

Commentary to Palm Sunday – Year B

Jesus, a Man, not a Superman



Introduction

The cross was the most cruel and horrible instrument of punishments. It was the capital punishment reserved for bandits, rebellious slaves, the marginalized of society, those guilty of heinous crimes. Cicero, the Roman orator and writer, who lived in the first century B.C., speaks of it as “a penalty the name of which should be removed, not only from the person of Roman citizenship, but also from their thoughts, eyes and ears.”

To profess oneself as a follower of the crucified? A madness! A shame, a choice contrary to common sense. To the Corinthians, Paul writes: “The Jews ask miracles and the Greeks for a higher knowledge, while we proclaim a crucified Messiah. For the Jews, what a great scandal! And for the Greeks, what nonsense!” (1 Cor 1:22-23).

From the beginning of their history, Christians have chosen the symbols of their faith. On the tombs we still find the fish, the fisherman, the shepherd, but not the cross. For a long time they have shown, so to say, a certain reluctance to recognize themselves in the cross. Only in the fourth century A.D., it became the symbol par excellence and production of crosses with the most precious metals and embedded with pearls began. During the Holy Week, this symbol will be offered for our contemplation.

To venerate the cross does not mean bowing down in front of a material object, not even to linger on the sorrowful aspect of the passion of Jesus. The cross indicates a choice of life, the gift of self. To contemplate it means to take it as a reference point for any decision.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“I will follow you wherever you go”—the bride tells the beloved—.

First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7

In the first reading of the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we met a mysterious character who comes on the scene in the second part of the book of Isaiah. This is the “Servant of the Lord.” In today’s passage he presents himself and speaks. He describes the mission entrusted to him. He is sent to proclaim a message of consolation to those who are dejected and without hope (v. 4).

The one who gets lost on bad roads and does not find the right path, who is enveloped by darkness and gropes in the dark must not be afraid. He will not hear reproaches and threats from him, but always and only words of comfort.

Then he clears the way with which he will accomplish his mission (vv. 4-5). The Lord gave him an ear that knows how to listen and a mouth that can communicate.

What he heard is not pleasant, but he does not compromise, nor pulls back. He knows how to resist (v. 5).

Finally he tells what happened to him, what were the consequences of his consistency. He faithfully communicated the message that was entrusted to him and he was beaten, insulted, slapped. They spat in his face, but he did not react and continued to trust in the Lord (v. 7).

If one reflects, especially on the last part of the reading, one is spontaneously induced to juxtapose this Servant as Jesus. Immediately after Easter, in fact, Christians have made this connection. As the “Servant of the Lord,” Christ kept listening to the Father. He spoke words of comfort and hope, gave comfort to the despondent and the marginalized, his life ended dramatically (Mt 27:27-31).

It is not enough to stop to contemplate and admire the faithfulness of Jesus, to be moved by what he suffered, to experience outrage at the injustices he undertook and bow down in front of some hero who, even today, has the courage to face the same painful experience of the Servant of the Lord.

Not some hero, but every believer is called to reproduce in himself the figure of this “Servant”: to keep listening to the word of God, to translate into action what he heard and also be willing to bear the consequences.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11

The community of Philippi was very good and Paul was proud of it, but, as often happens, there was also a bit of envy among Christians. Someone was trying to draw the attention to himself. He wanted to lord it over a bit over others and impose his own will.

Because of this situation, Paul, in the first part of the letter gives a heartfelt recommendation: “I beg of you, make me very happy; have one love, one spirit, one feeling, do nothing through rivalry or vain conceit. Do not seek your own interest, but rather that of others” (Phil 2:2-4).

To engrain better this teaching in the mind and heart of the Philippians, Paul presents the example of Christ. He does this by quoting a stupendous hymn, known in many Christian communities of the first century. In two stanzas the hymn tells the story of Jesus.

He already existed before becoming man. Taking on human flesh “he emptied himself” of his divine greatness and agreed to enter into a life slaved to death. He made himself forever like us: he took our weakness, ignorance, passions, feelings and mortality. He appeared to our eyes in the humility of the most despised of men, the slave, the one to whom the Romans reserved the ignominious punishment of the cross (vv. 6-8). But the path he has traveled has not ended with the humiliation and death on the cross.

The second part of the hymn (vv. 9-11), in fact, sings the glory to which he was raised. The Father raised him, held up as a model for every person, and gave him power and dominion over every creature. All of humanity will eventually be united with him and in that moment God’s plan will be accomplished.

Gospel: Mark 14:1-15, 47

All the evangelists devote so much space to the passion and death of Jesus. The facts are basically the same, though narrated in different ways and with diverse perspectives. Each evangelist then puts in the story episodes, details, underscores that are his own and which show the care and concern for some themes of catechesis, considered significant and urgent for their communities.

Today’s version of the story of the passion being proposed to us is that of Mark. In our commentary we will only highlight the specific aspects.

