

*[During Lent, we are reading through Mark's account of the last week of Jesus' earthly life, with an accompanying sermon series and discussion for those interested after the service. .For background see The Last Week: Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan].*

**Mark's Gospel:**

- Importance of Jesus' last week. Jesus has left his Galilean ministry to visit Jerusalem for the Passover. Five chapters (11-15 out of sixteen) are involved with the few days from Palm Sunday to the Crucifixion.
- Of the Gospel writers, Mark is clearest about what happens on each day, with introductions such as, 'On the next day ...' He also marks time during certain days (in the morning, in the evening) and on Good Friday notes three-hour intervals.
- The sweep of the last week is from a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, through a gradually darkening and confrontational atmosphere to his arrest (Thursday) and trial and crucifixion (Friday).

**Why this study series?** Issues because the lectionary does not tell the story in chronological order

- Detailed study reveals that Mark wrote his Gospel carefully and deliberately. Details that are often overlooked are significant.
- The lectionary conflates the liturgy of the Palms with the Passion (literally, *passio*, suffering) story on Palm Sunday. The result has been to confuse what happens on Palm Sunday and almost to give an excuse not to attend on Good Friday.
- We read the tensions between Jesus and the Temple authorities (Mark 11: 12 to 14: 11 and // in Matthew and Luke) at the **end** of the Church year, in October and November, and miss the point that what is going on is the lead-up to Jesus's arrest. These passages are not just a follow-on from the teachings and parables in the Galilean ministry.

**Lent 1: Summary of Mark 11: 1-26**

- [Palm] Sunday: Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem, vv. 1-11
- Monday: Jesus curses the fig tree vv. 12-14
- Monday: Jesus overturns money-changers' tables 11: 15-19
- Tuesday morning: Jesus explains about the cursed fig tree vv. 20-24
- Tuesday morning: a saying // Petition in the Lord's Prayer vv. 25-26

**Triumphal entry:**

- vv. 2-5 make clear that Jesus' procession was planned. The reference to the colt comes from Zechariah 9 [Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey]. Matthew and John identify it as a donkey's colt; Mark and Luke do not.
- Borg and Crossan (B&C) postulate two processions: an official procession by the Roman governor, Pilate, and an unofficial counter-procession by Jesus and his followers. Justification: the Roman governor always kept a large contingent of troops in Jerusalem during major festivals, especially at Passover (a liberation festival), to guard against rioting by 'home-rule' advocates. B&C imagine Jesus and followers coming from Galilee in the north; Pilate's procession from the east, from the Imperial capital of Judea, Caesarea Maritima (not the same as Caesarea Philippi, in the north).
- The whole scenario implies a study in contrasts. We imagine Pilate arriving at the head of the imperial procession with chariots and horses, on a magnificent white stallion. Jesus

looks faintly ridiculous on the back of a little donkey. Pilate has armed soldiers, in contrast with Jesus' procession of rag-tag peasants. Pilate projects imperial might: his king is the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, who claimed to be divine. Mark (but not Jesus himself) identified Jesus as the Jewish Messiah – in Mark's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly tells the disciples not to tell people who he is. Jesus proclaimed the spiritual Kingdom of God – but did not threaten to overthrow the Romans, to the disappointment of his most enthusiastic followers.

- The people shouted, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David." In other words, restoration of the independent kingdom of Israel. By implication, Herod's kingdom, supported by the chief priests and Pilate, was going, not coming.
- The idea of Jesus as any sort of king would have been very disturbing to the Romans. Jerusalem was filled with crowds for the Passover celebrations, a tinder box just waiting for someone to strike a match. Pilate needed the Temple authorities to cooperate with getting this potential trouble-maker out of the way. For modern parallels of trouble-makers who opposed oppressive rule, think Mahatma Gandhi in British India or Nelson Mandela in South Africa.
- The crowds cheer Jesus on Sunday, but mock and spit on him the next Friday. Traditional preaching links the fickleness of the crowd from Sunday to Friday, but there is no reason to imagine the same people – Sunday's crowd looks spontaneous, but Friday's looks like a 'crowd for hire' that you might find in North Korea or Putin's Russia, where everyone is told what to shout out ahead of time.
- [John Spong has advanced the hypothesis that Jesus' Palm Sunday procession took place in the fall, not at Passover-time, and was fitted into the conventional story for the theological reasons that B&C advance. It is a minority view.]

