

Mark 14:1 – 15:47

For the past five weeks we have traced Jesus' steps toward the Cross. This Sunday we reach the sobering, even brutal conclusion to Mark's account of our Lord's Passion. On this Passion Sunday, we participate as people who know the end of the story from the beginning, and we view the events of Christ's Passion through the lens of the resurrection. We enter into it every year, at whatever point of belief or doubt we find ourselves. And each year, the starkness of the images, the cruelty of the treatment of the Son of God gives us pause, even breaks our hearts.

Mark tells a story of an innocent man who was accused by the leaders of his people of leading Israel astray and of seditious threats against the Roman government, an innocent man who consequently was put to death by the Roman authorities.

As we read the story, it becomes clear that this was a miscarriage of Jewish law and Roman justice. This execution simply should not have happened. Despite the motives of the accusers, no one in authority actually thought the charges were valid: both Pilate and Herod (according to Luke) declare the innocence of Jesus. Pilate eventually caves in and goes along with the demands of the leaders of the Sanhedrin and the crowds.

Each year, as we reach this point of the climax and conclusion of Jesus' earthly life, one simple question wells up inside of us: Why? Why must Jesus die like this?

Faithful Christians throughout the centuries have struggled to address this question, and many of their various answers have been described as theories of atonement and sacrifice. Emphasizing one part of Scripture or another, these theories attempt to address the "why" question by describing Christ's death as a substitution for our own, or of Christ satisfying God's requirement for holiness, or of paying the penalty for our sin, or of the example Christ's death sets for us, or even of the victory Christ wins over death and the devil.

And yet, while each of these theories highlights some aspect of the truth, none of them ultimately satisfies us. Our questions persist. How could Jesus' death be more important than his life?

It may be of some comfort to know that we are not alone in our questioning. Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus regularly predicts his Passion, and just as regularly his disciples don't understand him, or misinterpret him, or finally reject his predictions as simply too awful to believe.

When the unimaginable, though not entirely unexpected, happens and Jesus is handed over, judged and crucified, the disciples are left reeling and asking, why? Perhaps this confusion isn't really the disciples' fault, or ours. For while Jesus may have predicted his Passion, he never went into great detail to explain its meaning. He never got around to explaining why.

However, Jesus does address another, perhaps more important question. At the very outset of his Passion, Jesus took his place at the table with his disciples to share one Last Supper with them. And at that meal he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given *for you*."

Take notice of those last two words, "for you." For those disciples, including Judas who betrays him, Peter who denies him, and the rest who desert him, and if for these, then also for us! So while Jesus doesn't answer the question, "why?" he does answer the deeper question of "for whom?" And knowing this makes all the difference.

Though Jesus may not explain the full meaning of his death, he leaves no doubt of its significance for you and for me. Above and beyond all our confusion and refusal to believe, we hear in these two words the shocking and utterly unexpected promise that everything that Jesus suffers, the humiliation and shame, the agony and defeat, he suffers for us, that we might have life and light and hope in his name.

While Jesus' death is tragic in many ways, it was no accident. From the beginning of his Passion to the end, Jesus participates willingly in what happens, refusing rescue, escape or a resort to violence. His death on the Cross and resurrection three days later demonstrate for all time that God's love is stronger than hate and that God's love is stronger than death.

The hard part of this Passion Sunday, the mystery of Christ's Passion and death, is that we may never fully answer that persistent and perplexing question of "why?" But we can answer another, perhaps more important question, "for whom?"

Amen.

Resources: David Lose, 2013 - 2018; Arland Hultgren, 2013; Juergen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 1993.