A first important element is the lack of response of Jesus to the kiss of Judas and to the violent act committed by one of those present (Mk 14:46-49).

While the other Evangelists relate a few words of the Master to Judas, “Judas, with a kiss do you betray the Son of Man?” (Lk 22:48) and to Peter: “Put your sword back into its place!” (Mt 26:52), Mark presents Jesus not rebelling against the events that he cannot impede, almost passively accepting what is happening to him and that, in the end, he concludes: “But let the Scriptures be fulfilled” (Mk 14:49).

The evangelist portrays a meek and helpless Jesus, who gives himself in the hands of the enemies, without reacting. He stresses this fact to support the faith of the Christians of his community, severely tried by persecution. In his Son, the Father has not reserved a preferential treatment. He has not spared him from the injustices, betrayals and the dramas that affect people. Like him, the disciples will have to deal with deceit, hypocrisy, pretense, violence. This is the fate of the righteous, often intended to be a victim of the malice of the wicked, as announced in the Scriptures (Ps 37:14; 71:11). In Mark, Jesus considers not worth a word of disapproval the senseless and agitating act of Peter: his putting hand on the sword is so far from the evangelical principles and do not even deserve to be taken into account.

The disciple who, like Peter, believes to be able to address the injustices through violence, in fact only complicates the situations and then has to escape... Those who use violence stray from the Master and plunges into the darkness of the night.

All the evangelists tell us that the disciples, as soon as they realized that Jesus did not respond, fight, nor invited them to fight, fled. Only Mark recalls a curious detail: “A young man covered by nothing but a linen cloth, followed Jesus. As they took hold of him, he left the cloth in their hands and fled away naked” (Mk 14:51-52).

The detail is really marginal and perhaps it was inserted by the evangelist as an autobiographical feature: the tradition, in fact, has identified that boy as Mark himself.

However, the little ‘comic scene of the young man who fled naked’ reproduces, in the evangelist’s intention, the nonchalant behavior of many Christians who easily fall short of their commitments. To follow the Master, the apostles have abandoned all (Mk 10:28), now, when they realize that the goal of the trip is the gift of life, they left everything. This time, however, is not to follow the Master, but to escape. This is what happens—Mark insinuates—even to Christians: sometimes called to deal in an evangelical way with the opposition of life, to avoid risks, they leave the baptismal garment that identifies them and renounce the courageous choices that their faith requires.

All evangelists indicate that, after an initial enthusiastic reception, the crowds gradually broke away from Jesus who in the end was left alone with the twelve. These, in turn, in the moment of decisive choice, fled. None but Mark, however, puts emphasis on the loneliness of Christ during passion. Reading the other gospels, there is always someone who is on the side of Jesus or takes position in his favor: an angel in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43), a disciple or Pilate’s wife in the process (Jn 18:15; Mt 27:19), a great crowd and a group of women on the way to Calvary (Luke 23:27-31); his mother, the favorite disciple, some friends, the good thief (Jn 19:25; Lk 23:40).

In Mark, there’s just no one. Jesus is betrayed by the crowd that prefers Barabbas. He is mocked, beaten and humiliated by soldiers; is insulted by passers-by and the leaders of the people present at the moment of his crucifixion. Darkness was around him. Only at the end, after his death has been told, it

was noted: “There were also some women watching from a distance” (Mk 15:40-41).

Completely alone, Jesus experienced the anguish of one who, being certainly committed to the just cause, feels defeated. His cry, “My God, my God, why have you deserted me” (Mk 15:34) seems outrageous, but expresses his inner drama. At the time of his death, he had the experience of impotence, of failure in the fight against injustice, falsehood, oppression exerted by religious and political power.

One who commits himself to live coherently his faith—it is the message of Mark to the Christians of his community—must take into account that, at the crucial moment, he will be left alone. He will be betrayed by his friends and refused by his own family, feeling oneself abandoned by God and wondering if it was worth to suffer so much to find oneself defeated. In these moments he will launch his cry to the Father, but, to avoid falling into the abyss of despair, he will cry out with Jesus. Only then he will receive an answer to his anguished questions.

Another feature of Mark’s story is the insistence on the very human reactions of Jesus in the face of death. Only Mark notes that Jesus, in the Garden of Olives, realizing that they were looking for him to put him to death, “he became filled with fear and distress” (Mk 14:33). The other evangelists avoid to present to us a fearful Jesus, as if shaken by a terror that, only with difficulty, he was able to control.

History is full of heroes who faced death with serenity and disregard for the suffering. Jesus is not among these people. He cried, he was afraid, he looked for someone who would understand and be near him in the moment of the most dramatic choice of his life.

It is comforting that the facts are just as Mark told them: contemplating this Jesus man, not superman, our companion in suffering. He experienced, as we do, how hard and difficult it is to obey the Father. We feel encouraged to follow him.

