

Passion Week

This Passion Week's readings come from the Gospel of Mark. Mark spends so much time on Jesus' last week that his Gospel has been called 'a passion narrative with a long introduction'. So we will not try to cover it all, and what we do cover will be compressed. Each of the incidents deserves consideration in its own right, but due to time and space limitations, we will instead focus on what each incident contributes to the larger narrative.

Day 1: Mark 11:1-21 The triumphal entry & the cleansing of the temple

This section combines two major activities on 'Palm Sunday' and the following day: the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the temple. Each enacts a claim to unique authority, and each precipitates a crisis with the religious leadership.

In 11:1-10, Jesus rides into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, deliberately alluding to the Messianic predictions of the OT book of Zechariah: "See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9-10). Recognizing the allusion, the pilgrims shout in praise, quoting the words of Psalm 118:25-26: "O Lord, save us ... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." They cut branches and lay them on the road in front of Jesus' donkey, in keeping with Psalm 118: "With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession *up to the horns of the altar*" (v27).

But here a notable oddity intrudes, breaking the Scriptural pattern: Jesus does go to the temple, but not 'up to the horns of the altar' (he does not worship). Because it is late – and fewer people are around – he simply looks around, and then leaves until the next day. When he returns, he throws out the merchants, again fulfilling Zechariah: "And on that day there will no longer be a merchant in the house of the Lord" (14:20-21). The point of the temple cleansing should be obvious, but to drive it home, Mark sandwiches this incident between two parts of another story (a stylistic device called 'inclusion'): before the temple cleansing, Jesus curses a fig tree; the next day, as he heads back to cleanse the temple, his disciples find the tree withered. The fig tree is emblematic of the nation of Israel. In cursing the fig tree, Jesus acts out a parable: God is cursing the temple and its worship.

Why? Jesus cites two Old Testament texts to explain. First, Isaiah 56:7 had looked forward to gentiles having full rights in the worship of God in the temple, but here, the place set aside for gentiles to pray and worship, was full of disruptions and distractions. Secondly, Jeremiah 7:11 pointed a

finger at a discrepancy in his time, where people would act immorally during the week, and then trot off to temple on the weekend, as though an hour of worship would make up for a week of wickedness. Jesus accuses the religious leaders of his generation of something similar.

So this passage intends, first, to portray Jesus as Messiah. At the same time, it drives home that his coming brings not the expected salvation, but a surprising judgment, in fact, judgment on the very religious activity which they counted on to save them. These incidents remind us that God is not just a heavenly benefactor, that he is also sovereign Lord. While he saves and blesses, he also calls us to honor and worship him. And he calls us to extend salvation to all, and to live consistent with the faith we profess.

Day 2: Mark 14:1-26 Preparing for death: anointing & a last meal

Mark uses inclusion again in this section, twice in fact, for both interpretive and emotive effect. In 14:1-11, inclusion links the violence done to Jesus with devotion shown to him. The account begins with religious leadership plotting to kill him (14:1-2), and ends with Judas approaching the Jewish leaders with an offer of betrayal (14:10-11). In between, Mark describes the anointing (14:3-9). In a culture where the deceased are perfumed for burial, the anointing anticipates Jesus' coming execution (14:8). In that context, Jesus finds such devotion emotionally moving (14:6,9).

The Passover meal in 14:12-26 also employs inclusion to symbolic and emotive effect. The narrative begins with preparations for the Passover (14:12-16), and ends with the celebration of the Passover meal (14:22-26). In the middle, Jesus interrupts the festive occasion with a prediction of betrayal (14:17-21). The association of the meal and Jesus' impending death with the Passover symbolizes a new deliverance of the people of God, this time not from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin and death. The association with Judas' betrayal drives home the pathos of Jesus' situation, just as – but in the opposite direction from – the anointing by the devout woman. Inclusion conveys both meaning and poignancy.

Jesus is about to die as Passover lamb, honored by a woman's extravagant devotion, despised by a follower's dastardly betrayal. Still today, he is honored by our extravagant devotion, and despised when his followers renounce him, whether in turning from faith or turning to sin.

Day 3: Mark 14:27-72 Arrest and religious trial

Mark also uses inclusion in this section, and even more extensively. The passage begins with a prediction of Peter's denial (14:27-31), and ends with an account of the actual denial (14:66-72). In between come three other

events: Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane while his closest disciples sleep (14:32-42), his arrest with the cooperation of the duplicitous Judas (14:43-52), and his mockery of a trial before the Jewish religious leadership while Peter keeps a safe distance (14:53-65).

