

The Rev. J. Gregory MorganThe meaning of the Passion of Our Lord

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all provide Passion narratives, and they alternate over the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. This morning, I'd like to concentrate our attention on Mark's account, primarily because it is considered to be the earliest of the three, in addition to which it has provides a unique perspective I'd like to focus on today. I'm indebted to Bishop Glasspool for calling my attention to that particular outlook which infuses Easter with special meaning.

"One characteristic of Mark's Gospel is his frequent use of the word *immediately*, which contributes to a sense of breathlessness from all the action - especially if we read the entire Gospel in one sitting. But not only does the word *immediately* move the Gospel along at a rapid pace. Mark also writes in such a way that it is the *activity of Jesus* which maintains the momentum. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is an active and transforming presence. "He is never the mere observer of the scene or the one who waits upon events but always the *transformer* of the scene and the *initiator* of events"

Jesus moves through this Gospel and leaves a wake of people affected by him or his actions: fishermen leave their nets and follow him; sick people are restored to health; critics are confounded; a storm is stilled; hunger assuaged; a dead girl is raised to life. And there are two characteristics of Mark's writing style which emphasize the activity of Jesus. One is that Mark reports scenes and situations through Jesus' eyes, from Jesus' perspective. So, for example, we do not read that "Simon and Andrew were casting their nets;" but that "Jesus *saw* them casting their nets." We *don't* read that "the Spirit descended as a dove;" but that "Jesus *saw* the Spirit descending. . . We read not that "Levi was sitting at the receipt of custom;" but that "Jesus *saw* him sitting there. Jesus is the actor, and we're seeing the story from Jesus' perspective.

A second characteristic of Mark's writing style is that Mark faithfully reports Jesus' *inner* activity of thought and feeling. We read, for example, not only that "Jesus, seeing a large crowd of people began to teach them"; but also that "he had *compassion* on them." We read not only that Jesus' "mighty works were inhibited by the unbelief of the people of Nazareth"; but also that "he *wondered* at their unbelief." We read not only that Jesus looked around when a woman, in search of healing, touched his garment; but also that he did so because he *knew* the power had gone out of him.

There is also a *change* that occurs in Mark's writing precisely at the verse in the Passion narrative that reads: "When (Judas) reached the spot, he stepped forward at once and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi;' and kissed him." (14:45) From that moment on, for the rest of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is no longer the active and initiating *subject* of what is done: He is the *recipient*, the *object* of what is done. Mark doesn't even use the simple verbs such as "going," "standing," or "turning." Mark writes, instead, "they took him;" "they led him;" "they dressed him." We can notice this change *immediately* after Judas kisses him. We read, "They *seized* him and held him fast." The verbs controlling the story

describe what is *done to*, not *by* Jesus. He is conspired against, anointed for burial, denied, betrayed, captured, tried, sentenced, mocked, crucified, buried. If the Passion means anything at all, it means that Jesus identified with the common human experience of not being in control.

The transition in Mark's Gospel is from *action* to *passion*. It is not a transition from *action* to *passivity*. Jesus could have put up a fight. He could have made a defense for himself. He could have "rallied the troops." But Jesus, in his ministry and mission, had sought from the nation's leaders that which could not be compelled - the response of discipleship - which is to say, living and working for the reign of God. And he sought it with such earnestness as to create a situation in which there could be no temporizing or ambiguous response on their part. So, having done all that Jesus perceived he could possibly do, he chose not passivity, but *passion*. And *passion* does not mean, exclusively, pain; but rather dependence, exposure, waiting, being no longer in control of one's situation, being the object of what is done, allowing the "other" to decide. The decisive moment in Mark's Gospel happens not on Calvary, but in the Garden of Gethsemane. The critical fact is *not* that Jesus *died*; but that Jesus, having done all he could possibly do towards the fulfillment of God's reign, *chose* to allow himself to be vulnerable, to be affected by the wills of others; to place his life in the hands of humankind. Jesus did this to such a degree that it resulted in his death. And in his resurrection, God vindicated the Son.

In Jesus we see modeled someone who identified to the greatest extent humanly possible what it means, what it feels like, to give up control. But not only that. Jesus, in his Passion, reveals to us a God who is *not* disaffected and distant from humanity; but a God who is so *involved* with humanity that God allows God's very *self* to be *affected* by what we do - even today. Jesus, in his transition from action to passion, models for us a God who preaches, teaches, combats evil, heals, and *invites* us into relationship with God - and then lets us decide. And God's vindication of his Son on Easter morning signals how "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son...not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved."

Amen.