

Palm Sunday (B)
(Isaiah 50:4-7 / Mark 14:1-15:47)
28.03.2021

In the 19th century, a German theologian, Martin Kähler, described Mark's Gospel as *a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction*. He came to this conclusion because of what seems like a disproportionate amount of space given in this short Gospel account to Jesus's final week. It appears as if the last week of Jesus' life gets as much attention as the thirty-plus precedent years. It is not that the evangelist Mark ignores Jesus' years of ministry. The evangelist records the Master's teaching, preaching and the many miracles He wrought (on this last point it should be noted that of the four Good News accounts, Mark's contains the highest number of miracles stories), but he certainly does concentrate a lot on the last week of Jesus' life. Why? Well, maybe those who identify Mark with that *young man who fled away naked* from the scene of Jesus' Passion are right in their supposition. This would help explain why Mark was so fascinated by Jesus' Passion. If the evangelist is that young man, then he himself had been very caught up in the unfolding of that story – at least up until the point where he fled. We could well imagine then how he would have come to see the whole of Jesus' life through the lens of what he witnessed of Jesus' suffering.

There is evidence in the overall Gospel account that it was through the lens of Jesus' Sacred Passion that Mark saw everything that preceded it. In the way Mark recounts the story of Jesus in the Gospel, Christ's death is foreshadowed from the very outset. Already in Mark 2:19, where we read of the call of the disciples, we are forewarned that Judas was *the one who would betray Him*. It has been argued that the Passion of Jesus is also hinted at in the Gospel's presentation of Christ's Baptism in the Jordan. The emphasis placed therein upon Jesus' being the *Beloved Son* (Mark 1:11) is interpreted by those who understand his Gospel account as essentially *a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction* to be an allusion to the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's *beloved son*, and/or maybe an allusion to the *Servant Songs* from Isaiah's prophecy. In Isaiah *the Suffering Servant* is also spoken of as *God's Beloved*. In the story of Jesus' Baptism in Mark's Gospel there are many echoes of the writings of the prophet Isaiah, so the voice from heaven which is said to have declared Jesus' Sonship may well be rooted in the prophet's *Servant Songs*. Let me quote Isaiah's words: *This is My Servant; I strengthen Him, this is My Chosen One, My Beloved; I delight in Him. I have put My Spirit on Him; He will bring justice to the nations.*

Those who see Mark's Gospel as essentially *a Passion Narrative with a long introduction* would say that it is Jesus' *suffering servant-hood* that most characterises Him as God's Son. The centurion's acclamation heard this morning – *Truly this man was the Son of God* – is often presented as the climax of Mark's Gospel account. In the person of the Roman centurion, we have a Gentile who becomes convinced of Jesus' identity, and, more than that, through his spontaneous confession of faith, at that very moment, becomes a disciple. This centurion (who came from outside Judaism) can be thought of as representative of all the Gentiles who have recognised Jesus' true identity and become Christian disciples – ourselves included!

It is at this point in the unfolding of Jesus' story, the famous *messianic secret* theme which runs through Mark's Gospel finds its resolution. We are *let into the secret*, as it were. We now know who Jesus truly is. Jesus is: *God's Beloved Son...* and we are led to realise that, in Him, *we are now the children of God.*

What is really striking in the Passion Narrative is how the realisation of Christ's true identity was given to the centurion. It came about in no other way than by this man's witnessing how Jesus *endured* His Passion and death. (It might be better to say how Jesus *positively lived*

through His Passion and death) The centurion witnessed how Jesus submitted humbly to His Father's will; how Jesus lovingly and generously made an offering of His life, giving it freely to God, out of love for others.

We could say that what is revealed to us today, as readers of Mark's Gospel, is the essence of Christian discipleship. What Jesus lived, *how* he lived His Passion and death... this is what is asked of us in our turn. As Christian disciples we are called to *share in the sufferings of Christ* and to do *humbly submitting* ourselves to God's will; we are called to make a loving gift, a free-will oblation, a total self-offering of our lives... out of love for God our Father and out of love of others... for the good of all our sisters and brothers in humanity.

