

HOMILY PALM SUNDAY YEAR B

“The Final Epiphany”

(Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47)

Today, in this celebration that begins Holy Week, we have moved from Palm Sunday to Passion Sunday. There is a remarkable genius in this liturgical transition from praise to suffering. What is happening is what could be called the final epiphany, the final revelation of who Jesus really is.

We are not used to hearing the word “epiphany” used at the end of any gospel. We are more used to it being used in other gospels at the birth of Jesus. We think automatically of the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem with gifts of gold and frankincense that identify the Christ child as king and priest. But then there is the mysterious gift of myrrh. Already at his birth, at this first epiphany, there is a hint of one who would suffer and die.

Mark’s gospel contains three other epiphanies. His gospel begins abruptly with the first, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, where God’s voice breaks through from the heavens to announce that Jesus is his beloved Son in whom God is well pleased.

The second epiphany for Mark is the transfiguration, where God speaks from a cloud to repeat that Jesus is his beloved Son to whom the disciples should listen, though they miss the point completely.

The final and greatest epiphany for Mark is the whole passion narrative that we have just proclaimed. In it the point is clear. Today Jesus is manifested as he truly is, the Son of God. The gospel of John has it beginning in the garden of Gethsemane, where God’s voice breaks through a third time to glorify the name of Jesus.

For Mark, however, it begins with the scorn and mockery of the Roman soldiers, hailing him as “King of the Jews.” And it reaches its high point with the declaration of their superior officer, the centurion who saw how Jesus breathed his last and who unwittingly blurted out the words of divine revelation, “Truly this was God’s Son.”

There is only one thing wrong with the centurion's remarkable affirmation – the verb in the past tense. Faith tells us not that this *was* God's Son, but more accurately, that Jesus *is* the Son of God. He continues to live as the Risen Lord in the hearts and lives of all who believe. He continues to invite us to take up our cross, and to follow him on our own Paschal Journey, to experience our own passion, death, and resurrection, as the way to the new life of Easter.

An example of someone who has done this is Velma. I met her at a Search weekend for youth. She then attended a Christopher Leadership Course and a Parish Renewal. As she got to know and trust me, she began to tell me her story of her childhood dream to be a nun, her sexual abuse at the age of fourteen, and her feelings of anger, resentment and shame. She shared how instead of forgiving, which she did not understand at that time, her reaction to that awful wound was to abuse drugs and alcohol. She was finally able to admit that she was powerless over her anger and her addictions, that her life was unmanageable. She stopped her addictive behaviour and started coming back to church.

By her involvement in movements like Marriage Encounter and Cursillo, as well as AA and Al-Anon, she started to learn about a God who was a suffering Messiah, who did not prevent her suffering and pain, but rather could be found in her pain and suffering. She finally was ready to embark on a healing journey of counselling, grief workshops, and working the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. These Steps took her through her own Paschal Mystery, her own Passion, Death and Resurrection.

In the Creed we pray that Jesus *descended to the dead, descended into hell*. As she remembered her hurt and relived her past, he would go with her into her own living hell, touch her wounds with forgiveness and acceptance, and heal her.

She did a Step 4 moral inventory (her cross), shared it in Step 5 (her empty tomb), and in Step 6 began to feel her anger (her cross again) and express her anger in positive ways (the empty tomb). She wrote a letter to her abuser with love describing only what he had done and how she felt, and sent it to him. She prayed to let it go (her empty tomb) and was able to forgive.

As we were working on her journey one weekend, I remember a session with her when she went through anger, sadness, and emptiness. It struck me that she

was going through the stages of dying to her resentment, and finally got to that emptiness that Jesus experienced when he became human (“He emptied himself, accepting to become human, to the point of death on the cross”).

The next day, she had a dream of an empty church with only a picture of Jesus on the wall. She was kneeling on a black box saying her rosary, and a whirlwind came by to take away the box. That dream told me that she was on the right track, going into her own pain with Jesus, who now would take her resentment away. She was set free, and went on to be rectora for a Cursillo in northern Sask. She is now trying to make amends to her family and others she hurt (Steps 8 & 9) and is feeling their pain (her cross once again) and hoping they will accept her apology (another empty tomb).

We are invited, like her, to go into our own desert, our own pain, during the rest of this Holy Week. If we are in denial, we must stop pretending, look at ourselves, deal with our hurt and loss, and our sin and sinfulness. Our children, our families may be suffering and we may not even know it. We must start listening to one another, trusting each other with what we are truly feeling, and turning around the unwritten rules of dysfunctional families, “Don’t talk, don’t trust and don’t feel.” We must start talking, start trusting and start feeling. In that process, we will find Jesus, the Messiah who suffered for us. In our own suffering and pain, we will find him, touching our wounds and healing us.

Our God is a passionate, loving God who embraced suffering out of love for all humanity. It is not suffering as such which saves the world, not even the suffering of Jesus. That would be to glorify suffering for its own sake, in an unhealthy way. Rather, it is the passionate love of God, shown in Jesus, and in his acceptance of suffering, that saves us. To experience that salvation we are invited to put our trust in Jesus, and follow him through our own Cross, to the new life of Easter.

The Eucharist we celebrate together this Palm/Passion Sunday, helps us enter into our own real life drama of the Cross in our lives. The Eucharist especially is our food for the journey through our own passion, death and resurrection, to healing and wholeness.

So let us put our faith in the cross of Jesus Crucified, especially during this Holy Week, and find the new life of Easter. Experience Easter now, this week, in our lives, our families, our own pain and suffering through forgiveness and

acceptance, and we will truly be able to celebrate it Easter Sunday with all of God's people gathered here today.