

Homily for Palm Sunday

March 27-28, 2021

Readings: Isaiah 50: 4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 14: 1-15:47

Preacher: Sr. Barbara Moore

On this Palm Sunday, we recall two noisy processions. Jesus Christ on a colt with ordinary men and women greeting him with cries, branches and praise. Some even linking him to the figure of King David. On the opposite side of the city of Jerusalem another procession of Roman troops comes into the city with all their color, noise, numbers and power alerted to any disturbance the Passover crowd might incite. Order was their constant goal and Jerusalem during Passover was crowded with pilgrims. Two Kings, two power systems meet each other in what would be an inevitable clash: the coming arrest and execution of Jesus Christ. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan in their book, "The Last Week," write, "The two processions embody the central conflict of the week which led to Jesus' crucifixion."

But the words that keep returning to me this Palm Sunday are used by the Prophet Isaiah in the first reading. "The Lord God is my help; therefore, I am not disgraced, *I have set my face like flint*, knowing that I shall not be put to shame." The early church sees Jesus in these words. Flint is a hard quartz or an alloy like iron. It can produce a spark when it is in contact with steel. Flint conveys power, strength, purpose and the capacity through sparks to start a fire.

The phrase seems to identify Jesus' life, mission and teachings. He set his face like *flint* as he reached out to the poor and sick who came to him. He continued to call his listeners and the religious authorities of his day, to return to the deeper meanings in their holy books. He did not retreat from his message of love and compassion even when faced with opposition and threats. He held on to the basics of his Jewish faith even as he was called a "blasphemer." He remained loyal to his followers who betrayed him, denied him and fled when he was arrested. What a life! His was a life that even before the events of Holy Week and the Resurrection, had a spark to it like the sparks that occur when flint is faced and struck by steel.

Jesus was faced with the rigid steel of religious traditions, customs and economic and political systems that were in his day, harming the very poor and marginalized of his community. And yet so many saw a spark in him that reflected the best of their faith tradition, and the promises of their holy books. A spark that revealed his concern for the overlooked and the ones carrying so many burdens. A spark that led to followers, new communities, and the growth of a faith tradition that took his name, Christian.

This past year, as a nation and as local communities, we have faced our own “holy weeks” through deaths, isolation and job losses caused by Covid. Divisions over politics, vaccines and masks have made their mark and caused sorrow among us. We have seen violence, lies, threats to our democratic system, and ever-present racism that spreads now to our Asian brothers and sisters. And alongside those facts, we have seen kindness, love, heroism and service that has brought new life and healing.

How, we might ask, are we to respond to our own Holy Weeks? How might positive sparks happen when we “set our faces like flint” to try and follow the message of Jesus each day? For the majority of us it happens when we try to do the “ordinary extraordinarily well.” When we make efforts to learn the truth and to see in each of our brothers and sisters the image of God. It can happen when we become aware of the “Good Fridays” those around us suffer. When we reflect on the abuse and pain Jesus suffered as he tried to serve and how betrayed he must have felt as Palm Sunday unfolded into Holy Week. This week also reminds us that we too have the capacity to hurt, abuse and betray others.

We have the capacity to bring “small resurrections” to others on a daily basis. May this coming week strengthen us as we make our own personal efforts to walk with Jesus and our brothers and sisters through these painful days of Holy Week, and the current painful times that all of us experience.