



Sixth Week of Lent: Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

April 5 through Holy Thursday, April 9, 2009

Journeying Through Lent A Time to Stand at the Cross

Use this resource alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflections aloud, pausing between them. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance for larger groups. Share with each other your Lenten commitments and promises, keeping within the silence of your own heart those things which belong only there.

Opening Ritual and Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others after a hectic day.

Leader: As we gather today we remember how Jesus died for us.

All: Praise God for sending us his Son.

Leader: Jesus Christ, the same yesterday today and forever.

All: All praise and glory are yours Lord Jesus Christ.

Leader: Abba, Father, we entrust ourselves to your loving care today.

All: Amen

Read Aloud to yourself or have various members of the group read aloud the Scripture readings for the Sixth Sunday of Lent. (You may choose not to re-read the entire Passion story, but only selected parts.)

Isaiah 50:4-7

Philippians 2:6-11

Mark 14:1-15:47.

Reflection

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”

This Sunday we read and hear the Passion story from the Gospel of Mark. It is the shortest in length, the first one written and at times quite stark. Nonetheless we always need to ask our selves when reading a Passion narrative from the Gospels just how we would have acted in relation to the agony in the garden, arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. With which character in the story would we most identify? Could we have been among the disciples who fled from danger abandoning Jesus? Are there not moments in

our own lives when we play the role of Peter, denying Jesus, or even Judas, betraying him? Have we not found ourselves at times like Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Jesus or like Pontius Pilate in John's Gospel, trying to avoid making a decision and washing our hands of the whole affair? Could we have stood among the religious leaders who condemned Jesus or the soldiers who mocked him? Or are there times when we are sheepish about our commitment to Jesus, like Joseph of Arimathea and need courage to witness to Jesus? In sum, while reading or hearing the Passion narrative we are constantly asked the question of the hymn: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Ask Yourself

With which character in the Passion story do you most identify? Share why.

The Passion story in the Gospel of Mark begins during two Jewish festivals: Passover and Unleavened Bread. Passover commemorated the Israelites deliverance by God from slavery in Egypt. Egypt symbolized the dominant culture. The feast of Unleavened Bread served as an offering of thanks and praise to God for all he had done in the past and will do in the future.

By placing Jesus' own sacrifice during the festival of Passover, Mark links the meaning of Jesus' death to the liberation by God of the exiled Israelites in Egypt. Jesus is the new Passover lamb who is innocently sacrificed so that his people might go free. Were you there when Jesus set us free from the choke hold of the dominant culture, of sin and of no meaning after death?

We move now to Bethany and the house of Simon the leper and a banquet. In Jesus' time banquets were only for men. The unnamed woman who anoints Jesus must have had great courage to violate the male dominated meal. Her perfumed oil was worth about a year's wages, showing that her action was both extravagant and generous. In Jesus' time it was a common act of hospitality for male hosts to anoint the heads of their guests, a gesture of welcome. Simon did not do this to Jesus his guest. Jesus defends the woman's actions and this attests that she both welcomes him and is correct in recognizing who he is, namely the anointed one of God. Because of her actions the woman will be remembered wherever and whenever the Gospel is proclaimed.

Ask Yourself

Will we also be remembered for the actions we perform as a disciple of Jesus?

The story continues with Jesus predicting Judas's betrayal, the last supper scene and then the scene of Jesus at prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John the one's who were with him at the raising of Jairus' daughter and the transfiguration. The only thing Jesus asks of his disciples is to sit and wait and keep watch while he prays. An anguished ridden Jesus prays: "Abba, Father, All things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me." Jesus' faith in God and his love for all of us are such powerful forces within him that Jesus concludes his prayer by submitting his will to God's: "yet not what I want but what you want."

Ask Yourself

In our own prayer life do we pray for what God wants of us as Jesus did?

Three times Jesus discovers the disciples sleeping. Even Peter, who said he would die with Jesus if he had to, was sleeping. Mark's point being that through prayer, Jesus is now prepared to face betrayal, arrest, suffering and death. The disciples on the other hand who failed to keep vigil and presumably did not pray will flee in fear and abandon Jesus.

