

Palm Sunday, 28 March 2021

Scriptures: Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1--15:47

Homily: Fr. Ken

After two and a half years of public ministry, preaching and healing as a man of mercy, Jesus has become a superstar of the many and an enemy to the few. But Jesus was careful not to present himself as a popular hero.

You recall that at the beginning of his public ministry, one of the temptations in the desert had been precisely this—to be the messiah of the people's expectations, a kind of wonderworker, a political revolutionary.

But the mission of Jesus, however, was to do the will of God. It was fidelity to the will of God that led Jesus ultimately to the events that we celebrate during this coming Holy Week.

We begin with remembering the joyous entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the acclamation of the vast crowds waving their palm branches and shouting "Hosanna" to the descendant of their great King David.

But Jesus is not a king. He is a humble teacher, riding on a donkey, at the head of his ragtag band of disciples.

As we read the account of the passion of Jesus from Mark's Gospel this morning, we move with Jesus through the events of that first Holy Week.

Against the background of plotting and betrayal, Jesus accepts the loving tenderness of a woman who prophetically anoints him in preparation for his burial. Then Jesus shares his last Passover meal with his friends, again prophetically acting out his approaching death in the sacrament of this body and blood. And, finally in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus goes through an agony of

anticipation, freely accepting the will of God, which will lead to his arrest and condemnation.

In the meantime, we find the disciples in a complete state of denial. They had enjoyed a brief experience of popularity, but now their world was crumbling. Jesus was speaking of a betrayal of which they would all be guilty. They could not accept this, but their only response was to fall asleep while Jesus agonized, anticipating his passion, and finally accepting it as the will of God.

When Jesus was arrested, they all deserted him and ran away. In Mark's Gospel, no excuses are made for the disciples' lack of understanding and cowardice; indeed, he highlights it in Peter's three denials of Jesus. Even the special friends of Jesus are weak like the rest of us.

If the disciples could change so much, how much more the crowds? On Sunday, they shouted and cheered Jesus as their hero. On Friday, they shouted: "Crucify him!" On Sunday, they welcomed him with palm branches. On Friday, they saw him crowned with thorns and hung on a cross at Golgotha, and they jeered and spit at him.

And so, at the start of this Holy Week, we ask how we can effectively take part in the commemoration of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. If we are truly to experience the transforming power of the Resurrection when we celebrate Easter next Sunday, we are therefore called to take part as fully as we can in the liturgical events of this Holy Week. We are reminded that we are all called to be disciples. To take up our cross and to follow Jesus.

In the second reading, St. Paul shows us that to be like Jesus, we are called to empty ourselves of anything that would prevent us from doing what God wants, even to the point of dying. Following Jesus, especially in the tough and challenging times of today's pandemic, that is the way to glory and to eternal life. That is the way to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, the way of the faithful disciple.

The challenge for us is this: Can I remain faithful to this way of self-denial, following Jesus all the way to the Cross; or, will I be like the crowds, enjoying the good times, but giving up when the going gets tough? Suffering and death that come are the way of Jesus, the way to Resurrection and the promised new life that awaits us, as faithful followers of Jesus.