

Palm Sunday 2021

Fidelity and Betrayal

Mark 14:1-11

Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. "But not during the Feast," they said, "or the people may riot." While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

Mark begins the passion with three stories of brooding, shameful betrayal and tender fidelity. The enemies of Jesus, often the Pharisees and now the Jerusalem based priests and elders, never step out of character. They had hounded Jesus during his ministry in Galilee and intensified their opposition to his teaching when he had arrived in Jerusalem. Now their relentless hostility is sealed with a plot to take his life.

A chilling new element is added, however: Judas, one of Jesus' own disciples chosen and loved and entrusted with a share in Jesus' mission goes to the leaders and offers to betray Jesus to them. They are pleased and pay him for his service.

In between these stories, Mark inserts a story of beautiful fidelity. While Jesus visits Simon the Leper in Bethany on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, an anonymous woman breaks open her alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil and anoints Jesus' head. In the Bible, kings and prophets were anointed on the head and Mark plays on that memory here.

As the fragrance of the oil fills the room, those with Jesus are shocked at the woman's extravagant gesture. But Jesus defends her. She had performed an act of true fidelity and love, he tells them, ***"for she has anticipated anointing my body for burial"*** (14:8). For this, Jesus promises, she would be remembered wherever the Gospel would be preached, the only one in all the New Testament to be so greatly honored.

These three sharply contrasting scenes thrust the reader into the heart of Mark's message. Two major themes run through the entire passion story; one focusing on Jesus who with intense determination gives his life for others; the other, on those who surround Jesus, some withering in the crucible of suffering, some exemplifying faith and courage.

The passion exposes the terrible intent of Judas and the leaders, but it also gives us a glimpse of authentic discipleship in the anonymous woman of Bethany. She, like Jesus, understands both who he is and what his destiny entails, and without hesitation acts on that intuition. And therefore, she anoints him for burial and acclaims his royal dignity. For such love she would never be forgotten.

The Final Passover

Mark 14:12-31

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely not I?" "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the [2] covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. "You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: "'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not." "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

Mark's Gospel is noted for its manner of framing a key scene with two other related stories. That takes place in the next portion of the passion story: Jesus' words over the bread and wine are framed by his predictions of Judas' betrayal and Peter's and the rest of the disciples' failure. Once again Mark's dual focus on Christology and discipleship are in evidence. Celebration of the Passover is the setting for all of these stories. Israel's great pilgrimage feast commemorated the exodus from the Egypt, God's act of liberating love that was basis of Israel's hope. So, the gospel highlights the fact that Jesus' encounter with death, a death that would liberate others, was entwined with Passover. Mark uses the ritual of the Passover meal to proclaim in Jesus' own words the meaning of the passion. Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, gives it to his disciples saying, ***"This is my body" and then he takes a cup, once again offers thanks, gives it to the disciples, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many..."***

Here was the inner meaning of every act of Jesus' ministry which Mark had narrated earlier in the gospel: Jesus' compassionate healing, his befriending of those left on the margins, his forceful teaching, his confrontations with evil, his feeding of the hungry crowds. All of this was a life given for the others, all of this was ***"bread broken"*** and ***"blood shed for many."*** Such was the spirit of his mission that would ultimately end in triumph and such was the mission the disciples were called to carry out.

But there was a long road ahead and much pain and conversion of heart before they would be ready. And so, Jesus' solemn words and eloquent gestures at the supper are framed with his predictions that Judas Iscariot would fail tragically and the rest of his disciples would abandon him. Even Simon Peter, the first disciple to be called would publicly disown Jesus out of fear and abandon his master.

Gethsemane: Prayer and Arrest

Mark 14:32-52

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him. Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear." Am I leading a rebellion," said Jesus, "that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled." Then everyone deserted him and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.

Now the setting shifts from the upper room to Gethsemane, an olive grove on the outskirts of the city, and here in two major scenes the pace of the passion story quickens.