### **The fig tree // Matthew 21: 18-22**

- A strange story. [vv. 12-14, Monday]: Jesus was hungry, but found only leaves, for it was not the season of figs (not surprising around Passover!). B&C argue that this inconsistency tells us that we are to read the passage as a parable, not literally. So Jesus cursed the fig tree, and said it would never bear fruit again, in the hearing of the disciples.
- [vv. 20-24, Tuesday morning]: The fig tree has withered. Peter remembers what Jesus said. Jesus tells him to have faith in prayer, even to throw this mountain into the sea. "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours" // Matthew 21; John 14: 13-14. This is very problematic because (a) it is the basis of the Prosperity Gospel which is very consumer-oriented; (b) most people find it to be untrue – does that mean that they do not pray faithfully enough?

### **Interpretation of the 'parable'**

- B&C argue that Mark (unlike Matthew) split the fig tree story to make a sandwich to the Temple cleansing. The fig tree is a metaphor for the Temple. "This mountain" is Mount Zion, on which the Temple stood.
  - Later, in 13: 1-2, the disciples admire the Temple architecture; Jesus predicts that one day it will be thrown down and not one stone left standing on another (this happened in 70 CE, ~35 years after Jesus' life, so that may be 'editorializing' by Mark).
- Another explanation: The withered fig tree // the spiritual decay/withering on the part of the Temple authorities, who were in cahoots with the Romans. The fig tree is an Old Testament metaphor for Israel. Judges 9:10: 'The trees (the other nations) said to the fig tree, Come and reign over us'; 1 Kings 4:25: 'Judah and Israel dwelt safely, ... every man under his vine and under his fig tree'; Hosea 9: 10, 'Like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel; like the first fruit of the fig tree I saw your ancestors'.
  - In Chapter 13: 28-31 (next week), Jesus talks about the signs of the end of the age

and elaborates this idea more clearly.

**Cleansing the Temple** [Monday, 11: 15-19; // Matthew 21, Luke 19 (and John Chapter 2)]

- B&C claim a // with Palm Sunday. Jesus : (1) enters Jerusalem/Temple (2) makes a prophetic action in front of a crowd (3) leaves Jerusalem/Temple
- v. 15: "They" came to Jerusalem. Did Jesus enter the Temple alone, or did he take a whole crowd with him? B&C suggest the latter, because (v. 18b) 'the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.'
- Where in the Temple did these events take place? Courts of the Gentiles, Jews, and priests; holy of holies. Ordinary business was conducted in the outer court(s).
- Animal sacrifices in Biblical Judaism [Aside, Judaism probably 'saved' from oblivion by Temple destruction]. B&C note that Jesus was not condemning animal sacrifices but the attitude of the Temple authorities.
- Changing 'unclean' money for Temple money to buy your sacrificial animal or bird. The money-changers took a commission.
- v. 17a is an exact quotation from Isaiah 56: 7. B&C doubt that Jesus would actually have referred to the Herodian Temple as my house because Herod's Jewish pedigree was suspect.
- v. 17b is from Jeremiah 7: 11. Aside: the word translated robber (Greek *lestes*) is closer to bandit or rebel.
- v. 18a: The mood has already darkened. For the Temple authorities, Jesus is trouble – crowds of followers; upsetting Temple protocol.

[**v. 25 (and 26)**]: This 'stand-alone' saying // a petition in the Lord's Prayer, which does not appear in Mark. v. 26 (omitted in NRSV), if you don't forgive, neither will your Father in heaven.

**MARK 11** 1 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3 If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' 4 They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, 5 some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' 6 They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7 Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9 Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

11 Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

12 On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. 14 He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it.

15 Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; 16 and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17 He was teaching and saying, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'

18 And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. 19 And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20 In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. 21 Then Peter remembered and said to him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.' 22 Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. 23 Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea", and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. 24 So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.' [26 But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.]