

Palm Sunday 2021 Mark 11:1-11

Today is one of those days that our current digital format seems even more stifling than usual. On Palm Sunday we want to enjoy a lively procession and wave around our palm branches to start Holy Week, but of course this year, that is not to be. This Sunday can also be observed as Passion Sunday, when the entire narrative of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial are read in parts, making sure that if we don't join in Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship we will still hear Jesus' complete story instead of skipping from his triumphal entry to his triumph over the grave. I prefer Palm Sunday to Passion Sunday anyway, but I was certainly not going to read all 47 verses of Mark's gospel to you over the internet. Yet, even setting aside the rest of the Passion narrative, the remarkable thing about Mark's Palm Sunday story is not what we read, but what we *don't* read. The details of Jesus' last days that Mark implies without stating outright are every bit as important to understanding what God is up to at this turning point in salvation history as the well-worn verses we read here.

Mark tells us that Jesus and the disciples approach Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. From there they would see a clear path leading down into the Kidron Valley and back up to the gate in the high stone wall that surrounds the city. The next time Jesus looks in that direction it will be on the night of his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane when, far from being ambushed or taken by surprise, he would have been able to watch the soldiers' long, steady approach in the distance. He would see them coming and wait, not run. On this day, the disciples and the cheering crowds don't know what Jesus' trip to Jerusalem will mean, but Jesus does.

Without quoting him directly, Mark alludes to Zechariah's prophesy of a king coming to Jerusalem, victorious yet humble, riding on a donkey. Mark wants us to understand that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the one anointed by God to rule over the people. The crowds recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophesy, spreading coats and branches on the ground in front of him as was customary in a royal procession. What Mark does not tell us about is the other parade that would have taken place that week. Pontius Pilate, who would have normally resided in Caesarea and only visited Jerusalem on special occasions, likely would have arrived with similar fanfare, through the gate on the opposite side of the city; however Pilate would not have ridden on a colt but on a great war horse and would not have been surrounded by pilgrims but flanked by soldiers. Passover was the feast that celebrated Israel's freedom from their oppressors in Egypt; Pilate would have come to town to make sure the festival didn't inspire the people to rise up against the Roman occupation. Mark invites us to imagine this contrast: on the

one side, Jesus, the promised prince of peace, ushering in God's kingdom; on the other side, Pilate, using the military to enforce Pax Romana across Caesar's empire.

Finally, because we know the rest of the story, we can see how Mark is setting the scene to reveal the crowd as fickle and faithless. Here they shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" What Mark does not yet say is that in just a few short days, that same crowd will shout "Crucify him!" All the hope and joy on display in this parade will turn to hate and blame as the people become disillusioned and fall prey to the leaders' persuasion. The crowds themselves don't know this yet, but Jesus knows.

Mark narrates the will and way of God, but in the shadow of what Mark does not say, we find the competing claims of the world. Jesus goes to Jerusalem, knowing the suffering and death that await him there, yet determined to live out his life as the humble servant of God. He could employ violence and exercise power to protect himself, because he is innocent and righteous, but he forgives those who accuse him instead of seeking vengeance. He acts not in his own self-interest but on behalf of others who cannot help themselves. In stark contrast, we imagine Pilate going to Jerusalem with the intent to use whatever means necessary to serve an empire of oppression, to force a false peace through fear, coercion, and state-sanctioned violence. When Jesus comes to trial, Pilate has the authority to intervene on his behalf, knowing he is innocent, but instead he washes his hands of responsibility and bows to the will of the crowd whom he knows are wrong. He perpetuates the "might makes right" myth that drives this world further into moral bankruptcy.

As we examine the characters of Holy Week, we are tempted to define the bad guys—Pilate, Herod, the chief priests, Judas—and we want to claim solidarity with Jesus, because we are, after all, supposed to be his disciples. But remember that when the going got tough, the disciples got lost. They fell asleep in the garden, denied even knowing Jesus, and hid in fear. When we shout *Hosanna* with the crowd today, we must also remember that by the end of the week that same crowd shouted, "Crucify him!" The people wanted Jesus to act like the leaders of this world—wielding military and political power; when instead he stayed God's course, they disowned him. We, too, are faced with competing invitations to be subjects of two very different kingdoms: God's kingdom of mercy, justice, and love, or the empire of greed, exploitation, and hate. Jesus only followed one of these paths; we cannot follow the other and claim to be doing so in his name. Holy Week invites us to see who this Jesus we claim to worship really is. May we see who Jesus is and who he is not, and may we discipline ourselves to follow accordingly.