In the passion narrative of Mark, Jesus is always silent. To the religious authorities who ask him if he is the Messiah and to Pilate who wants to know if he is king, he simply replies: “I am” (Mk 14:62; 15:2). That’s it. During the trial, not a word came out from his mouth. In the face of insults, provocations, lies, he is silent; he makes no reply (Mk 14:61; 15:4-5). He knows that those who want to condemn are conscious of his innocence. He is aware that his enemies have already decreed his death and that it is not worth to lower oneself to their level, accepting an argument that would not change anything.

There is a silence that is a sign of weakness and lack of courage: that of those who do not take action to denounce injustices because they are afraid of losing friends, getting themselves into some kind of trouble or antagonize the people who count. Instead, there is a silence that is a sign of strength of character: that of someone who does not react to provocation, does not lose heart in the face of arrogance, insult, slander. It is the noble silence of those who are convinced of their own righteousness and loyalty and are certain that the just cause for which they are battling will eventually triumph.

The Christian is not a coward who is resigned, does not battle against evil. He is one who seeks to establish the truth and justice, but he is also the one who, like the Master, has the strength to be silent, refusing to resort to unfair means employed by his opponents: the calumny, lies, violence. He does not

fear defeat, and does not care about the victory of his enemies: he knows that their triumph is short-lived.

Only Mark, referring to Jesus' prayer to the Father, shows the Aramaic name that he used 'Abba', Father (Mk 14:36).

Abba corresponds to one of the many terms that, here too, the children use to speak to their parents. The rabbis said: When a child begins to taste the wheat (i.e., when it is weaned), it learns to say "abba" (daddy) and "imma" (mother). The adults avoided this childish term, but resumed using it when the father grew old, when he became a grandfather, he needed assistance and most affection. Abba therefore expressed confidence and tenderness.

In the gospels, this term appears only here. Jesus uses it in the most dramatic moment of his life, when, after asking the Father to spare him a so hard a trial, he leaves himself with confidence in his hands.

It is an invitation to never doubt, even in the seemingly most absurd situations, God's love and to always remember that he is Abba.

The climax of the whole story of the Passion of Jesus according to Mark is the profession of faith of the centurion at the foot of the cross: "The captain, who was standing in front of him, saw how Jesus died and heard the cry he gave; and he said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'" (Mk 15:39).

Since the beginning of the Mark's Gospel, the crowds and the disciples wonder about Jesus; they are asking who he is (Mk 1:27; 4:41; 6:2-3, 14-15). But no one can grasp his true identity. When someone proclaims him the messiah, he immediately, takes action to impose silence (Mk 1:44; 3:12): his identity must not be revealed; the secret must be kept until the end, because only after his death and resurrection it will be possible to understand who he really is.

Now, what is surprising is the discovery and the proclamation of Jesus "Son of God" are not made by one of the apostles or by a disciple, but by a pagan. It's in the mouth of a foreign soldier that the formula is found. It is disconcerting for its purity that the early Christians employed a pagan to proclaim their faith in Christ.

The way that Jesus had died: giving a strong cry, the cry of the righteous spoken of in the book of Psalms (Ps 22:3, 6, 25) opened the eyes of the centurion. It made him recognize in the condemned the "Son of God," not the earthquake, the darkening of the sun or some other miracles.

What he was not able to get calming waves of the sea, healing the sick, multiplying the loaves, Jesus now gets it with the gift of life. It is the miracle of his life shaped by love alone that converts the pagan centurion.

In this context, the meaning of the veil of the temple that "was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mk 15:38) becomes clear. This is not an information. There was no miraculous tear of the curtain that served as a partition between the Holy and the Holy of Holies (Ex 26:33), as well as, at the time of the baptism of Jesus, the heaven were not materially opened.

Mark is telling a much greater miracle: a miracle of the spiritual order. At the beginning of his public life the heavens “were torn,” that is, peace and communication between heaven, the abode of God, and the earth, the people’s house, are re-established. Now Jesus’ supreme act of love has brought down all the barriers, also upon earth.

In the Holy of Holies, believed to be the abode of the Lord, only the high priest had access to it once a year, on the solemn day of the feast of atonement for sins. Now every person, whether Jew or pagan, like the centurion, can come and go from the Holy of holies, because it is the house of his Father. God cannot be imagined far away, inaccessible; to him, even the greatest sinner can approach with confidence, knowing oneself his son or daughter.

After the death of Jesus, all the evangelists put into the scene Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council who went to Pilate for permission to bury the crucified One. Only Mark, however, specifies that his was a courageous gesture (15:43). To declare themselves disciples of Jesus when the crowds cheered him was easy, but to stand as his friend before the authority that had sentenced him to death required great courage.

Joseph of Arimathea is, for Mark, a reminder to those fickle, opportunistic, weak disciples who do not have the courage to profess their faith, who are ashamed of moral values taught by Christ and that, to avoid trouble or just not being laughed at, they easily adapt to the current morality.

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