

**PSALM 118:1-2,19-29**

- <sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his steadfast love endures for ever!
- <sup>2</sup> Let Israel say,  
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'
- <sup>19</sup> Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the LORD.
- <sup>20</sup> This is the gate of the LORD;  
the righteous shall enter through it.
- <sup>21</sup> I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.
- <sup>22</sup> The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the chief cornerstone.
- <sup>23</sup> This is the LORD's doing;  
it is marvellous in our eyes.
- <sup>24</sup> This is the day that the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- <sup>25</sup> Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!  
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
- <sup>26</sup> Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.  
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- <sup>27</sup> The LORD is God,  
and he has given us light.  
Bind the festal procession with branches,  
up to the horns of the altar.
- <sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
you are my God, I will extol you.
- <sup>29</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

## MARK 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' <sup>4</sup>They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,  
'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

<sup>10</sup> Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

<sup>11</sup> 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.

## SERMON

I was tempted this week to simply copy and paste last year's Palm Sunday sermon and see how many of you noticed the repeat. Because at this time last year we were sitting with the same text—the Palm Sunday parade from the Gospel of Mark. It's my favorite of the Palm Sunday stories, because it's both deeply dramatic, but also because it kicks off the earliest of the Holy Week stories. As I've told you all, we're going to be spending our Lent walking through Holy Week one day at a time, which is why we're starting Lent 1 with Palm Sunday. And we're going to spend our holy season hearing the story according to the gospel of Mark. So, before jumping into Palm Sunday, specifically, let's spend a few minutes getting our minds oriented to the gospel according to Mark.

Now, Mark is the earliest of the gospel stories. Most scholars think it was written down somewhere in the year 70, which is about 40 years after the events of that infamous holy week. Mark's account of Jesus life became the source material for both Matthew and Luke, so there's a lot of similarities between these three gospel accounts. And then later, all three of these gospels, in their own way, worked their way into the mind of the writer of John. And think about that for a moment, these gospel stories were written 40 or more years after the events they're actually talking about. Now, of course, people would tell the stories, right? Paul wrote his letters, churches were meeting, stories were shared around tables, but it was at least 40 years before anything was written down. That's like us, today, trying to recall and compose a short book about the presidency of Jimmy Carter from memory and conversation. It would be hard, right? And readers would be rightly skeptical of some of the details.

That's sort of what we need to think about when it comes to the gospels. Not that they're not true, that's not what I'm saying...but that the writers are interested in telling us a story, and they want it to be true, but they're distant from the facts. And factual is not their point. The writers of the gospels are trying to tell us a story, and they're trying to persuade us. These are theological and political documents, more than tick tock reports of the comings and goings of Jesus.

So, if we're going to be looking at Mark, it's probably a good thing to orient ourselves to what story he's telling. Mark is particularly interested in telling us a story about what he might call "The Way." Mark's gospel talks a lot about "the way," so it's a phrase we hear a lot, but it's also a gospel literally oriented along a path...the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, following Jesus. Mark's story has this sort of inescapable magnetism. Jesus and the disciples, and us as the readers, we're making our way to Jerusalem, and there's no escaping it. To follow Jesus means we literally follow him to Jerusalem, and there, during this Holy Week, we find the climax and point of Mark's story: the passion of Jesus.

Now, the word "passion" has two different meanings, and they're both important as we study this last week. The first meaning is the one we associate with the Mel Gibson movie, right? The Passion of the Christ? That's the old, Latin meaning of the word. "Passion" in that sense means "suffering," and we literally mean the suffering and death of Jesus. But passion, in our modern parlance, also means something we're devoted to, right? Something we love and practice and work hard to master, and are maybe even obsessed with. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' passion is both the suffering of his death...but it's also his love and devotion to the coming Kingdom of God. And these two definitions of passion—the suffering and death, and the proclamation of the Kingdom and Dominion of God—they will both be central to Mark's Holy Week story, and Palm Sunday is a great place to start, because this dual story is on display from the start.

Holy Week, for Mark, opens with a parade. Jesus is parading into Jerusalem from the East on a colt of a donkey, to the shouts of an adulate crowd of peasants. But there might have been a second parade that day, as well. There's a lot of evidence to support the idea that on the other side of Jerusalem, from the West, Pontius Pilate, the Roman ruler of the region. The Roman ruler didn't live in Jerusalem, so from time to time, especially during the high traffic seasons of religious holidays, and especially on the high traffic week of the Jewish festival of Passover, where the Jews got together to celebrate their past history of escaping the political rule and slavery of Egypt, the Roman legion and their leaders found it prudent to show up in the holy city of Jerusalem...just to you know, keep an eye on things. Keep the peace. Maybe execute a loud mouth seditionist or two.

Whether it was happening at the literal same moment or not, the image is poetic and compelling, right? Jesus on his donkey with a palm branch and a bunch of smelly, rural farm workers on one side and Pontius Pilate on the other side, with his imperial stallion, rows of well dressed Roman soldiers, golden eagles up on poles, and a respectful, or perhaps terrified, crowd. Last year I described this as the big, heavy red velvet curtain opening on Jerusalem, the dramatic prologue to the week of conflict yet to come. And that really does seem to be the stage Mark is setting.

In Mark's gospel we're presented with a question: which procession do you want to be a part of? Where does our allegiance lie? And if this feels political, that's because it is. Mark's gospel, like all of the gospels, is deeply political. There's a choice here, and it's a stark one: to be with the powers of Rome or to stand in opposition, knowing full well the consequences that are to come. Mark's entire gospel points toward Jerusalem, Jesus is moving, inexorably, toward this place. And once we arrive, Mark gives us a choice—are we disciples of Jesus? Walking into Jerusalem behind a donkey, palm branches in hand, ready to stand against the might of the Legion? Or should we stand silently in awe of the power of Pilate and his legion?

And this isn't some existential or ancient question. To be a disciple of Jesus today is now, as much as it was then, a political choice. I'm not saying a democrat or republican choice. I mean a Kingdom of God choice. Jesus is pretty clear who his kingdom takes seriously. In God's kingdom the first will be last, and we pray for our enemies, and those who are hungry and poor and sick and forgotten here in this place get to be filled up and taken care of loved and made whole, first. Jesus' kingdom has what Archbishop Romero and his friends would call "a preferential option for the poor." And, as we will see in the gospel of Mark, the consequence for Jesus is death, an execution at the hands of the state. Because Rome will not suffer opposition.

And this is, of course, true for us today. It is powerful, and hard, and countercultural to stand on the side of the refugee, the immigrant, the stranger. It sounds nice to say that we want people to be fed and housed and loved and clothed and all that...but it's a lot harder to actually stand on the side of policy that moves toward the care for our neighbor, especially when it will cost the rich and the powerful...and very often us...something in return.

Holy Week invites us into a political narrative, a story of values and power clashing. And people die for it. This isn't a safe story, and we've been warned. Two processions marched into Jerusalem that day...which one will we find ourselves part of?