

Homily for Palm Sunday, Year B

March 24, 2024

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

Gospel at the Procession: Mark 11:1-10 (The triumphant entry into Jerusalem.)

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7 (I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.)

Responsory: Psalm 22 (My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?)

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11 (He humbled himself, accepting even death on a cross.)

Gospel: Mark 14:1-15:47 (The Passion according to Mark.)

The Passion narrative is really the heart of the Gospel. It is through these horrifying events that the Paschal Mystery was revealed to the world and Christ's saving mission was accomplished. The great paradox of our faith is that the "Good News" of Christ could be proclaimed most clearly through a story of such violence, injustice and sorrow.

We all know the story so well that we have learned to integrate into one narrative all four versions found in the gospels, as well as the traditional Stations of the Cross, which represents yet a *fifth* version. The problem with that blending together of different versions of the same story is that we can miss what is unique about each of these distinct views of Christ's suffering and death. For example, what strikes me about *Mark's* account of the Passion, which we heard today, is Jesus' *silence*. From the time of his arrest until the moment of his death, Jesus barely speaks at all. There's plenty of talking going on around him: prosecutors charging him with crimes, false witnesses testifying against him, judges demanding that he answer his accusers, angry crowds shouting for his crucifixion, unbelievers scoffing at him as he hangs on the cross... But, in the midst of all this noise and hatred and humiliation, Jesus remains virtually silent, and very determined. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, he "sets his face like flint, knowing that he shall not be put to shame."

During his first trial, before the Sanhedrin, Jesus refuses to answer any of the charges leveled against him. He does not challenge the lies told about him, nor does he point out the inconsistencies in the testimony. He says *nothing* in his own defense. The only time he speaks is when the High Priest asks him point blank, "Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?" *Then* he finally responds, "I am." He will not defend himself, but he will continue to speak the truth about who he is and why the Father sent him into the world.

Jesus says even less in his second trial, before Pontius Pilate, because Pilate is concerned about *political* matters, which are of no consequence to Jesus. Pilate does not want some charismatic preacher to go running around claiming to be the King of the Jews. The Romans had an agreement with the local Jewish authorities, in order to keep the peace. The Kings of all the Jewish provinces were granted a great deal of autonomy to rule over their people, as long as they obeyed their Roman overlords, like Pilate. If Jesus posed a threat to that arrangement, he would have to be stopped. And so, Pilate asks Jesus if he considers himself a king of the Jewish people. But, Jesus dismisses the question as too absurd even to merit an answer. His only response is, "You say so." Jesus has nothing more to say. He has committed no crime. He

has done nothing wrong. He will not submit to *Pilate's authority*, but he will silently submit to all of this questioning and abuse in obedience to the *Father's will*. In the words of St. Paul: "He *emptied* himself, taking the form of a slave... He *humbled* himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

We see the depth of that self-emptying in the manner of Jesus' death. As Mark tells the story, the only words that Jesus speaks from the cross are his final cry of agony: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Over the centuries, many people have tried to explain away that verse, saying that Jesus was merely quoting Psalm 22, which ends with the Psalmist praising God. But, let's not kid ourselves. Jesus is *fully human*, just like the rest of us. How many times have we felt abandoned by God in moments of deep distress, even though our faith assured us that God was very near? *Any human being* in that situation, experiencing the physical and emotional anguish that Jesus suffered, would feel abandoned by God, even if he knew in his heart that the Father was always with him. If we try to strip away Jesus' humanity by downplaying his suffering, we diminish the sacrifice that he offered for us on that cross.

The key difference between Jesus hanging on the cross and all the rest of us suffering in lesser ways is that Jesus had the power to stop the pain and put an end to this whole sordid drama. As the crowds taunted him to come down from the cross, he knew that he actually *could*, if he wanted to. But, he had already made that decision, in the Garden of Gethsemane. In prayer, he had confessed to the Father that he was deeply troubled by his impending death, yet he desired to go ahead with it, anyway. Jesus understood that he was sent into the world to save his people from sin and death, and he was not about to turn back now, when victory was so close at hand. The agony of death and the fear of abandonment would *not* deter him from completing his mission. He would see this through to the end, *for our sake*.

Whenever we Christians reflect on the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, we necessarily do so in light of his resurrection. But, let us be wary of jumping ahead too quickly to Easter Sunday. Holy Week offers us an opportunity to sit with the Mystery and ponder it deeply, to remain with Jesus in his suffering, so that we can truly savor his triumph. Let us walk with him in these final days of his earthly life, to appreciate all that he gave for our sake. For he truly emptied himself and gave *absolutely everything*... all for us and our salvation.