If the way in which Jesus lived His Sacred Passion and saving death *brought about the ransom of many*, so the way we dare to *share in Christ's Passion and death* can contribute greatly to the life and well-being of the world. St Paul reminds us *that the life and the death of each one of us has its influence upon others*. The Apostle states an important truth there. Paul's understanding of suffering as a *participation in Christ's saving action* is especially evident when he speaks of how he lived through his personal sufferings in the hope (indeed, the certainty) that this would impact other people's lives positively. Paul encouraged a young Christian leader named Timothy to follow his example in this respect. He wrote to him: *Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus*. (1 Tim. 2:3). Paul went on to speak of the imprisonment he was enduring because of his preaching, explaining: *It is because of the Gospel that I am suffering and wearing fetters like a criminal*. (v.9). He went on to say how he believed that this suffering could affect others for the good when he penned the following lines: *I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory. The saying is sure: If we have died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him*. (verses 10-12). In this passage from 1 Timothy 2, we see clearly that Paul lived his part in the suffering of Christ, considering this to be what was asked of him as a Christian disciple. What comes across is that Paul believed that the way in which he lived his suffering could help contribute to the good and well-being of others... and even advance their salvation. That being said, there is something we need to be very clear about. Ultimately, salvation is something that only God can bring about. It can never be the work of any human being, other than the God-Man, Christ-Jesus. But, as disciples of Jesus, we are, all of us, *God's children*... and, *as God's children, we are led to share in the Sonship of Jesus*... and this means that can be led to share in His *Suffering Servant-hood* and thus, with Christ, be of benefit to others.

In the optic of Mark's Gospel, at the very heart of Jesus' Sonship, stands the salvific effect of suffering. As God's children, we are invited to live our sufferings with and in Christ. This means that just as Paul could speak of himself as *suffering to bring the Gospel, the message of salvation, to the people, (...) enduring his suffering so that they may obtain salvation*, so can we say, as the apostle did elsewhere (this time writing to the Romans): *By the Spirit of Sonship, which is given to all of us who are Christian disciples, we have become children of God and co-heirs with Christ. (...) and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him*. Further on in the same chapter, in Romans 8, Paul tells us: *We know that in everything [including any suffering we endure] God works for good with those who love Him who are called according to his purpose*. (v. 28).

All that being said, suffering can never be the end in itself. Suffering was not and never could be the end of the Christian story! Even if, in our turn, we admit that Mark's Gospel is essentially *a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction*, we have to concede that for

this text to have been considered to be a *Gospel* it had to contain a Resurrection ending... and it does! If there is no resurrection end to the Jesus story, then it is not *Good News*. It is simply not a *Gospel*! In the Gospels there is always life beyond Christ's death. There is glory beyond the humiliation and shame of the cross. Indeed, there is already *glory in the cross*.

That last point is a particularly important one to grasp. It is not only in John's Gospel account that the cross of Jesus points to glory. We are used to hearing it said in the Fourth Gospel that the moment of Jesus's elevation upon the cross was the moment of Christ's glorification, but this thought is found in the Pauline writings as well. Paul also speaks of *the glory of the cross of Jesus* and of his *glorying in the cross of Christ*.

The really extraordinary thing about the centurion's proclamation, when he declared that Jesus was the Son of God, is that it shows us how in Mark's Gospel it was not only the resurrection of Jesus that revealed Christ's true identity and glory, but already the way in which Jesus endured His death upon the cross. Christ's fullest identity, His glory, was made manifest on Calvary's Hill. It was displayed in a strange way: in weakness! It was hanging powerless upon the cross that Jesus manifested God's power to save a fallen, rebellious, human race. It was in Jesus' humiliation that His messianic greatness was made visible.

Christ continues to manifest His power in *our* suffering and death... if only we dare to live our sorrow, our distress, our pain and, ultimately, our death, with and in Him. We will be enabled to *endure whatever suffering comes our way* as long as we stay close to Jesus. He gives us the courage and fortitude we need when we are at our weakest and most vulnerable. He offers us His comfort and peace when we feel overcome by our many fears and anxieties.

Jesus *understands* us! Literally, He *stands under us*... to sustain us, to hold us up. He is with us, compassionate in our regard. He Himself has experienced emotions similar to those we can know. We are told that Jesus was *troubled, distressed, anxious and sorrowful... even unto death*.

We can be assured that one day we will be led (one day our suffering will lead us) to enjoy a share in Christ's resurrection. As we heard Paul say: *Those who die with Him will live with Him*.

On Easter evening we will hear from Luke's Gospel the famous words: *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory?* If that was true for Jesus, we can expect it to be true for us, His disciples!

I leave the last word to my friend the Apostle Paul, who writing to the Ephesians of his suffering for others, so they might obtain glory (while suggesting that the same fate would be that of his readers), gives to them and to us this simple word of advice: *That being so, I ask you not to lose heart*. Whatever we are going through in our lives right now – or whatever we may yet be led to endure – may we not lose heart!