

## Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion (B)

April 1, 2012

We have just finished hearing a story of abandonment. Mark's Jesus is completely abandoned during his passion. From the moment in Gethsemane when he resigns himself to arrest, his abandonment grows more and more complete.

The betrayal of Judas is just the prelude. As he is arrested, his disciples run off. Then, a young man following, wearing nothing but a linen cloth, abandons him ...along with the cloth he wore! – an interesting image unique to Mark's Gospel. In the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus' disciples abandoned all to follow him. In the end, this young man abandons all to run away from him.

Then, there's Peter, his closest associate, who in happier days had proclaimed before the silence of the other disciples, "You are the Messiah!" and who, hours before, had boasted, "Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you." Peter now vehemently denies any knowledge of him when questioned by a servant girl, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about."

Jesus faces his accusers alone: the chief priests and the Sanhedrin by night, Pilate and his soldiers by day. All those who once followed him are nowhere to be seen. When Pilate brings Jesus and Barabbas before the crowd, the people choose the rebel-murderer for release. Only Simon from Cyrene, a passerby, gives a helping hand, and he is forced into doing it.

On the cross, he is mocked first by people passing by, then by the priests and scribes, and finally, by the others being crucified with him. More terrible of all is the sense of complete abandonment by God. Even in the garden Jesus had prayed and spoken his fear: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me...." But it was not possible. And the cup was not taken away. Now, on the cross, we meet the moment of his greatest anguish.

Mark's Jesus speaks only once on the cross. In Mark's story there is no comforting "Into your hands I commend my spirit," as in Luke, or a dignified "It is finished," as in John. Just a final piercing cry and a last breath: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

The death of Jesus is a horrifying death, a terrible end. Death truly is the enemy, the last enemy, and it appears it has conquered. While Luke's Jesus goes to Jerusalem to ascend from there to the Father, and John's Jesus goes there to enter finally into his hour of glory, Mark's Jesus goes there simply to die. Alone.

In Mark's Gospel no one gets off the hook: disciples, religious leaders, politicians, the crowd. All fail to protect the innocent one. And that is how we are meant to hear it and ponder it. Jesus entered into this powerlessness and abandonment totally. This is what Holy Week invites us to reflect and meditate on. We are reminded that no matter how deep the darkness, no matter how strong the forces of death, no matter how desperate our cries, and even when death seems to have won out, there is a power stronger than death.

Even in this sad story we see the signs of hope. A Roman centurion, a Gentile, an outsider was the first after a night of the deepest darkness to speak words that were not either lies, perjury, or curses. He was the first to speak the truth and continue to speak it to all who would listen: "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Mark told his story to a community undergoing persecution. Its people were being dragged from their synagogues and hauled before governors. They too would come to know abuse and abandonment. They were tortured and beaten and killed violently. But they knew that a new world was coming, the Kingdom of God was at hand, and it was entering the world through all those refusing to be co-opted by the powers of death and destruction.

We carry a piece of palm home today, a reminder that what seemed to be the end proved to be only the beginning. For Jesus, who had seemingly been overcome by the forces of evil, sin and death, really had the last word. And it was not a word of abandonment but one of abundance, God's last word of endless reconciliation and peace, grace and joy.