

Palm Sunday - Mark 14:1-15;47

Little Johnny was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked why. His father explained, "You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him; so, we got palm branches today." "Aw, shucks," grumbled Little Johnny. "The one Sunday I can't go to church, and Jesus shows up!"

Well, we know there is more to this story that we just heard. But Jesus didn't. He faced his death without knowing he would be raised up. That statement may confuse us because three times in this year when Mark's gospel is read, we hear of his flat-out prediction that he would die on the cross and on the third day be raised up.

But we also know, from even a small amount of biblical scholarship, that those passages are not Jesus' own words but belong to the evangelist and reflect the resurrection faith of his community, the early church.

That's upsetting because this style of writing is very different from what we are accustomed to. But something very good can come out of that perplexity; it is this: **we now know** that Jesus faced death as each of us are invited to face this last passion in our lives: moving into the darkness, trusting in God, who is light.

That trust is reflected, or reported, in the description by the synoptic gospels - those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke - of Jesus's last hours in the garden of Gethsemane.

The Evangelist John also puts him there but only to tell of his betrayal and arrest. The others tell that he spent the time in prayer and also in agony, not of his body, but of his spirit.

He did not know all things, but he knew many, and we are told in an earlier gospel that "he knew what was in men's hearts." This was not a divine knowledge but a gift of discernment.

He could anticipate the terrible things that were about to happen to him: betrayal, judgement - a false judgement-death, even death on the cross. Horrible as it was, it was no exceptional judgement for the brutal Romans to sentence their subjects to.

Faced with this horror, Jesus' prayer was simple: a request that it not happen. They record him saying, "**Let this cup pass from me.**"

The cup can be a symbol of joy when we lift it in a toast; it can be a symbol of pain, as when we must drink it to the dregs, as when we face the inevitability of our own dying.

We seek medical help when we are sick and we postpone death mightily as long as possible. This does not show bad faith, but rather, appreciation for the present gift of life, and often a sign of love for each other, the bonds of life and love we dread to lose.

When it is unmistakably clear that in the end we, or the beloved, are soon to die, we are invited, as Jesus did, to surrender to God's will. The gospels record him saying, "**Not my will but yours be done.**"

We call the suffering of Jesus, the Passion, and there is a sense - a mystical sense - that the suffering and death of each of us is all part of that Passion. How can that be so? Because Christ is in us, the risen Christ.

We are baptized into His body. We confirm that membership a thousand, thousand times in receiving the sacrament of holy communion. "The body of Christ." The bread, yes, but even more, us. We **ARE** the Body of Christ.

A pastor tells of a scene at a deathbed which he did not anticipate. He did not know the person; he was responding to a request from one of his parishioners.

She was a somewhat eccentric woman, but her request was simple (and for him, unavoidable). She said, "Pastor, my cousin is in General Hospital. Her name is Thelma Madden. The family doesn't go to church. Won't you visit her?"

He called it more of a command than a request, but what was he going to encounter? A dying person. His parishioner declared, "Thelma's cancer has spread. The doctors told her yesterday that there was no sense in surgery. Chemotherapy may give her a bit more time and ease the pain, but that's all."

So, he went to the hospital; he found her in bed, her husband nearby in a chair, both of them saying nothing. He introduced himself and Thelma spoke immediately from the bed: "We don't go to church. We wouldn't live any differently if we did, so we don't."

And her husband nodded. Neither really looked at him. Was he just an intruder? What could he possibly do? He said that the words rose to his lips: "So it wouldn't make any difference in how you live. Would it make any difference in how you die?"

He didn't voice those words. They sound coercive; the old approach of "you better get straight with God; he won't give you a second chance."

Salvation and the mercy of God is greater than that, and take into account a person's entire life, not just the last few days of it. Who knows what goodness, what love, has taken place in another person's life?

What a pastor does in circumstances like these is to ask to pray for the person, to strengthen them and commend them to God's mercy. The request is rarely refused, even if it is only with the grudging thought that "it can't do any harm."

The pastor will say something like: "Never mind about the church-going; all that matters is that you are a child of God, and God loves you and will take you to Himself."

But going to church does matter, he reflected later. Not as a necessity for salvation, but for making life easier to bear. And giving one the occasion, even weekly, to give thanks for all good things. Even to rejoice. The greatest of all these gifts we have received, we who call ourselves Christians, is Jesus himself.

Did anyone pray for Him when He was dying? Only John tells us of the group of faithful at the foot of the cross - the women, His mother Mary, and the young evangelist himself. Surely, they prayed.

And what about Jesus dying? In Mark's gospel we hear only a loud cry that sounds like despair. The other writers record wonderful things: his concern for the dying thief, his forgiveness, even for his executioners, and words at the end that we would like to make our own: "**Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.**"

The cross on which he died, or the crucifix, is everywhere in the Christian world. It is the Christian symbol. It is not that we don't believe in the resurrection. The cross has been adopted as our universal icon because of several things that are important.

It reminds us that suffering is part of our own lives, but He is part of it; the one who endured the **passion** now shows **compassion**. It reminds us that we, like Him, will die a death, and because He was faithful, we have hope.

To what was He faithful? To the Father's will. That the divine will was not, I repeat, **not** that He die on the cross.

Some of the scriptural verses lead us astray on this point, but it should be clear: the Father's will was that Jesus proclaim, teach, and work endlessly to bring about God's reign - in one's own heart, and in the world.

Faithful to that mission, Jesus died. And God's answer was to raise him to new life. AMEN.