be a better prayer to summarize and interpret the death of Jesus on the Cross than Psalm 22.

Jesus' Death is part of the mystery of God's unfolding plan. The Salvation the Lord offers us isn't always realized in the situations of this life; sometimes our deliverance from the forces that oppose and oppress us occurs in the Resurrection. Nonetheless, this prayer helps us to find meaning in our suffering, to have confidence in our trials, and to re-affirm our faith when things don't go our way by remembering that God is in ultimate control. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we end by asking that we not be led into temptation and that we be delivered from evil. The temptation we most want to avoid is that of believing that God has abandoned us, God hates us, or that God doesn't care about us. When we pray to be delivered from evil, we are not praying to be preserved from it (that is unrealistic in a world infected by sin) but that we will not be overcome by it; that means we pray for perseverance, deliverance, vindication, and salvation from the evil situations we endure.

1. *Read the prayer of Psalm 22. How does reading the prayer of Psalm 22 by Jesus on the Cross affect the way you understand our Lord's Crucifixion?*
2. *How does this understanding of the final verses of the Lord's Prayer and the lived experience of Jesus change the way you will pray that prayer?*
3. *What are the temptations you experience when you suffer unjustly?*
4. *What situations in our world today give the false impression that the forces of evil are victorious?*
5. *How can the experience of this Holy Week invite you to deepen your trust and confidence in God in the midst of adverse circumstances?*

One of the most important elements of Mark's Passion narrative is the proclamation of faith by the Roman Centurion as Jesus dies on the Cross. The centurion exclaims, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that such faith has been proclaimed by a human being. Mark told us in the opening verse of his Gospel that Jesus was the Son of God. That insight has been reaffirmed in significant sections of the Gospel by the Father (see the Baptism of Jesus in Mk 1:11 and in the Transfiguration of Jesus in Mk 9:7). The previous announcements by the Father were given during manifestations of heavenly glory as a proclamation of the Divine Presence. It is easy to see Jesus as the Son of God when the heavens open and the Spirit descends at the moment of our Lord's baptism. It is also easy to see Jesus as the Son of God when He stands in the shining presence of Moses and Elijah. However, it requires exceptional faith and insight to see Jesus as the Son of God as He dies on the Cross of Calvary. That is why the proclamation of the Centurion is so important-- he expresses the faith of a true disciple who can see that God is present in moments of suffering. The proclamation of the Centurion brings to fulfillment the very first verse of Mark's Gospel. As disciples, we are challenged to have the same faith as the Centurion. It is easy for us to acknowledge the presence of God in moments of great success and blessing, but it is even more important for us to be able to profess our faith in God's presence in moments of suffering and seeming defeat. The Cross of Calvary is not a sign of God's abandonment but a promise of God's presence.

- 1. When, in the midst of someone's suffering, has that person's faith inspired you?*
- 2. In what moments of your life do you find it difficult to recognize and acknowledge God's presence?*
- 3. What do you believe the other bystanders thought when they heard the Centurion's profession of faith?*
- 4. What do you think the Centurion did as a result of his newfound faith?*

The Passion narratives are full of surprises as we see how different people respond in various moments. Certainly we are surprised to see Jesus' closest disciples fall asleep and abandon Him after having spent three years following our Lord. We are also surprised to see that one of Jesus' own friends turns into a traitor while another of His friends denies Him three times. There are other surprises as well, like when we see a woman offer her precious gift of perfume to anoint Jesus, or when we read of Joseph of Arimathea coming forth to claim the body of Jesus for burial, or even when we hear the Roman Centurion-who had brutally treated Jesus and crucified Him-now profess his faith in the Lord. Indeed, the mystery of discipleship is full of surprises. A person's background doesn't indicate their future response. No one can ride on the laurels of their past fidelity and no one can rule out future holiness based on past sinfulness or rejection of the Gospel. We continue to experience this mystery of discipleship today as well.

Those we expect to be predictable examples of holiness sometimes let us down, while those from whom we expect little faith response can inspire us with their insight and courage. This message is a source of both hope and challenge for us as disciples. It gives us hope because it reassures us that no one-- including ourselves-- is beyond the invitation of God's grace no matter what our background or social affiliation. It gives us challenge because it cautions us against presuming our standing in the eyes of God based on some past witness or status; like Peter, James, and John, we are only one step away from infidelity.

- 1. How do you experience both hope and challenge from this reflection?*
- 2. Who has surprised you with their witness of faith despite their seemingly difficult background?*
- 3. Who has let you down in their witness of faith despite their privileged background of discipleship?*
- 4. What helps a disciple remain faithful at each step of the journey?*