

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion
March 29, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 14:1-15:47

The Passion narrative we just heard contains several incidents wherein followers of Jesus disassociate themselves from Him out of fear of persecution. The first two of these incidents happen in quick succession and involve our Lord's abandonment in the Garden of Gethsemane. We are all familiar with how the eleven "forsook him and fled" after the mob showed up with swords and clubs. But St. Mark includes a brief account of a story unique to his Gospel; he relates how a young man literally ran out of his clothes in order to avoid being arrested with Jesus.

The third disassociation is the most famous, as St. Peter goes so far as to invoke a curse upon himself in his insistence that he had nothing to do with Jesus. He denied Jesus three times, as Jesus said he would; but what is shocking in St. Mark's account is the vehemence with which Peter undertakes his denial. Fear leads him not only to deny knowing Jesus, but also to act in a way that directly contradicts the teaching of Jesus. To swear in his denials was overt disobedience of Jesus' command.

All of these disassociations fall broadly under the objective of self-preservation. In denying Jesus, the faithless ones imagine they are avoiding death or at least the brutal treatment to which Jesus was subjected by both the Jewish and Roman authorities. Lying so we don't die is easy for us to understand even two thousand years later, but what is harder to understand is how they did this so soon after pledging that they would sooner die than fall away.

This acceptance of death for Jesus is something we pledge every time we receive Holy Communion. In taking Christ's Body and Blood we are entering into the Sacrifice of Christ Himself. Too often, however, we make this pledge Sunday morning, but by Sunday afternoon we have already denied Jesus three times ourselves.

Our denials may be subtle, such as when we fail to stand up for Jesus when someone derides the Church He founded. Or our denials may be more overt, such as when we ignore the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy, by engaging in hours of unnecessary work rather than taking the rest God has given His children. Worst of all, we may disassociate ourselves explicitly in the manner of the apostles or the anonymous young man who ran away: we would choose the embarrassment of being naked before all the world to see before we would suffer the embarrassment of being identified as a believing and practicing Catholic.

Assuming the posture of a dissenting Catholic is the easy way to disassociate ourselves from Jesus while at the same time pretending to be His friend. Note in the Lord's Passion that the only disciple who wanted to associate himself with Jesus was Judas Iscariot. He calls Jesus "Master" and goes so far as to kiss Him. But Judas does this only to harm our Lord, to flaunt his closeness to Christ only so he could betray Him. Catholics like this say they love Jesus, they just don't love the Church; or, rather, they would begin to love the Church if only it would conform to their image of it.

If you think this sounds crazy, please know that even Cardinals in the Church have been known to take such a stand. Just this past week, Cardinal Marx, the head of the German bishops' conference said that each nation's bishops are best equipped to determine how Church teaching should be applied in their respective nations. He even went so far as to say, "We aren't a branch of Rome." For spouting such heresy, Cardinal Marx received a strong rebuke from his countrymen. Cardinal Mueller, the Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, said that Cardinal Marx's idea was "absolutely anti-Catholic" and then went on to remind the world that the head of a nation's conference of bishops has no "particular magisterial authority." Judas is alive and well within the Catholic Church.

If even cardinals in the Church are tempted to apostasy in order to win favor with the world, we must recognize in ourselves the tendency to disassociate ourselves from Jesus or associate ourselves with Him only on our terms, to run away as the disciples did when we feel threatened, or give Him a Judas kiss to show we are essentially in agreement with the world's agenda. What's more embarrassing—what the Church teaches, or that our neighbors suspect we actually believe it?

Palm Sunday serves as a beautiful corrective to this destructive tendency, to the calculus that weighs when it is right to deny the faith, even if we have just received Holy Communion. That's because on Palm Sunday we all go home with a tangible reminder that identifies each of us as a practicing Catholic. On Palm Sunday we take our palms home and often place them on a picture frame or some other noticeable spot in our home. Anyone who comes to see us can see that we've been to Mass. Anyone can see we're Catholic.

We need these external reminders, not so much to let others know where we stand, though this is certainly necessary. We need these external reminders to remind ourselves about the commitment we made most recently on Sunday morning when we pledged we would sooner die than deny our Lord. Sacramentals like palms from Palm Sunday remind us of our faith in the Sacraments and point to the Lord Whom we confess with our life and in our lives.

It will be necessary, as the culture becomes more hostile to the Faith we profess, to make clear exactly what kind of Catholics we are. Do not let it be said about your house that there is no Catholic iconography in it. You have the palms, but do you have the framed image of your patron saint hanging on your wall upon which to rest them? You wear the cross about your neck under your shirt, but is there a crucifix in the most prominent spot in the most public area of your home?

The small investment in this regard, whatever it may set you back, will be well worth the price. Because the time is coming, if it hasn't already, that the enemies of the Church are going to place a firm grip on your clothes. You will be given the opportunity to run away naked or offer our Lord a Judas kiss. The sacramentals with which you decorate your home, that you carry home today, don't just point to the suffering you said you're willing to endure. They point to what the naked boy and the apostles, in all fairness, had not yet known—the resurrection of our Lord, the promise that the end of all suffering is not death, but life.