Mark's Jesus is abused and completely abandoned during his passion. From the moment in Gethsemane when he resigns himself to arrest, his abandonment grows more complete. The betrayal of Judas, his arrest and the disciples abandoning him are all part of the symphony of sadness that Jesus hears.

Then there is Peter, Jesus' closest associate who had proclaimed in the silence of the other disciples: "You are the Messiah!" (Mark 8:29) and who, hours before, had boasted: "even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you." Peter now denies any knowledge of Jesus when questioned by a servant girl, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about."

Ask Yourself

When have you denied Christ yourself? How do people in today's world deny him?

Jesus faces his accusers all alone: the chief priests and the Sanhedrin at night, Pilate and the soldiers by day, and no where to be seen are those who once followed him. When Pilate brings Jesus and Barabbas before the crowd, the people choose the rebel-murderer for release. Ironically, the name Barabbas means “son of the father,” and the people fail to see the real son of the Father who is Jesus. Only Simon of Cyrene, a passerby, gives a helping hand, and he is coerced into doing it.

On the cross, Jesus is mocked by an entire entourage. First by people passing by, then by the priests and scribes, and finally by others who are being crucified with him. Beneath this experience is the numbing sense on the part of Jesus of total abandonment by God. Now we meet the moment of Jesus’ greatest anguish as Mark’s Jesus speaks only once from the cross. It is a final piercing cry and a last breath: “*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani*” (“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”). The death of Jesus, abandoned and alone is a horrifying death, a terrible end.

Yet within this story of abandonment runs another story line about abuse: the abuse of power. In Mark’s passion account we see the power of both religion and state perverted. Jesus is subjected to religious authorities in a trial that is a farce, laced with false witnesses and fraudulent accusations. The religious leaders and their minions spit on him blindfold him and strike him. Then there is Pontius Pilate, who represented an empire that prided itself on its alleged system of impartial justice, betraying that ideal beyond question. Knowing Jesus to be innocent, Pilate caves into a rabid rabble whose preference for a rebel (Barabbas) leads him to hand off Jesus to a brutal scourging. Then he surrenders Jesus to a style of death so terrible that Rome would not allow its own citizens to die in this manner.

In Mark’s Gospel no one gets off of the hook: betrayers, disciples, deniers, religious leaders, political leaders, the crowds. All alike fail to protect the innocent one. Such abandonment of the innocent and abuse of the powerless continues to happen.

Ask Yourself

The question for the modern reader or listener to the passion is what are we doing to protect the abandoned, the abused, the innocent, and the powerless?

Jesus entered into this powerlessness and abandonment totally. We are to do like wise. In Jesus' passion we are reminded that no matter how black the darkness, or how strong the forces of death, or how desperate are our cries, and even when death seems to have won out, there is a power stronger than death.

Even in this profoundly sad-laden story of the passion we see signs of hope. Hope springs up in a veil being torn in two from top to bottom, that veil in the Temple that restricted access to God. And who was the first to step through that opening? An outsider, a Gentile, a Roman centurion the one who spoke first the true words to all who would listen: "Truly this man was the Son of God." This is the ultimate profession of our Lenten faith.

Activities for this week of Lent

For Individuals and Households

Holding a crucifix in your hands look at it and reflect on how you have helped Christ carry his cross and on how the risen Jesus has helped you carry your cross. (This activity can also be done at the dinner table by having each person hold the crucifix and share his or her reflections and then pass it on to the next person.)

Since this is Holy Week, make every effort to celebrate the Sacred Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday at your parish. If your schedule does not permit this, then meditate on Holy Thursday as to the meaning of the Eucharist for you, on Good Friday on the meaning of Jesus' death for you, on Holy Saturday the meaning of the resurrection for you.

For Children

With Easter just around the corner, rather than just color Easter eggs think of all the people and things that you are thankful for in your life. Write a prayer of thanksgiving to God and pray it out loud in the presence of your family on Easter Sunday morning before you hunt for Easter eggs.

Closing Prayer

Leader: Were you there when they crucified our Lord?

All: Yes we were.

Leader: Did you help him carry the cross?

All: Yes we did freely.

Leader: Are you willing to take up your own cross daily and follow Jesus?

All: Yes we are.

As a closing gesture, trace the sign of the cross on your own forehead and on the foreheads of others who are present, then exchange a gesture of peace with everyone.