

MARK 15 - 16

This chapter contains, perhaps, the most difficult passage in all of scripture. And the difficulty is not in the complexity of ideas or events. Rather, the difficulty is in comprehending how Jesus' end as this gospel depicts it, is worthy of a "Son of God." There is no heroism here. There are few words by Jesus, and in some ways, his way with words after his encounter with the Jewish council (Chap. 14) is more like resignation than anything else. But is it? Here are some things to ponder:

1) Jesus' sense of abandonment and aloneness.

- In Chap. 14 we saw this happen with the disciples, and lastly, Peter.
- He is abandoned by Pilate and the Romans who leave Jesus to his deathly fate.
- The crowds easily turn against him at the instigation of the religious authorities.
- Even the women who have followed him from the countryside keep their distance.
- Finally, the only words Jesus utters before he makes a loud cry and breathes his last are: My God, my God why have you forsaken me.... and he means it.

2) Jesus' process of being broken down from Gethsemane to Golgotha.

After his internal struggles at Gethsemane, Jesus is clear about his destiny and its hidden purpose in spite of the intentions and motivations of the religious leaders, as well as the blindness and resistance of the disciples. But after the initial questioning and trial by the Jewish Council, in which Jesus speaks out boldly about himself and his destiny beyond this time of trial, things begin to change. He is not as bold and outspoken before Pilate, and the only other words he utters are on the cross just before he dies. They are words of utter despair and abandonment.

But Jesus' personal state of being does not interfere with the meaning of his death. In fact, the way he goes to his death makes the meaning of his death that much more compelling. What do I mean? Consider the way any person dies, especially if the way to that death involves physical pain, internal distress, disappointment in others and helplessness to change circumstances. There is also a loss of control. There is, often, a shaking of the foundations and convictions that have sustained a person throughout their life. It is a time when all can be uncertain, and feelings of loneliness abound. Jesus was not protected from experiencing all this. Not only was his death a painful process from beginning to end, but he experienced an abandonment from those around him out of fear (disciples), hate (the religious among his own people), indifference (the Romans), and fickle approval easily swayed (by the crowds). He was ridiculed, mocked, spat upon, and utterly humiliated. He experienced a questioning about the very purpose of his dying as he taught it to his disciples because he questioned whether God was still with him. Jesus had to suffer this if he was to be "Emmanuel" - God with us.

How does compassion shine brightly and victoriously through all this? What do you

need and what does the world need in the face of cruel injustice, suffering and despair? We need accompaniment, solidarity, and a powerful assurance that we are not alone in our pain. God is with us and God sharing the injustice indicts the perpetrators and the measure of their sin that much more profoundly. We are called to shine a light on injustice, not sweep it under the carpet. In Jesus God sees, God knows, and God is there. God takes it on and comes to be where all victims are. And God comes to walk with us and carry us, even in Jesus so that we are not alone in our pain and suffering.

Finally, from the place of victimization, the meaning of Jesus delivered into the hands of cruel injustice is given us in the last supper, in the curtain of the temple torn in two, in Jesus' declaring that he has not come "to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." It's all about forgiveness. Forgiveness opens a door to a different future. Forgiveness is the only way when there is pain and hurt and loss and terrible things have been done that cannot be erased. Forgiveness opens a door for perpetrators, and it empowers victims to take back power, but not power to hate or exact revenge, but the power of love to heal oneself and offer a path to healing for perpetrators if they can walk through the door of repentance, confession, and the search for reconciliation.

God's power is not exercised in force, in punishment or in revenge. God is not seeking repentance out of fear or obedience for some reward like heaven or vindication and victory over enemies. That's a false God we humans have created. No, the God revealed and embodied in Jesus is powerful in compassion, in "being-with" us if we welcome such accompaniment to transform us, so that we are changed by such love and spread it in the world. This is the only hope and the only power that can change hearts and heal our world.

The women are the link between the events around the burial of Jesus and the brief account of his resurrection.

15: 42-47. Joseph was a member of the Jewish council, the same council that tried Jesus and then took him to Pilate. Either he was a silent member or his voice in favour of Jesus, being that of a minority, was overruled by the majority. It is interesting to reflect on Jewish religious leaders like Joseph and Nicodemus (John 3,19). How did they reconcile Jesus' message and their own involvement as members of the Jewish religious leadership? Joseph was also a man of means, and therefore, under the broader indictment of Jesus against wealth (i.e. Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler, his parable about the rich man and Lazarus, the beatitudes that bless those who are poor while condemning the rich, etc.). Whatever the case may be, Joseph serves as a quiet disciple who does something constructive, providing for Jesus' burial. For that, his actions are recorded in the gospels, and in being recorded, we may assume that he became a member of the early Christian community, further alienating himself from his

fellow religious authorities. We are also told that Joseph was a sincere seeker (like Nicodemus) "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God." Moreover, his reticence to speak out boldly when Jesus is tried, now gives way to a bold request of Pilate for Jesus' body. He is rewarded for his quiet courage by being noted.

Sometimes, it takes time for the courage in us to arise.

16: 1-8. The same women who follow the body to where Joseph has it buried, then prepare for its anointing. They return to the tomb on the third day and experience the shock of their lives! First of all, the stone, which was exceedingly large, has been rolled away. Second, when they enter the tomb, they see a young man dressed in a white robe (an angel?) sitting there. He tells them that the crucified one has been resurrected. He tells them to go and tell the disciples. He also tells them that Jesus will appear to them in Galilee where he has gone ahead of them "just as he told you." But how do the women respond to this shocking and amazing news? "So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for" In the original version, the sentence is left incomplete. Translators have completed it with words such as this "for they were afraid."

It's as if the ending is left open-ended, in anticipation of further developments in the story. It's as if the ending is but a beginning of the next chapter in the life of the disciple community, a life that will be as unbelievable as the story of Jesus itself. For fear, terror and amazement will give way to faith, transformation, boldness of conviction and courage to follow Jesus all the way. Clearly, without this kind of ending, without the resurrection, there would be no gospel, no good news story to tell, and no church to tell it.

What does the resurrection mean? It means Jesus' way is blessed as the way of God to us. It is also blessed as our way to God - "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." The cross is that point of conflict between the demands of love in our lives and all the fear, frustration, selfishness, egotism, insecurity - all those things that become obstacles to those demands. Against our limits and anxieties, our temptations, conflicts and humiliations, Jesus invites us to receive forgiveness in order to forgive, to receive divine compassion (being-with, suffering-with) in order to be compassionate with and toward others, to receive grace in order to be gracious and generous even to enemies. The resurrection is God's "yes" to the world in spite of the "no" of the world to God and in spite of the "no" of God to the evil in the world. God says yes, and God finds ways to make yes real in our lives and through our lives into the world. As Christ is now our spiritual foundation, we become his hands, feet, and heart in the world.

How will the story of our lives and our communities live this all out?