Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, Year B (2018)

We Leave Everything if We Flee Christ

This year on Palm Sunday we read the story of Jesus’ sacred passion from the Gospel of St. Mark. One of the unique aspects of Mark’s version of the passion is his mention of the young man who was following Jesus and who was covered with just a white linen cloth. This guy fled when the soldiers seized him by the cloth and he ran away naked – leaving the soldiers holding only the white cloth.

Who was this man? There have been many educated guesses about his identity. Some have said it was Mark himself who, as a young man, may have been present in the Garden of Gethsemane. Other scholars have said this man is a symbol of those followers of Christ who are initiated into his church by stripping naked and being baptized and then are clothed with a white garment as a token of being purified of sin. But this is a stretch. More than likely, the true interpretation is that this young man was simply a specific example of all those who were with Jesus but who, as St. Mark writes, fled when the Lord was arrested. (Chapter 14, verse 50 in the Passion according to Mark reads: “all deserted him and fled.”) Like everyone else, this man jumped ship out of fear – despite his attraction to Jesus and his attraction to the Gospel.

In a way, we are all always tempted to be this young man. We are tempted to flee before the struggle to be good. The passion of Jesus is the final battle with evil, which he won once and for all on our behalf – armed only with the most powerful love. However, this battle also is still waged by grace every day in time and space in our individual lives and in the life of
the community of believers until the end of time. We can either engage in the fight to love or we can flee. The nakedness of this young man betokens that he is bereft of everything when he deserts Christ. Earlier in his gospel, Mark depicts a scene (in Mark 10:28) where St. Peter tells Jesus: “we have left everything and have followed you.” And the Lord praises Peter for this insight. But here in this passage, ironically, the young man has left everything to flee from Christ (rather than leaving everything to follow him).

One Bible commentator has suggested that Jesus’ Agony in the Garden was all about his struggle to love those whom he suspected were about to torture and kill him. As we all know, Jesus won this battle because from the cross he beautifully and incredibly said “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” – as recorded in St. Luke’s account of the passion (Lk 23:34) which we will read next year on Palm Sunday. Perhaps if this guy who fled knew that to stay loyal to Jesus he did not have to fight anyone, he would not have run away out of fear. Jesus surrendered himself to evil to conquer evil. He surrendered himself to death to destroy death. His weapons were not clubs and swords, but humility and compassion. Mary and St. John and the others who stood by the cross knew deep down that they just needed to be there. Maybe the young man would have been there too if he understood that hate does not conquer hate – only love can conquer hate. This is a lesson that humanity and even Christians are still learning in our time.

Maybe the young man who fled naked was not prepared for the battle to love. We cannot afford to be unprepared in our struggle to be holy. To be ready, we must stay close to Jesus and close to his cross. And Christ will stay close to us to guide us to eternal life which he won for us through his
passion, death, and resurrection. The first and last message of the Gospel is that God loves us to death – literally!

This week, the church affords us the best opportunity to be close to Jesus – to keep watch with him as we are present for his passion and death in the liturgy. Please plan to take part in the services this week and to be joined to the Lord in prayer these next few days as much as you possibly can.

Taking part in the events of Holy Week will make us ready to use the power of Christ’s love to leave all to follow him and never to flee from him. His grace will lead us to the riches of a deeper relationship with him, especially by serving the poor and the lowly and those who are afraid. Through the sacrifice of reaching out to our neighbor, Christ will show us the fearless way to Resurrection and New Life.