

“Fidelity and Betrayal” – Passion Sunday, Mk 14:1-28

Today in the Church Year is celebrated by some as Palm Sunday and by others as Passion Sunday. The difference lies in a denominational focus and relates to a perspective on the liturgical events of Holy Week. For traditions that do not practice Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services this Sunday is usually observed as Passion Sunday, in order that the details of the Passion or the suffering of Christ would not be missed and the church roll too quickly into and beyond the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. For those who do offer Holy Week observances this Sunday provides in the form of Palm Sunday a lead-in to the full set of events that will unfold throughout the week. I try to accommodate both themes, beginning early in the service with the familiar marching into Jerusalem motif and distributing the palm crosses, and then in the sermon narrowing in on the events that soon followed, as the joyful cries of “Hosanna!” fade and begin to turn to the more ominous cries of “Hang him!”

However, even having taken that option, the selection of texts is tough, mostly because the story is lengthy, even in Mark’s abbreviated accounts. The suggested gospel readings for today run from the beginning of Chapter 14 through to the end of Chapter 15. Few people today are willing to listen or are even capable of listening to two whole chapters of the gospel being read in a worship service and so I’ve cut it in half. Today we’re only looking near the beginning of those events, in part because it seems appropriate as we begin this Holy Week that takes us to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday that we start at the beginning of the story, and to let ourselves get drawn into those fateful events.

The story unfolds in a sequence of pictures, just like a slide show or a well-made movie, with images that alternate appropriately enough between the contrasts of light and dark. The first slide opens with an ominous warning of trouble to come. The time is specific, two days before the Passover, the festival of Unleavened Bread that celebrates the pending departure of the Israelites from captivity and slavery in Egypt. The place is also specific, in the hot sunshine with the smell of blood from the animal sacrifices pervading the air with the onset of Passover, recalling the smearing of lamb’s blood on the lintels of doorways to keep the Israelite children safe. The smell of blood is in the air also with the revealing of a secretive, unpopular scheme to arrest and kill Jesus. The knives are out in more ways than one!

Meanwhile, back in Bethany, the scene shifts indoors to a tender and touching moment in which Jesus is anointed with very expensive ointment by a woman. Even here there is controversy as the disciples chastise her for wasting money, but Jesus proclaims her action hints at and is in preparation for his burial. This scene sets a stark contrast to the events that will soon unfold, and yet it also hints at the grace that will be revealed. In a moment of supreme caring and with a demonstration of lasting fidelity, she anoints Jesus.

The scene shifts once more and the drumbeat of betrayal and impending death becomes louder and more insistent. In what could have been a prototype for Canadian politics, taking place in shadows and behind closed doors, one of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, makes the secretive arrangements to betray Jesus, and receives a promise of a monetary reward for doing so.

Here is where we start looking in detail with our reading as the progression of images again turns out of the shadows and back into the sunshine, to Jesus and the disciples, and to thoughts of a sacrificial lamb. As the disciples ask Jesus about making preparations for the meal, he gives them detailed instructions about meeting and following a man carrying a jar of water. Affirming that every detail told them by Jesus was to come true, the disciples followed his instructions, and “found everything as he had told them.”

We now move into the evening darkness, with the soft glow of oil lamps in the room, and Jesus and the disciples gathered around the table, eating. Soft light warmly bathes the room, smooth conversation – table talk, if you will – flows gently until the plot thickens with Jesus dropping a bombshell into the middle of the gathering. “One of you will betray me,” he tells them, and they understandably become agitated and greatly distressed. “Surely, not I?” each proclaims, unaware that before the tragic events had completely unfurled each and every one of them would have betrayed him, not merely the one who would trigger those fateful events for a purse of silver.

And then the most incredible scene unfolds – after proclaiming that one of them would betray him and being fully aware that all would betray him, instead of rejecting them or dismissing them because of their frailty in faith Jesus graciously offers to them bread and wine, defining them as symbols of his body and his blood, the symbols of life and the new covenant with God. Knowing their imperfections, knowing our imperfections, even and because of our incomplete, inadequate and imperfect faith, Jesus offered not only these symbols of himself, but all of himself. Shifting from gentle table talk to defining Word of God, Jesus defines a way for his followers – for us – to join with one another and with him in his magnificent act of holy obedience and sacrifice.

It is no wonder that artists over the ages have tried to capture this moment, trying to help us to stop and stare at the picture of that moment when Jesus offered the bread and the wine to all who would accept and share in his grace. The images of that moment cannot be adequately captured on canvas, on film, on DVD, but they can be recreated in our minds as we participate in the sacrament. Let yourself be transported in the moment of sharing back to that guest room, with the air hanging thick with the tension of Jesus’ announcement of betrayal. Let yourself be enveloped by the night sounds, the smells of burning lamps and fresh bread and hearty wine and figs and dust. Let yourself be enveloped also by the overwhelming love of God incarnated in your host at the table, offering not just bread and wine but life and life everlasting, not for anything you have done but simply because you are there accepting and because you are loved. As you taste the bread, taste the possibilities offered by God for sharing, for fulfilling, for loving. As you drink the wine, feel the life pour into you, life pulsing with the tang of joy and the saltiness of tears. This is the moment of connection with God – savour it with all your being.

Finally, just as the disciples did in that closing scene, we too will sing the hymn and head out to climb the mountain. The supper cannot last forever, although the celebrating and reenactment of it will. That special moment comes, and goes, and we return to our time and place, refreshed, reenergized, recommitted to not only follow Christ but to proclaim our allegiance by displaying his love. Our allegiance and faith is not perfect. We will, like the disciples, trip and stumble, but like them we will also live out our lives in the security and peace of being covered by the new covenant in Christ. So, let us enter into the picture, gather around the table, and give all thanks to God for His gift of life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.