

How do we see Jesus today? Who is Jesus? The question has followed us since we began reading the gospel of Mark last year in Advent. With this Palm Sunday we read Mark's version of the Passion and it is filled with both questions and answers about who Jesus is. It is also filled with people who should have known, did not, and the consequences were disastrous.

The passion begins with the ones who should have known, the ones who lived with Jesus for three years and saw everything he did and heard his words. How could they not have known? Even unto the end they kept thinking he would be a kingly political leader. They could not get the idea of glory and power and wealth out of their minds. It is hard to blame them. Sometimes we think the same way. We want the glory without the sacrifice.

Jesus keeps telling the disciples his kingdom is different. He did and said everything he could to prepare them for the passion and death. They chose not to understand it, not to look a little more deeply at him. They liked the idea of the power and the glory but not the idea of carrying a cross. In fact it was repulsive and terrifying for them. As a result, at the moment he needed them the most, they completely abandon him.

This is the only gospel narrative of the passion that includes the incident of a young man, covered with nothing but a linen cloth, following Jesus as he is arrested. As those taking Jesus also seized him, he runs away naked leaving the cloth behind. What a startling and puzzling incident! Maybe Mark is reminding us of the irony that

the apostles left nets and family, everything, to follow Jesus. Yet, in the last moment, under threat, there is a complete reversal as they leave everything, even their clothes, to run away from Jesus. Later, the only words from the cross that Mark includes are, “Why have you abandoned me?” How have we abandoned Jesus? Who have we abandoned? How many times do we just look away and pretend not to see him in the most needy, the most abandoned in our community?

Mark gives the contrast between the interrogations of both Jesus and Peter. One tells the truth and one lies. Peter lies in denying Jesus, but the third denial quotes him, “I do not know the man,” which was actually true. He really did not know who Jesus was or what it meant to follow him. He never understood that Jesus was serious when he said to be his disciple was to carry a cross. He would discover the real truth only after the resurrection.

Mark’s constant question, “Who is Jesus?” is continually answered throughout the passion. The High Priest asks: “Are you the Messiah, Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus’ answer is, “I AM.” Pilate asks, “Are you King of the Jews?” Jesus answers, “You say it.” Pilate names him twice King of the Jews. Soldiers mock him calling him “King of Jews.” The inscription on the cross reads, “King of the Jews.”

Taunts of crowd include, “Let the Messiah, King of Israel, come down from the cross.” Finally, a non-Jew, the centurion, says, “Clearly this was the Son of God.” The curtain of the old temple, closed to all but a few, is torn giving way for the new temple which is Jesus, open to all as exemplified by the centurion. Through the cross all can know who Jesus is and have the way to approach him.

The role of the women is also shown in the passion. Women were not important in society of the time, yet show themselves courageous and faithful to Jesus in his moment of suffering. They are the first witnesses of the death, burial & resurrection. They never fled or abandoned Jesus. They saw all of it. There is a strong lesson for us here. If we take time to see those we have labeled as unimportant in our society, often we learn what courage and faithfulness is in the way they live their lives. It can become the way to see Jesus.

So the question for us as we enter Holy Week is what do we know? What can we see? Has lent helped us go deeper into who is Jesus for ourselves? Can we look for him in those who are seen as weak and not significant? Can we minister to his needs in them and discover for ourselves the way to follow Jesus?

Holy Week calls us to answer the question “Who is Jesus.” Who is he for me? What do I do to follow?