The shadow of his impending violent death hovers over Jesus and torments him. As he had done several times in the gospel Jesus gathers his strength in prayer. It is not a polite or heroic prayer but one that echoes the raw expressions of faith found in the psalms: ***“Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will.”*** (14:36). So much of the spirit of Jesus is here: his tenacious and intimate devotion to God, his “Abba,” the fierce struggles with the power of evil and death that marked his ministry in Galilee.

Mark informs his readers early in the Gospel that Jesus is the Son of God, one in whom the Spirit abides and one whose name God’s speaks at the Jordan and on the mount of Transfiguration. But Jesus is also genuinely human, wary of death and crushed by the thought that his mission was running aground. So, Mark dares to present us with this scene, one that would be fixed in Christian memory forever: a wrenching prayer of faith from the lips of Jesus.

Mark continues his method of presenting the disciples in stark counterpoint with Jesus. Three times he comes to find support in their presence, only to find them sleeping. The Gospel had already made clear that this “sleep” is not mere fatigue at the end of a long celebration. This brand of sleep could be deadly, it was the spiritual lethargy of those who do not recognize the moment of crisis in history and do not prepare themselves to face it. Jesus had warned the disciples about this type of “sleep”:

“Watch, therefore, you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’” (13:35-37).

That moment of crisis comes swiftly. Judas and an armed crowd break into the stillness of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, the apostate disciple identifying Jesus with a treacherous kiss. Mayhem breaks out: they seize Jesus and arrest him, meanwhile one of Jesus’ followers lashes out with a sword and wounds a servant of the High Priest.

Jesus faces that wall of violence and condemns it: ***“Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs, to seize me? Day after day I was with you teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me; but that the scriptures may be fulfilled...”*** (14:49). How often has this scene been repeated in the centuries since Mark wrote: a nighttime arrest; the forces of violence seeking to destroy the voice of justice; violence breeding more violence; the lone heroic stance of the martyr who refuses to betray the spirit of God.

Again, Mark contrasts the response of the disciples with that of Jesus. The crisis has come, and they cannot endure it. All of them flee, abandoning Jesus. The disciples have left behind their dignity, their calling, and the one who gave them life.

Confession and Denial: the Interrogation by the Sanhedrin

Mark 14, 53-72

They took Jesus to the high priest, and all the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law came together. Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree. Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'" Yet even then their testimony did not agree.

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.

"The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death. Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him.

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.

When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it.

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses on

himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

The scene shifts once more: from Gethsemane to the residence of the High Priest where Jesus will be interrogated by the leaders. Mark frames the interrogation scene with that of Peter's denials, clearly contrasting the disciple's fear with Jesus' courage.

A parade of false witnesses are brought forward against Jesus, but their accusations are contradictory. Some, however, bring up a charge that jogs the memory of the reader of the Gospel: ***"I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands."***

Earlier in the gospel Mark had presented Jesus as a prophet on fire with zeal, purging the temple and predicting its demise. Indeed, the Risen Christ would be the new temple of God, the ***"rejected stone"*** that would become the cornerstone of a new sacred people in whom God would dwell. This accusation of the trial would be remembered when the veil of the sanctuary would tear apart at the moment of Jesus' death.

Frustrated by the flawed testimony of his witnesses, the High Priest poses the key question to Jesus: ***"Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?"*** There is no hesitation in Jesus' reply: ***"I am."*** And he adds a challenge to his opponents: they would one day see their prisoner coming as the "Son of Man," that haunting figure who would experience humiliation and rejection, but then would be lifted up in exaltation by God and return in triumph at the end of the world.

Jesus' bold declaration of his identity is rejected as blasphemous by his opponents; they condemn him to death and begin to abuse him. We who know who Jesus truly is can only marvel in deep sadness at how spiritually blind we are all capable of becoming.

Mark shifts our attention from Jesus standing before his captors back to the courtyard below where Peter warily edges near a group of servants huddling around a warm fire. As if in slow motion, we watch the power of fear break down a disciple's resolve. Three times Peter denies he even knows Jesus, finally cursing and swearing as panic takes hold. A cock crows and Peter remembers Jesus' warning at the supper. The terrible realization of his failure surges over him and he begins to weep.

