

Conventional wisdom suggests that the preacher find something to say about Mark's Passion Narrative today. It's not a rule that is written down anywhere or, as far as I know, an expectation that the Bishop has. It's just that as we have made the transition from Lent to Holy week, the entire liturgy has unfolded today in dramatic fashion around Mark's Gospel. We have entered into this "never-ending story" as we made our way once again to Jerusalem, amid shouts of hosanna and waving palm branches. We have watched it all unravel and lead to the events that took place outside of the city gates, at the Place of a Skull, where Jesus is crucified.

The truth is that this story is so big and so compelling that I never know quite where to begin, however. The suggestions usually made by people who think about such things is for the preacher to focus in on one aspect of the story, or maybe one character in the story. But this year I'm going to come at this from a completely different angle. I'm going to let the gospel from Mark just be and invite you to take a closer look with me at today's epistle reading, from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

It's not as strange an invitation as it may seem. Paul's letters are really the place in the New Testament where the rubber meets the road. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all offer their accounts of the Passion, but its left to Paul and those early Christian congregations in Corinth and Philippi and Rome to ask the larger meaning questions. *Who is this Jesus and how does his dying change the world, and more personally how does this death transform the way we live our lives?*

I have my issues with Paul, but one of the things that I respect and love about him is that he is constantly reminding us that there was never some golden age of the Christian faith. Yes, we sing about the "faith of our fathers (and mothers) and maybe some of us even sung "gimme that old time religion" on occasion. But it's tempting to view that "old-time religion" through nostalgic eyes and the truth is that all the way back to those earliest decades of the Church's life, there have been conflicts and challenges. Whenever two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, Christ has promised to be in our midst—and I believe He is true to his word. But that doesn't negate the fact that wherever two or three are gathered together in Christ's name there is bound to be conflict as well. Those two or three will pray differently and enjoy different hymns and read the Scriptures through different sets of lenses. They will even view the events of this day through different lenses.

Corinth and Galatia and Rome and Thessalonica were never idealized congregations that provided some kind of proto-type for future generations of Christians like us to aspire to. They were more like laboratories for discipleship, where faithful people had strong opinions and different opinions, yet were kept trying to be faithful Jesus. In short, they were a lot like us.

To see these congregations is, I think, something like looking at ourselves in a mirror. Philippi was no exception. A major city in northern Greece, it was on the Roman road that linked east to west. That's both a plus and a minus: it means rich cultural diversity (which is always a gift) but it also means that cultural norms and worldviews clashed. Paul writes to this congregation from prison, unsure of what the future holds for him personally—or for them. He notes several times in this letter that he really doesn't know whether or not he will ever see them again. Surely he must have had moments when he felt depressed and scared as he considered the uncertainty of it all. They were living through dangerous and difficult times.

Yet the overall tone of this letter is extraordinarily confident and hopeful. He keeps reminding his friends (and maybe himself as well) that joy is stronger than fear and hope really does conquer despair and life has defeated death.

But in the reading we heard today, the scholars tell us that Paul is not writing his own words anymore. Rather, he's quoting a hymn that is almost certainly familiar both to him and to the congregation he is addressing. It would be like me breaking into song during a sermon (I promise to never, *ever* do that!) and singing something like:

- For all the saints, who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed; *or*,
- The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord, she is his new creation by water and the word; *or*,
- All glory, laud and honor to thee redeemer king...

Music touches our souls. It takes us to a place that our brains can't take us. So Paul is making the case with the Philippians that they need to find unity in the midst of their partisan disagreements. But when he comes to the heart of the matter, I find it significant that he doesn't offer them doctrine or more argumentation. These things can take us only so far and rarely do they lead us to true unity. Instead, Paul looks to poetry—to a hymn—to explain what Christian community is all about. What Paul is suggesting is that the Philippians need to sing their faith, and then live it.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. That's confusing language for modern people, and maybe not just modern people either. For the Trekkies among us you just need to get the notion of a Vulcan-mind-meld out of your brain. For the debaters among us you need to get the notion of a persuasive argument out of your head that forces one person to yield and admit defeat: I am right and therefore you must be wrong. *The mind of Christ is not about agreement or unanimity, nor even about compromise or consensus either.* The mind of Christ, as one commentator puts it, "...is not to grasp at glory, but to live, to love, to die...an emptied self." Let me say that again in a slightly different way: the mind of Christ is not about doctrinal conformity; it's about a mindset that let's go of ego and chooses love.

And I think that this is what this day and this week are all about. I think it's what the cross means first and foremost. The Greek word that Paul uses is *kenosis*. It's a good Palm Sunday word, and a very good word to take with you into Holy Week. It means something like letting go and letting God; that is, the mind of Christ is about relinquishing control. That is very hard for many of us, especially those of us who like our ducks all neatly lined up in a row. It means emptying ourselves in order to more fully put our trust in God, even when it looks like what lies ahead is certain defeat. *Kenosis* is lived out when Jesus washes his friends' feet and reminds them to love one another even on the days when they don't like each other very much, and especially then. But above all else we see *kenosis* at work in the humble life and death of Jesus, even death on a cross.

The week ahead is all about kenosis. It's about taking the risk of developing a Christ-mind, not a mind-meld: a mind that can hold paradox and celebrate difference without a need to control or win or abuse one another. It rarely leads us to *agreement*, but by God's grace it leads us to love. As St. Paul wrote to another congregation in another town on the Mediterranean, if I believe something to the core of my being, but I cannot love you until I convince you that I'm right, then I'm not much better than a noisy gong. And if I have all the orthodox theology in the world and if I have the deepest spiritual connection to God through prayer, but I then make my sister or brother in Christ feel like anything less than a beloved child of God, then I'm not much more than a clanging cymbal. You remember how it goes from there, I'm sure. The self-emptying love of God is patient and kind and gentle, not arrogant or rude; it doesn't insist on its own way but rejoices in the truth...

It almost makes me want to sing to you, but I promised I wouldn't do that because I love you all too much. But if I were to sing I might begin with something like this:

When I survey the wondrous cross,
 where the young Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
 and pour contempt on all my pride...

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
 that were an offering far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
 Demands my soul, my life, my all.