

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” PALM SUNDAY (B)
Processional Gospel Mark 11: 1-10 or John 12: 12-16
Isaiah 50: 4-7 Philippians 2: 6-11 Mark 14:1- 15:47
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I will be focusing on the Passion narrative for these reflections. (Be sure to note the Justice Preaching notes at the end by [Elaine DesRosiers, O.P.](#)) Mark’s account of Jesus’ suffering and death is harsh. What Jesus has been predicting throughout this gospel has come to pass, “the Son of Man must suffer...” Mark’s gospel makes it clear that the Messiah is a suffering Messiah, and those who follow his way will also suffer. And suffer they have, the history of the church reveals a long line of those who have lived the life Jesus lived and suffered for it.

The tension has been building through the whole gospel from the opening chapter when we heard of John the Baptist’s death (First Sunday of Lent). Mark presents Jesus as being quite aware of what awaited him and as willing to continue his path; a path that will meet rising opposition and his eventual death. Though Jesus prays that this hour he is facing will pass and that he will not have to endure it, he surrenders to God’s will. Meanwhile, the disciples are asleep in the garden. Jesus is quite alone at this hour of his suffering.

The crucifixion scene shows how alone he is. The last we hear of the disciples is of their scattering when Jesus is arrested in the garden. One of them flees without his clothes, a symbol of their rush to get away from Jesus’ fate. It is as if the disciples are exposed in their frailties and cowardice. Peter, who is present in the courtyard at the high priest’s house, is spotted by the maid as one of Jesus’ followers, but as Jesus predicted, Peter denies him three times. No one is mentioned with Jesus at his crucifixion; his mother and some women are looking on “from a distance.” (At least the women are there, the men are nowhere to be seen!) Mark does nothing to soften the sense of abandonment, nor does he ease the reality of Jesus’ anguish as he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There is no peaceful and calm surrender to death. From the beginning of the bible death has been the enemy that comes as the result of sin. Death is not what life is about, it is fearsome, no friend of humans and powerful in its ability to overcome and defeat us. It is only through Jesus’ acceptance and God’s conquering of death through Jesus, that we can avoid despair and defeat in the face of death. But it is still an enemy that wields great power over us until it is finally overcome. As Paul says, “Death is the last enemy to be overcome” (I Cor. 15: 26).

The community to whom Mark addressed his gospel was already experiencing the cost of what it meant to be Jesus’ disciple; persecution was a fact of daily life. So, Mark needed to help them see their lives in the light of Jesus’ own experience. This gospel was probably written just after the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. For the early church, the temple’s destruction was thought to be a sign that the End was imminent. But the End did not come and it did not look as if the community’s suffering was about to end, so Mark may have needed to steel them to face the

long haul. His message is very clear in this Passion account: the Messiah was not spared suffering, indeed, his and now our own victory, comes through suffering and death. Hearing this Passion account urges the Christian to try to come to terms with suffering.

Throughout this gospel there has been the motif of the “messianic secret.” Jesus silences those who would put royal titles on him. But it is after his suffering on the cross, just as he dies, that the secret is out and it is proclaimed by a gentile centurion, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” Mark seems to be saying that if one wants to “see” Jesus’ true identity, one has to look through the lens of his suffering. Jesus has allowed himself to be taken, tried, tortured and put to death. What contrast: One with heavenly authority has become subject to and defeated by his oppressors.

This gospel stresses discipleship. The way of discipleship has first been traversed by Jesus. Disciples are invited to follow One who has shown the way----“take up your cross and follow me.” But throughout his gospel, Mark has given plenty of evidence that the disciples are weak humans. Jesus answers in the affirmative to the questions about his identity. Peter, on the other hand, is quick to deny his identity as a disciple of Jesus. We need to see the disciples as reflections of ourselves, like them, we have heard Jesus’ call and have followed. Like the disciples we have also failed in our commitment to him. Neither Peter, nor any disciple, is able to pass a severe test of discipleship without the power of the One who does not forsake his task or renounce the role given him by God. Just as Jesus was loving and patient with his disciples in their weakness, so is he with us in our frailty, our compromises and in our betrayals to him and his way. What is so encouraging is that, though the disciples have utterly failed Jesus, he remains faithful to them by being faithful to the mission that will yield life for them. (Note however, that the women alone remained faithful to Jesus to the end. See Harrington’s quote below.) Later, it will take the power of the Redeemer to raise Peter and the other disciples up—back to the status of discipleship.

While the preliminaries to the crucifixion are long and detailed, the description of the actual crucifixion is brief in comparison to its treatment in the other gospels. The mockery of Jesus from his trial continues even during his crucifixion by the chief priests, scribes and those crucified along side Jesus. There is no human consolation for Jesus during his three hour ordeal on the cross. Jesus finally breaks his silence just before his death and cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Even at this he is mocked, “Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.” He is so alone at this moment that he seems abandoned even by God. What must one do when all else fails us and like Jesus, there is no one there for us? One cannot celebrate this week in segments, e.g. looking only at Good Friday and the Passion. The Passion is viewed in the light of the Resurrection: the Resurrection in light of the Passion. His resurrection will show that, in fact, God had not abandoned him and does not abandon us.

