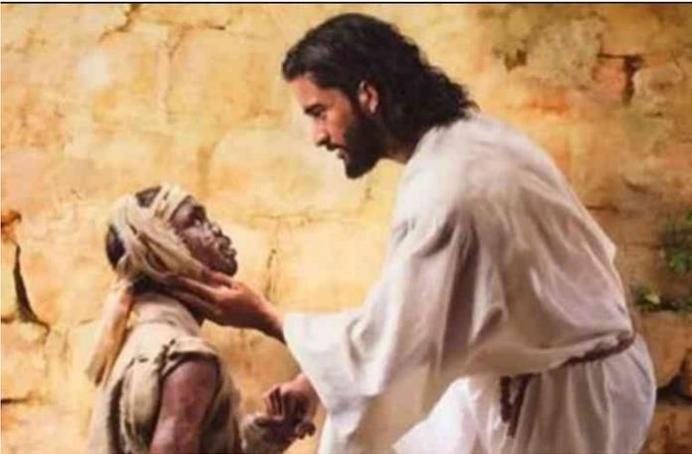


Homily for April 2, 2021 (Good Friday)



Although we just heard the passion reading from the gospel writer John, all four gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) basically tell the same story but with slightly different emphases. I'm going to draw a little bit from each of them. We are in the year of Mark, which means that almost all of the gospel stories we hear at Sunday Mass, this year, are taken from the Gospel of Mark. I love the opening line of Mark's Gospel. It says: ***This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus***

Christ, the Son of God (Mk. 1:1). There is it: Jesus is God's son. But what does it mean to be the Son of God? And why is this story, which includes suffering, crucifixion and death, called *Good News*? Let's see how this is possible by looking at two themes, the theme of "touching" and the theme of "rescue."

First, the touching theme. Jesus basically touches everything that nobody else will touch, including people and things forbidden by his own religion. He touches the woman who has been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years and heals her. He touches the lepers and the disciples try to push them away. He touches the blind. He doesn't just touch the blind; he actually puts his finger on their eyes. He sticks his fingers in the ears of the deaf. Then the children come and the disciples push them away, and he pulls the children in. Jesus touches Peter's mother-in-law, who is gravely ill, and restores her to health. When Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, swords are drawn and somebody cuts off one of the ears of the servant of the high priest. Jesus touches the man's ear and heals him. Jesus is moving at the world and touching everything that is untouchable and pulling it into himself. He is even going to the realm of the dead to touch what is there. He touches the body of a dead 12-year-old girl and brings her back to life. He does the same thing with the only son of a widow; his touch brings the young man back from the dead. This is one of clues of what it means to be the Son of God, but some people don't like it.

When Peter tries to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem—the place where Jesus will fulfill his mission through suffering, dying and rising to new life--Jesus says to him, ***"Get behind me, Satan."*** In other words, "Get behind me. Get in my following, and I will lead you to the truth of what it means to be the Son of God, because, right now, Peter, you have no clue. Don't tell *me* what it's all about. I will tell *you* what it's all about. In fact, I will *show* you what it means to be the Son of God. I am going to Jerusalem whether you like it or not, and I'm going to touch and gather all the hurting people of this world along the way." Hold on to all that touching stuff.

Let's look at the second theme, the theme of "rescue" and see if it has something to tell us, as well, about what it means to be the Son of God.

While in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays, **"Father, for you all things are possible."** We think to ourselves, "Good. Since all things are possible for God, maybe *one* of the possibilities is that you can rescue your innocent Son from these thugs." But, there is no rescue. When the swords come out, Jesus says, **"Enough. Put your swords back. Don't you know that if I simply ask, my Father would send more than 12 legions of angels to my defense?"** And we think to ourselves, "Great. Just ask. Jesus, you taught us to ask the Father for anything, and he would give it. Just ask, now." But Jesus does not and, again, there is no rescue.

The story continues with Jesus before the high priest and the whole council. It is a kangaroo court, as you know. The Passion story says, **"they were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none."** Oh, good. With no testimony against him, there is no reason to hold him; surely, he will be set free. But, that does not happen. The next line says, **"Many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree."** Oh, good. The flunkies are obviously lying. They cannot get their story straight, so it is going to be a hung jury, and Jesus will get to go free. But, that doesn't happen.

All throughout Mark's gospel, there is something we call "The Messianic Secret." Basically, whenever Jesus heals someone, he sort of swears them to secrecy by saying, "Don't tell anyone." Now, during this mock trial, the high priest asks Jesus, **"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"** All Jesus has to do is take his own advice and not tell anyone, the accusation of blasphemy will be dropped, and he will be set free. But he doesn't do that. Instead, he says, **"I am,"** and immediately he is off to his execution.

When given the chance to set an innocent man or a notorious murderer free, the crowd only had to shout Jesus' name and he would have been rescued. But, they didn't do that, and again there was no rescue. With his last breath, Jesus cries out from the Cross, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** **Some of the bystanders heard it and said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah."** **Someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to Jesus to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."**

Elijah, the prophet of old, is known for rescues, rescues that include fiery chariots and loud trumpets. If they can keep Jesus alive long enough, the crowd will get their sound and light show from heaven. They can go home amazed, but nothing in their lives will change. They love amazement but not inner conversion. Jesus is not calling out to Elijah; he's calling out to God. **"Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last."** Did he simply die? No. Jesus has arrived at the last place of abandonment, the land of the dead, even hell itself. His mission is not over until he arrives in the land of the dead and touches it with God's love.

So, what does it mean to be the Son of God? Everyone in this story who should have gotten the answer right--like the religious leaders, and the disciples--got it wrong. With so many getting it wrong, who—if anyone-- got it right? A soldier got it right. The centurion facing Jesus on the Cross said, ***“Truly this was God’s Son!”*** The guy, whose job it was to help put Jesus to death, got it right. No wonder Jesus said that the prostitutes and the tax collectors are going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of the rest of us.

Let’s return to that opening line of Mark’s gospel: ***This is the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*** What does it mean to be the Son of God? It means that Jesus emptied himself of all divine privilege. Jesus claimed no privilege for himself even though he was God’s Son. He endured everything, and was rescued from none of it—not from suffering and not from death. Why? Because he knew you—before you were even born-- and he knew you would not be exempt from suffering and death. He will be with you and will never leave you even if he has to go to hell and back again. And now we know why we say, “he descended into hell” in the Apostles’ Creed. He is going to the last place of abandonment to touch and bring God’s healing love to all places we are convinced are beyond hope. He is going to touch cancer and COVID, backpain and broken relationships, loneliness and rejection, prostitutes and peacemakers, those who are in a state of grace and those in a state of disgrace, the addict and the counsellor, the refugees and the child soldiers. Anyone, who gets in the way of Jesus moving toward the suffering of this world, touching it, healing it, and gathering it into himself will get set straight with the same words he set Peter straight with, “Get behind me.” This is what it means to be the Son of God, and this, indeed, is Good News!

Fr. Phil