

Well, today you've heard about *20 percent* of the Gospel of Mark! More than any other evangelist, Mark has his readers focus on the last 24 hours of Jesus' life – it is clearly of paramount importance to Mark's version of the good news. Why this focus on treachery, suffering, and death? Why indeed? Let's seek our answer in three areas of detail that are easy to miss.

Any good commentary on Mark's gospel will mention the so-called "Messianic secret." In a number of occasions, often after Jesus has done something dramatic, such as the healing of a leper or a blind man, Jesus will tell the newly healed person to tell no one about the incident. It's as if he wants to keep his identity as the Messiah a secret. Of course, the healed person ignores this, and Jesus' fame grows and grows. Finally, today, Jesus claims his identity. The high priest asks him, "Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?" You can envision Peter hovering the background, muttering to himself, "Say no, Jesus. Just say no!" What does Jesus answer? "I am." And in case you missed it, he goes on to say "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." Jesus claims his mantle, his name, his responsibility, his identity. At this point, Jesus has just gone "all-in." Now the taunting begins, now the real suffering commences, now he has entered the last act. First key point – Jesus willingly engages in this final battle with death. He is not being dragged into it. He accepts his mission.

Note that the taunts of the Roman soldiers and the crowds, though meant to be embarrassing and hurtful, are actually words of truth. He's called The King of the Jews, the Christ, the king of Israel. The crowd encourages him to save himself, and barring that, have Elijah come and get him. The two things we are meant to note? The irony of the taunting labels and the knowledge that Jesus could indeed save himself if he wanted to. He chooses not to, and the devil laughs. Understand that amazing discipline and obedience. He chooses not to stop the pain, not to stop the agony, not to give in to the weakness, but to stay in obedient relationship with the Father. The complexity of that relationship is summed up in Psalm 22, which begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If there's one thing you should try to do this week, it is this: find a Bible and read Psalm 22. It is a prayer of complexity, of pain, of confidence, and ultimately of hope. It is the last prayer of Jesus. Pray it with him this week.

Our last brief vignette is a single sentence coming immediately after Jesus dies. You might have missed it. "The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom." That's it. Why is that significant? Remember, to the Jews, the presence of God was confined to the temple. And even then, God was hidden away in the sanctuary, the room called the Holy of Holies, a room with a heavy curtain concealing the entrance, a room that only the most ritually pure high priest could enter. This curtain is torn in two, a shocking calamity to the high priests and

elders. Note that the curtain is torn from *top to bottom*, implying that God is the one doing the tearing. The message is clear – God is not to be confined any longer. God has entered the world of humanity and the pathway is now open between the all-powerful and his creatures, a pathway that only opens at the death of Jesus. So, let's tie this together.

Weighing at the heart of every human being on earth is the sure knowledge that we will someday die. I hope this is not a surprise to you! We try not to think about it very much – of course – but the reality is that virtually every destructive thing we do to ourselves and to others can be traced back to this primal fear. We greedily consume. Why? Someday we'll die. We lash out at others in anger. We are impatient. Why? Time is short. Get out of my way! Someday we'll die. We strive for control – control of everything. Why? Someday we'll have no control. Someday we'll die. We can't face that reality without a chill up our spine.

No matter how much Yahweh God tried to reassure His chosen people that He was a God of life, the cold reality was that the chosen people were just as terrified of death as any of the surrounding pagan tribes. Jesus chose to become one of us in order to do battle with death, to show us once and for all that death is not the final victor. Notice how Jesus does it. He enters the battle with the confidence of someone who knows the outcome. Rather than be dismayed by the taunts of his detractors, he smiles inwardly at the truth of their words. And finally, of utmost importance, he enters into the most gruesome death imaginable to show us that God has been, is, and will be present at the death of every one of us human beings. Jesus is in solidarity with the Father, and the Father has granted to each of us the presence, the solidarity of Jesus at our darkest, last hour.

Would you lead your life any differently if you knew without a doubt that death is not final? If you knew that Jesus would hold you through it all? That he won't abandon his children? That the primal fear that we all know so intimately can be turned into primal confidence? How much more effective are we as disciples of Christ if death is but a shrug? This is the peace beyond understanding that St. Paul talks about. Pray on this during our upcoming Holy Week. You're beginning to see why Easter is such a joyful season. Peace. The outcome has been decided.