

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B ~ November 15, 2015

When listening to Mark's Gospel, you must always remember the people to whom this life-giving Word of God was first addressed. Mark writes for the Christian community in Rome in the 1st Century during a time of great persecution, during a reign of terror. Because of the violent persecution of the Christians in Rome, they feel like the world as they know it is coming to an end. The day seems to be as dark as night. The stars no longer seem to shine in the sky. The Emperor Nero and his soldiers make sport of the Christians in the Coliseum. They become food for the lions to the blood-thirsty cries of the crowd. During this darkest of times for Christians in and around Rome, Mark shares the Good News of Jesus Christ, reminding them of the centrality of the Cross. For those who would question, "Why is this happening?" the Evangelist, through the words of Christ, would remind his community: They are asking the wrong question. The real question goes much deeper — "What does it mean? What does it mean?" And the suffering and dying of Jesus, the Son of God, sheds light, gives an answer that brings meaning to a time of seeming meaninglessness.

Because in His love for the world the Son of God gives His life completely on the Cross so that the Cross no longer becomes an instrument of terror, but a sign of hope; because death does not have the last word, life does, as the darkness of the Cross gives way to the never-ending day of the Resurrection. And so Jesus teaches His followers: Only in losing one's life does one find it, only in giving it away does one receive it back more full than ever before.

The question also those first Christians had to answer, and every Christian community since that time who walked through dark days: "Who are we going to become? Who are we going to become because of this suffering, this trial, this terror, this seeming darkness?", which again is why the Cross is at the very center of Mark's Gospel. We've heard it during this year of Mark: Chapter 8, Chapter 9, and Chapter 10—three predictions of the Passion, the dying of Christ and His Resurrection. Three times those very first disciples, Peter, James, John, the rest—they struggle to understand, they wrestle to comprehend what this means, what the mystery of the Cross means. And Jesus continues to patiently teach them and us that it's only in following Him along the Way of the Cross, this suffering, self-giving love, that we become something more, that our lives become something more. For the temptation whenever the world seems to be crumbling around us, whenever we think what was certain as sunlight or starlight has vanished from sight, the temptation is to become a people swallowed up by fear and in this darkness to go even deeper into a more profound darkness of violence and despair.

The words of Jesus, spoken first to Peter, James, John, Andrew and the rest, and to those first Christians in Rome suffering and dying, and to all Christians since, the words of Jesus give us strength today to become something more than we ever thought we could be, so that we do not give up this Pearl of Great Price—hope itself—and give in to despair. So that we do not lose the hidden treasure of faith and give in fear, so that we do not give in to fear so that we will not abandon the way of love to walk in the never-ending darkness of hatred.

Because those first Christians persevered in faith, hope and love, even though the world was anew, it seemed to be coming to an end. A new world was born, so that 2,000 years later on the very ground on which they spilled their blood, Popes have walked the Way of the Cross during Holy Week as the way of life, so that the very city that tried to swallow them alive is now the headquarters to the largest Christian church in the world, over 1 billion strong.

We can relate to the Christians in Rome who first heard this word of the Lord passed on to them by the Evangelist Mark. Since the dawn of the millennium fifteen years ago and the promise of a whole new world, what we have experienced instead at times is the darkness of terror and everything we thought to be solid, to no longer be so. From 9/11 on our own American soil to the terrible evil perpetrated in Paris this past Friday, we have lived through some very dark days. In Paris, the City of Light, many people now feel like darkness has enveloped them. They fear to go out to eat at their favorite restaurant, or to their stadiums to cheer on their favorite soccer team, or even just to go to a concert and delight in the sheer pleasure of music. The City of Light now seems to be swallowed by the power of darkness. But that is what the enemy wants us to believe: The temptation that the Great Tempter of humankind wants us to fall into, the temptation to believe that the powers of evil have won the day is great.

Even in our own land, where senseless violence at times seems to make no place safe—workplace or home or even churches. But it is not only terror and violence out there that shakes our world, that tempts us to despair—it is also in our own personal lives whenever the darkness of loss overshadows our day. Not just the loss of someone deeply loved to death, but whenever we lose our job, our very life's work that we enjoy, or a person close to us whom we have loved for many years betrays our trust, or when a parent strong and sure for many years loses all their strength or even their ability to recognize us anymore. At those times, we can feel like we walk in never-ending night, that we have lost our way and everything which was now solid seems to be as shifting as sand. Everything that was once certain, now shot through with uncertainty.

Yes, we can relate to those first disciples at the center of Mark's Gospel, that first Christian community in Rome as well, and Christians of all ages who have struggled with the darkness of suffering and sorrow and wonder how the Good News of the Gospel sheds light on all of that. That is why week after week after week, we come here to remember, to remember, to remember a whole new world has already begun with the Resurrection of Christ—the world as we know it and all its troubles truly passing away. The powers of this world destroyed forever by the power of the Resurrection of the Lord. In fact, on that Good Friday when sun went dark at noon, those powers ended and the day a tomb broke open and the Risen Jesus appeared with a life that no one could ever take from Him again, a new age was born.

This one who is the living Word of God, the Word of God in flesh, reminds us that all that we think has passed away is really in God's hands, and all those who thought that He had passed away forever from their lives, to know that He lives forever and by the power of the Spirit, He walks at our side every day, encouraging us and enlightening us in times of darkness and the temptation to despair, because He knows in the depths of His bones, fully human like us, what it means to feel like one's life is enveloped by darkness. Even the deepest darkness of all, to feel like one has been abandoned by God. Why else the words from the Cross, in Mark's Gospel, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

He who was sustained by the life-giving words of God, who perhaps prayed this very Psalm that sustains us today in our worship, trusting that His Father would indeed show Him the path to life even though in the midst of suffering and dying, struggling to find the way; to trust that somehow the Father would provide fullness of joy in His presence to His faithful ones—a joy that could never, ever be taken away. And in doing so to delight forever at the right hand of the Father, for He is there in glory. And He summons us there to be with Him, not only interceding for us every day when our world seems to crumble around us, but drawing us to Himself by the power of His love and reminding us that there is always more than what we can see in front of us, that by the light of faith, knowing that He walks with us, drawing us every day more into a more abundant life, a more profound peace, and a deeper joy—for He is the Living Word who will never pass away.