

The Book of Mark is most likely the first of the four gospel books to be written, sometime in the late 60s CE as those that knew Jesus personally were possibly dying and the Roman Empire invaded Israel and Jerusalem to put down their insurrection.

Today we're going both backwards (chapter 11) and continuing onwards (14) in our reading of the book to observed the liturgical calendar celebration of Palm Sunday. Both of these stories are perhaps well known, but how clearly do we see them through the lens of tradition and liturgical celebration that we usually encounter them through?

Jesus seems to carefully plan out his entry into Jerusalem as a form of political street theater. Notice how he gives instructions and seems to be in charge of what happens, not just showing up and being surprised by the crowd. Why would he do that? Why would Mark transmit the story that way to us?

RIDING A COLT...LEAFY BRANCHES...SHOUTING: These items and actions are all highly symbolic and rooted in First Testament Scriptures describing the coming of the Messiah to liberate Israel from her enemies. The Messiah was to arrive with his army from the Mount of Olives, and was associated with riding a colt and the waving of branches (here it seems to be the crops – maybe wheat? – of the fields) which was part of the celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles (booths). The acclamation of the crowd is a citation of Psalm 118 – a plea and possibly a greeting (Hosanna) meaning “Save us now!” Jesus seems to set this all up the military procession of a triumphal nationalist hero – yet his version of it subverts all the preconceived ideas that had been associated with the nationalist dream of re-establishing the greatness of the past David dynasty (imagine it a bit like the cries for MAGA today). And then finally he enters the city (after the procession) and goes to the Temple...where we should expect something radical to happen yet nothing happens.

Scholar Ched Myers contrasts this symbolic action with that of the Last Supper – seeing a connection with Mark 14:12-21:

¹² On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?” ¹³ So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, ¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵ He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” ¹⁶ So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal.

¹⁷ When it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸ And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” ¹⁹ They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?” ²⁰ He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.”

April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11; 14:3-9

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus 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!

¹⁰BLESSED IS THE COMING KINGDOM OF OUR ANCESTOR DAVID!

HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST HEAVEN!”

¹¹ Then Jesus 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.

Mark 14:3-9

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³ While he was at Bethany **in the house of Simon the leper**, as he sat at the table, A WOMAN came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and *poured the ointment on his head*.
⁴ But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way?”⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than **THREE HUNDRED DENARIUS**, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her.⁶ But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me.”⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.”⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.⁹ Truly I tell you, wherever **the good news** is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today’s story grabs your attention?
- Imagine yourself as excitedly present for that procession then seeing Jesus do nothing? How do you feel?
- What does it mean to participate in the Way of Jesus? To pick up your cross and follow-him?
- What’s it mean to do so today? how do you do so in this time of COVID-19 as we’re stuck at home?
- What invitation to walk, act, speak, or relate to others do you hear in the text today?

The Book of Mark - The story of the woman anointing Jesus is often remembered for Jesus’ cryptic saying about the poor more than her actions. Why does she do what she does? Why is she criticized for it? What is Jesus really saying about the poor since he repeatedly says that the last shall be first and that he came to give his life for others?

in the house of Simon the leper Easy to overlook the first words tell us of the radical nature and context of the story. Jesus is eating with the outcast, in the home of a leper. The Torah forbade such practice. Following the example of Jesus necessitates challenges the social boundaries of the dominant order. See Leviticus 13, especially “⁴⁵The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.”⁴⁶ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he *is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*”

A WOMAN It’s easier to forget the radicalness of this gesture – done by a woman, and accepted by Jesus in a highly structured patriarchal society. Feminist theologian E. Schüssler Fiorenza writes about it saying, “ Since the prophet in the Old Testament anointed the head of the Jewish king, the anointing of Jesus’ head must have been understood immediately as the prophetic recognition of Jesus....But it was a woman who named Jesus by and through her prophetic sign-action. It was a politically dangerous story.”

DENARIUS was the standard Roman silver coin, understood to be worth a day’s wage. So this ointment was worth a year’s salary!

Biblical scholar Ched Myers links this story directly to the story of Bartimeus in Mark 10:45-52 as the a story portraying true discipleship followed by teaching about what it means to be a disciple. Like Bartimeus, the faith of the woman is contrasted with the partially blind faith of the disciples who still don’t get it. The woman understands that the path of discipleship leads to crucifixion. By anointing Jesus she understand the gospel (good news) and participates in it. She is one of the least and last, yet she is among the first – just as Jesus taught.

⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

⁴⁶ The [disciples and Jesus] came to Jericho. As [Jesus] and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” ⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.