In all three events, Jesus stands alone, neither rescued by God, nor supported by followers, only condemned by the religious leaders who should have honored him. These three themes particularly stand out: the hostility of the religious leaders, the failure of the disciples, and yet the confident authority of Jesus even through the process of his own trial and sentencing. The first is a travesty; the second, a cowardice; the third, a nobility. While Jesus is a victim at his own crucifixion, on a deeper level, he fulfills the divine purpose, and does so with courage and faithfulness. His apparent defeat is his actual victory. And an assurance that carries forward even today that Jesus is in control of our lives and his mission, even when it faces its greatest challenges or endures its darkest moments.

Day 4: Mark 15:1-32 Political trial: The 'King of the Jews'

The three narratives of this section – the trial before Pilate, the mockery by soldiers, and the crucifixion – are united by a recurring theme: the sarcastic proclamation of Jesus as 'king of the Jews'. This is the focus of Pilate's interrogation: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (15:2). "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" (15:9). "What should I do with the one you call the king of the Jews?" (15:12). It is the focus of the soldiers' mockery; in a mock coronation, they enthrone Jesus as royalty, complete with purple robe, crown, scepter, and veneration (15:16-20). It continues as the focus of the crucifixion, with the charge against him posted atop the cross, 'The king of the Jews,' and the mockery of the religious leaders, "Let this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe" (15:21-32).

Ironically, all these mockers spoke the truth. Jesus – and not the Roman emperor or his regional lackey – is king. Jesus' crucifixion would be followed quickly by his enthronement, not by soldiers or on a temporary earthly throne, but by God and on an eternal heavenly throne. This Messiah did not come down from the cross precisely so that we can see and believe. So we rightly worship Jesus as king, not only of the Jews, but of the entire world.

Day 5: Mark 15:33-47 The day the sky turned dark

Nature mourns: the day turns dark. Son cries out: Father turns his back. The God-man breathes his last; the barrier between God and man rents in

half. Gentile-soldier perceives the truth; Jewish-priest goes blind. Powerless women grieve the one they loved; a powerful man offers honor to the fallen. The crucifixion of Christ is a defining moment: for nature, for God, for religion, for all peoples, and for his followers. What will they make of him? And it is a defining moment no less for us today: What do we make of him?

Day 6: Mark 16:1-8 A non-ending to an extraordinary story

The original ending of this Gospel is something of a mystery: vv 9-20 do not appear in the earliest extant copies. Some contemporary interpreters try to find a deeper sense in an abrupt ending: perhaps Mark intends to convey that in the face of the failure of the original disciples, and the fears of these otherwise devoted women, if the gospel is to spread, it depends on the reader picking up the dropped baton and finishing the course. On the other hand, the Gospel of Matthew runs parallel to Mark up to this point, so we can likely infer that Mark originally ended in much the same manner as Matthew does, and the last page of the manuscript was somehow lost in the early years of transmission.

Whatever the best explanation of the narrative's abrupt ending, we rightly reflect on the text in its current form (rather than in any supposed reconstruction). And in its current form, it is not without significance. For one thing, when Mark 16 opens, of Jesus' twelve disciples, ten have deserted him, one has betrayed him, and the last has blasphemed, falsely swearing in the name of the God that he did not know Jesus. All that is left is a small group of devoted women, very much a second-class gender in the first century. Even they are marked not by faith, but by love, as they come not to meet a risen Jesus, but to perform customary funeral rites for the dead. When they encounter an angel, they respond not by believing in the risen Christ and fulfilling their commission to go inform the disciples, but by fleeing in fear and silence.

We find at least two lessons here, both grounded in the survival of the Christian faith after such ignominious beginnings. One lesson is the power of God: the power which ensured the survival of Jesus after death also ensures the survival of the Church after such unimpressive beginnings. Another lesson is the grace of God: the grace which, in the first place, sent Jesus to die for the forgiveness of sins, also, in the second place, forgave the desertion, the denial and the cowardice of Jesus' closest friends and followers. This Gospel may end abruptly, but we rightly take great encouragement, that in the power and grace of God, neither the Christian faith nor our own relationships with him end similarly, despite our failings.