

PALM SUNDAY
April 1, 2012

Isaiah 42: 1-7
Philippians 2:6-11
Mark 14:1-15:47

Back in Advent of last year, specifically on Sunday, December 4, we heard at Mass the opening verses of the Gospel according to Mark. It started with these words: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” A few minutes ago we heard a return to that very theme in a verse from St. Mark’s account of the passion, where the evangelist writes: “When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God.’”¹ It’s worth pondering that verse, asking ourselves what it might have been that would lead a person to make this declaration of faith. What was there in Jesus’ words or demeanor that apparently struck the Roman soldier in so forceful a way? Of the traditional seven last words of Jesus, only one is found in Mark’s gospel, and it is one that at first hearing sounds very much like a cry of desolation: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” To be sure, some scripture scholars suggest that Jesus was here beginning to pray the twenty-second Psalm, which does end on a note of trust in God, but there is no reason at all to think that a Roman centurion would have realized that or have been brought to a confession of faith by it. Indeed, he presumably would not even have understood the first verse, for Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic, not Latin: “Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani.”

What else could the centurion have seen or heard? In Mark’s Gospel, there is no reference to a “Good Thief,” for this evangelist writes that those who were crucified with Jesus kept abusing him. Likewise, in this Gospel there is no mention of relatives or acquaintances of Jesus standing right beneath the cross. All of his disciples had fled far away, the most important of them, Peter, having denied so much as knowing Jesus, and even Mary Magdalene and two other women are said to be “looking on from a distance.” Moreover, all the passers-by reviled Jesus, “shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross,’” while the chief priests and scribes mocked him with the words, “Let the Messiah, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” In brief, Jesus is here utterly alone, bereft of all human comfort and companionship and seemingly feeling abandoned by the one he called “*Abba*, Father.” So why does the evangelist write: “When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God.’”?

I myself don’t think there is any absolutely clear answer to that question. It does, however, begin to make sense if we read that verse in conjunction with our first reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, one of the so-called “Suffering Servant” songs. Whether or not the evangelist was explicitly conscious of that particular passage in composing his text, he would surely have known of it, for it was part of the overall religious understanding of the early Church. There in Isaiah we also hear of someone who was utterly bereft of human aid, someone of whom the prophet writes: “I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who

plucked my beard. My face I did not shield from buffets and spitting,” but he goes on immediately to add: “The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced.”

In light of those verses, I think we can say that someone who suffers without rebellion, even if he or she expresses some consternation at an apparent loss of divine favor, is in fact a child of God, and that one who does this in a preeminent way, exemplary for all who would one day be his followers, can be called not *a* son of God but *the* Son of God. That this expression of belief is found on the lips of a Gentile is surely, among other things, a way of showing us that Jesus is to be revered not simply as “king of the Jews” but as Savior of the world. We, together with Christians throughout the world, are assembled this morning to affirm in our own words what the centurion said at the foot of the cross.

But merely to affirm those words, to stop there, would be so short-circuiting as to fall short of making any of us worthy of even being called a Christian, a disciple of Christ. No, we must go on to pray that if and when any similar situation of aloneness, bereftness, abandonment comes our way, we will likewise be given the grace to endure it without rebellion. That is at least part of what St. Paul is talking about in the opening verse of today’s second reading, from the letter to the Philippians: “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus.” And this is not merely something for each one of us to do as individuals. The Church as a whole is to some degree mocked and scorned in many circles today, in large part because of problems that members of the Church have themselves caused. A prominent theme of Blessed John Paul II’s final years on earth—namely, his asking forgiveness for the various failings of the Church both past and present, something for which he was at times criticized by members of his own Curia—is a theme that remains needful today. It may be relatively easy to parade one’s Catholicism when everything is rosy, as to some extent it may have been back in, say, the 1950s. What we need today are Catholics who will do whatever they can to help purify the Church, even as they also affirm the immense amount of good that the Church has done and continues to do in the present. It’s worth noting that even some atheist or agnostic authors have recently acknowledged that it is largely Christian values that have helped build up what is best in our civilization and that it is the abandonment of such values in large sectors of society that has led to so many serious problems in economics, politics, and culture. For example, back in the 1960s a prominent Marxist atheist in Poland, Leszek Kolakowski, published an article entitled “Jesus Christ, Prophet and Redeemer,” in which he discussed a number of fundamental values that derive directly from Christianity, such as the supplanting of law in favor of love, the truth that man does not live by bread alone, and the recognition that the world suffers from an organic imperfection. Similarly, and even closer to our own day, a few years ago an Italian atheist, Professor Marcello Pera, published a letter to our current pope, Benedict XVI, that was full of respect for the Catholic heritage. We are called to take rightful pride in that heritage even as we must also express sorrow for ways in which that heritage has at times been betrayed. As we enter this holiest week of the year, and in particular as we prepare to receive the sacramental body and blood of Christ at this Eucharist, may each of us re-commit ourselves to our baptismal promises, which are ultimately no less than promises to be faithful, committed, active followers of the one we, too, confess to be “truly the Son of God.”

Abbot James Wiseman

¹ Mark 15:39. For further quotations consult the text of the readings for this day.