Mark’s gospel would make sense to the early Christian community that was experiencing persecution and seeming abandonment by God. Had God not been faithful to Jesus, despite all the contrary evidence? they could ask themselves. If God were not with Jesus, the story would

have ended with his death. But the first readers of this Gospel knew that resurrection and triumph over death was the true outcome of this tragedy.

The Passion presents contradictory evidence for us. Our usual experience is that when the world is confronted by power, it responds in kind. The more powerful triumph: in military conflict, economic competition and in personal encounters (the educated over the uneducated, the technophiles over those without access, the well-placed over the margined). The strange paradox of the Gospel, especially in this Passion account, is that though power and brute force seem to have won out once again, it turns out that all the evidence isn't in yet. Indeed, it is through weakness and suffering that Jesus will ultimately achieve his victory over the forces of death. That truth is more than enough material to ponder as we enter this Holy Week. The disciple will have a chance to learn again the message that Jesus has preached throughout this Gospel: those who lead must be servant to the rest.

Sometime this week, with its accounts of the execution of Jesus, the preacher may choose to preach on the death penalty in our country. We are the only industrialized nation that still executes people. Some of our states seem to be in a race to outdo each other in the number of executions they perform. Meanwhile recent releases of inmates from death row, due to new evidence that proved them innocent and the suspension of executions in Illinois, have raised the issue of the many injustices involved in this practice. If you need information your diocesan peace and justice office would be one source and of course the internet has ample material on web pages dedicated to the topic. One such web page is provided by our North Carolina ecumenical group, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." www.netpath.net/~ucch/pfadp

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

I found two books helpful in preparing for this preaching:

A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES, by Raymond E. Brown. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989. Paper, 72 pages.

An eminent biblical scholar reflects on the four Passion narratives. His strong pastoral interests come through these very readable essays. Good for preachers. Also good for those who want to do some meditative reading during Holy Week.

MARK, by Wilfrid Harrington, O.P. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1979. Paper, 252 pages.

This is a fine study of Mark's Gospel and makes good reading during this liturgical year when Mark is being read on Sundays.

QUOTABLE

All disciples of the Lord should have the honesty to see themselves in these disciples. They had been called by Jesus and had responded to his invitation. He bore with them, in loving patience. They had failed him, but he had remained true. And Mark closes on a note of quiet confidence

as the disciples, on the other side of cross and resurrection, wait for a meeting with the Lord in the “Galilee” of their hope. Not all had failed: the silent, steadfast women had remained faithful to the end (15:40-16:8). Perhaps a lesson of Mark, yet to be learned, is that the community of Christ will come of age when the dignity of woman and her place in his church are acknowledged not only in word but in truth. -----Harrington, page xv.

PREACHING JUSTICE

Gospel: The Passion of St. Mark

It is not everyday that the preacher gets to preach on a passage two chapters long. On Palm Sunday, however, the preacher is given a great opportunity to speak on Justice. The theme that speaks to me from the Passion According to Mark is that of the death penalty. We have the obligation to speak out to abolish it because so many people on death row, like Jesus, are innocent of the crime. For example, this month Joseph Green on Florida's death row for almost seven years was acquitted when he was found innocent. He had been convicted on the basis of a witness account later acknowledged by the court to be unreliable. Sounds like Jesus, doesn't it, except that Jesus wasn't acquitted.

According to Amnesty International, Joseph Green is the 87th condemned prisoner since 1973 to be freed from death row after evidence of their innocence emerged. Amnesty International is urging U.S. Authorities – both at Federal and at State level -- to call an immediate halt to our country's appalling conveyor belt of death.

Acts of injustice are committed by people who want to protect themselves -- the false witnesses who did not want their lives upset by this newcomer; Judas who betrayed Jesus for money; Peter who denied Jesus to save his own skin, etc. Today we see the same motives -- a man frames another to stay out of jail; people lie to save their skin; a man is murdered because his way of life is different from theirs; and for money men and women betray their friends, neighbors, and relatives.

We may also think about Jesus' suffering and death for our salvation and our freedom. Are we ready to stretch out our arms by words and action to help others who suffer from injustice.

Elaine DesRosiers, O.P. Dominicans of St. Catharine, Kentucky Promoter of Preaching

ANNOUNCEMENTS

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage addresses:

<http://www.opsouth.org/preexch.htm>

<http://www.op.org/domcentral/preach/exchange/>

<http://www.Mattdoyle.com/pe/peindex.htm>

“Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by two friars of the Southern Dominican Province experienced in Hispanic Ministry, Carmen Mele, O.P. and Isidore Vicente, O.P. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. jboll@opsouth.org

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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