The story is so familiar we may not be able to recapture its incredible shock. The full measure of the disciples' failure can be taken in this single tragic story: the leader of those whom Jesus called publicly to discipleship renounces his allegiance to his Master.

The Roman Trial

Mark 15:1-15

Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision. They bound Jesus, led him away and handed him over to Pilate.

“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied.

The chief priests accused him of many things. So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed. Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him.

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. “What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them. “Crucify him!” they shouted. “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

The leaders take Jesus to Pilate to have him condemned to crucifixion. Mark rivets our attention on a single-issue Jesus’ identity as king as for the first time the power of Rome enters the passion story.

The scene is full of irony. Pilate, the representative of imperial power, confronts this battered Jewish prisoner and questions him on his supposed pretensions to be “king of the Jews.”

While Jesus' own people reject their true king and choose Barabbas, a murderer, Pilate, a Gentile and a Roman, appears convinced of Jesus' innocence and seeks to have him released.

Underneath all of this is the issue of kingship, the most forceful expression of human political power known to Mark's readers. Pilate and Jesus' opponents agree on one thing: Jesus is no king. In Pilate's mind he is a harmless victim of the leaders' envy; to the leaders he is a false and dangerous claimant to religious authority. So ultimately Jesus is mocked for his pretensions to kingship: a cloak of purple, a crown of thorns, a reed scepter, and a parody of homage that turns violent. But the reader of Mark's passion story knows that it is not Jesus but those symbols of imperial and abusive power that are being mocked.

Jesus is a king but one whose power is expressed not in exploiting or ***“lording it over others”*** but in giving them life. Earlier in the gospel during the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus had urged his disciples not to exercise that kind of power but only the power whose source and intent is to give life to others, the very power that animated Jesus himself. The passion story, therefore, stands in judgment over all forms of abusive power.

Crucifixion

Mark 15:16-47

The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe." Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." One man ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink.

“Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”

“Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath).

So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

The end comes swiftly in Mark’s account; the story is told in few words, as if it were too painful to say more. Pilate gives up his attempts to free Jesus and condemns him to crucifixion. An execution detail brings Jesus to Golgotha where he is offered a narcotic (which he refuses), stripped of his garments, and nailed to the cross. Two criminals are crucified with Jesus one on each side of him, forming a sad entourage. The sign over the cross acclaims in derision: **“The King of the Jews.”**

During the death watch, a parade of mockery dredges up the issues of the trial and hurls them at the man on the cross: his threats to the temple; his power to save others and now his inability to save himself.

Mark casts this last taunt in strongly ironic tones: “Let the Messiah, the **King** of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” But the reader knows that Jesus’ power is demonstrated not in shedding the cross but in carrying it, in giving his life for others. **“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it”** (8:34-37).

Darkness envelops Golgotha and out of that darkness comes Jesus’ final lament: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** Jesus dies with words that echoes from that dread hill, splitting the veil of the temple and igniting faith in the centurion’s heart. This unlikely witness sees in the manner of Jesus’ death for others the true revelation of God. The sight of the Crucified Jesus triggers in him the full first confession of faith expressed in the gospel: **“Truly this man was the Son of God!”** A startling revelation God’s power revealed not through staggering prodigies but in a selfless death motivated by love.

The chosen disciples had long fled. But standing at a distance were other faithful followers, the women who had been drawn to Jesus in Galilee and had come to Jerusalem with him. They would stay with him now through death and burial, never abandoning him. Two of them, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome, would keep vigil at his burial and would be the first to discover the tomb empty and to know that Jesus was victorious over death (16:1-8). These “unlikely disciples” who proved true where others more prominent had failed, would be the ones to bring the Risen Christ’s message of joy and reconciliation to the disciples who had failed.

May you have a blessed Holy week. Amen