March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

Procession:  Mk 11:1-10 or Jn 12:12-16 
Is 50:4-7 
Phil 2:6-11 
Mk 14:1—15:47 or Mk 15:1-39

By Joseph Serano, O. Praem.

Today, as we begin Holy Week, it might be helpful to ponder the suggestion that “a Gospel is a Holy Week story with a long introduction”. Yes, that’s a bit of an exaggeration but arguably a bigger parcel of truth, especially for Mark (whose Passion story we will hear today). Of Mark’s mere sixteen chapters (that say nothing of the infancy narrative or the Beatitudes or even the Our Father), three chapters provide an account of the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection: what we call the Paschal Mystery.

To go a step farther, as today’s reading tells the core of the Gospel message, so too the liturgy of the Triduum (the unpacking of the Holy Week story) reminds us of the core of our faith. On Thursday, we remember the night before he died, when he broke bread and poured out wine: what the community soon would call the gift of the Eucharist. On Friday, we see before us what Thursday prefigured. On Calvary, his Body is broken and his Blood poured out. In accord with the image of Isaiah’s suffering servant, Jesus died for us and our salvation. Then, on the third day (in Judaism the Sabbath begins on the night before, so we have the Saturday Vigil and the Sunday morning liturgies), we hear the “good news” that “He is truly Risen” and so again we sing Alleluia.

Mark’s Gospel is the shortest and the earliest of the four. In theological shorthand, it has a predominantly “low Christology”, i.e. it gives the most attention to the Lord’s humanity. It is only Mark who has Jesus admitting there are things he does not know, getting angry at more than the cleansing of the Temple and then Mark alone reports the anguished cry of “My God, my God why have you abandoned me?” (Yes, some exegetes remind us that these are the opening words of Psalm 22, ultimately a psalm of hope, but on its face the text is a deeply human cry of anguish, just one more indication of how at-one the Lord is with us in his humanity.)

It was Karl Barth who once explained how the name Jesus means “God saves” and this in turn underlies the community’s understanding of the Christ as “fully human & fully divine”. Thus, Barth argues, Jesus must be God to SAVE us and he must be human to save US. The Lord’s passion & death are the clearest evidence of his true humanity — which we celebrate in the Triduum as a declaration of our faith’s insistence that “we are not alone” as we walk life’s journey. In good times and bad, God walks with us. Indeed, it is precisely in our brother’s rising from the dead that we dare to “hope” in our own call to share in eternal life.
The Triduum is the story of the Lord’s dying and rising, and so it is the fundamental paradigm for a life of faith: the call to die to ourselves and rise to something new "through, with and in the Lord” In Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi (source for verse before the Gospel today), he explains how God “self-emptied” of his glory to take on flesh. Then, the Lord Jesus self-empties a second time, pouring out his life blood from the cross. The key Greek word is “kenosis”, which becomes the linchpin for Paul’s teaching about the meaning of Baptism: OUR entering into the Paschal Mystery. At the end of their final forty days of preparation, the catechumens removed their old garments, went down into the water (the Greek “to be baptized” literally means to “drown”) and, then having died to the old way, they come out of the water and put on new garments as signs of their commitment to the new Way, the Way of the Lord.

A final thought to try and tie it all together. Whatever we do to better the life journey of our fellow pilgrims — to make their lives more human, especially the marginalized and forgotten — the more we continue the redemptive work of the Christ who took on flesh and died on a cross to show us the Way. Thus, the more the strong are willing to stand with the weak, the more the powerful are willing to stand with the powerless, the more we become agents of that EASTER HOPE which we will celebrate a week from today.

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