

## Sunday of the Passion

April 5, 2020

At the end of Mark's story of the passion, a battle-hardened Roman centurion looks up at Jesus on the cross, after he has breathed his last, and says, Truly, this man was God's Son! In our reading, there is an exclamation point after that declaration. Here is what is interesting about translating from the Greek- We have to guess what the punctuation is. This could easily be a question- He might have looked up at the wretched body of Jesus on the cross, hanging between two criminals, and asked, This man was God's Son?

After all, God's chosen one wasn't supposed to end up like this. Earlier in the week, the crowds had been shouting, Hosanna, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, hosanna which means, Save us now!

As this pandemic goes on and on, we are looking for physical salvation, aren't we? What will save us? Will social distancing? And is it six feet apart or 20? Do I wear a mask or not (By the way, I am wearing one now, when I have to go out). When will we develop a vaccine? Will we have enough respirators? We are looking for salvation. Every generation looks for some kind of salvation- from warfare, from poverty, from illness, from addiction.

So the people in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday were shouting, Hosanna, Make it all better! Make the bad things go away, Jesus! Save us from this Roman occupation...save us from poverty...save us from sickness and sorrow and suffering. We've seen you feed the hungry and heal the sick and cast out demons. Take over the throne and make all the bad things go away!

So for the centurion to look at this man on the cross who had just died a criminal death and say, Truly this man was the Son of God, some kind political hero, or a victorious king, didn't make any sense. After all, we want a mighty God who defeats all our enemies, not a God on a cross. The Apostle Paul, in all his letters, calls God "Almighty" only one time, and that is when he quotes the Hebrew Scriptures. (2 Corinthians 6:18)

Paul sees God as the Crucified One, and that is why he calls the cross a scandal. This is not where God is supposed to show up. The cross shows us how far God will go to meet us where we are, in the deepest places of suffering and evil and pain. In the midst of our suffering, God can say to us, I have been there. The cross says that whatever you are suffering in your life, God is with you.

The writer Garry Wills tells about his son who had a terrible nightmare. He came in and woke up his daddy, and when Garry asked him what was troubling him, he said that the Catholic sister at his school told the children they would end up in hell if they sinned.

So his son asked, "Am I going to hell?" Garry Wills writes, "There is not an ounce of heroism in my nature, but I instantly answered what any father would- All I can say is if you're going there, I'm going with you. And then he writes, Perhaps the incarnation is just God's way of saying, No matter what horrors we face or hells we descend to, he is coming with us. (from Garry Wills, *What Jesus Meant*).

Save us now, the people cry out. But this king goes to a cross. From a purely political standpoint, that is the price he pays for going up against power. Jesus confronts religious and political oppression, and power pushes back. But on that cross God in Christ soaks up like a sponge the sin and sorrow and suffering of the world.

The disciples don't get the king they want: they are given, and we are given, the king we need, the one who shows us how to open our hands to serve our neighbor, the one who forgives his enemies from the cross, the one who offers us forgiveness, the one who is with us when we face our own suffering. And God says, This will not be the end. I will put my stamp of approval on Jesus' life, when I raise him from the dead. Amen.