

### **Palm Sunday: A Blip on the Screen**

Mark 11:1-11 ...*and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

Today church sanctuaries will reverberate with Palm Sunday celebrations, which include bewildered children lined up by adults to parade down the aisle waving palm fronds, pipe organs swelling with sound, and well-rehearsed choirs singing something from Beethoven's "Christ on the Mount of Olives" or Handel's "The Messiah." Sanctuaries will be full, though not quite so much as next Sunday, with occasional worshipers who have gathered with a vague sense that something important is being celebrated. The Christian community will once again begin the journey through Holy Week.

It has been a few years now since I have served churches that held such Palm Sunday celebrations. In a way, I miss some of those more elaborate services. And yet, I also remember all the energy and work, and frustrations that went into them. Most of all I am glad to be here where things are more modest in scope. I can focus more on the meaning of things without the distractions of complex liturgical preparations and performances.

Perhaps that is why this week I found the Gospel of Mark's version of the so-called "triumphal entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem so compelling. As I read it each day, I felt a curious mix of disappointment and curiosity. Mark tells the story in his typical style—brief, sparse, few details, and no special effects! The other gospel accounts amplified it considerably, ramping it up with quotes from the Hebrew prophets and making a lot more of the size of the crowds. John even closes the scene with the Pharisees looking at the throngs of shouting people, lamenting that they can do nothing because "the whole world has gone after him." Now that's impressive!

One commentator on Mark's gospel [D.E. Nineham, *St. Mark*] says that Mark's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem presents it as barely a "ripple on the surface." Or as we might say, hardly a blip on the radar screen. Mark is probably closer to the reality of what happened. At Passover time, many would-be messiahs and popular teachers and healers would parade into the city with their

groupies. It was a common occurrence, and Jesus' own entrance was likely just one among others.

I like Mark's story. It tones things down. It can help us reflect more meaningfully on Palm Sunday in terms of our lives of faith today as individuals and as a community of Jesus' followers.

Jesus sends two disciples into a village ahead of them to find a colt that has not been ridden and bring it to him. If anyone questions you about it, just tell them the Lord needs it. And that's the way it happens. Jesus seems to have a plan for how he will enter the city. Maybe he had some kind of clairvoyance to know the colt would be there. Maybe it is just that some in the village would have heard of him and trusted him enough to lend him their colt.

There was something about this detail of the story that touched me for the first time. Jesus wanted to assure the anonymous owner of the colt that it would be returned. He doesn't commandeer someone's property like an official flashing his badge. He doesn't have the kind of self-importance that would cause him to use someone's animal and not return it. He doesn't seem so engulfed in his mission that he discounts matters of common courtesy and kindness. One of Jesus' parables came to mind [Matt. 25:14ff]. It was about a man going on a journey who entrusted his servants with smaller and greater amounts of money. When he returned, the servants presented to him what they had done with what he had given them. The two who had used what was entrusted to them to increase it were told: "Well, done good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Paying attention to small things. Treating the common and small with the same care and attention as larger matters. For me, this little detail of the story was a wonderful reminder to give faithful attention to every moment, every aspect, every interaction in my life.

When the disciples come back, they put their cloaks on the colt and Jesus climbs on and proceeds into the city. Mark says that "many people" cut some kind of branches from the fields and put them on the road in front of Jesus. But beyond that, there's nothing made of a huge crowd of any kind. Mark doesn't quote the prophets of Israel concerning the symbolism of the colt or Jesus' being the messiah. He does have the people shouting out the words of Ps. 118: "Hosanna!" Save us now! It seems to be both a cry for help from God and a hope that Jesus might embody that help.

So Jesus and his little band of followers enter the city. Then it's all over! Nothing else happens. Jesus gets off the colt, walks into the temple, and looks around. It's late in the day, so Jesus goes back to Bethany to spend the night with his disciples.

Mark's story just leaves us a little flat. It doesn't have that...you know...pizzazz, the drama and excitement you come to expect on Palm Sunday. What can we make of it?

Maybe excitement is not what it's about. Maybe religious enthusiasm is not the thing we most need. Maybe what we need is to see ourselves in the picture Mark paints. There is this little band of disciples following Jesus whom they hardly understand at all. There are some more people who are excited about the prospects of Jesus' being a messiah who will bring political and religious liberation. But the disciples walking with Jesus toward Jerusalem are a tiny band of bewildered folks who, according to Mark's gospel, keep misunderstanding what Jesus is about. Yet they have nonetheless committed themselves to following him. There's something about his teachings, the things he does and his very presence that keeps telling them that he is "the way, the truth, and the life."

Every time they get excited and think he's going to install this new regime and overthrow the powers-that-be, he talks about giving up power, not being more powerful. He talks about loving your enemies instead of knocking them off. When they jockey for the best positions in this kingdom they imagine he is going to set up, he takes a child in his lap and says that unless they can become like this child, they will never be part of that kingdom. When they get caught up in worry about where their next meal will come from or what to wear, he talks about their being like flowers out in the field or birds flying around in the air, trusting that what they really need will always be there. When they get all pumped up about this faith and trust thing and try to walk on water or heal someone like he does, but fail, he just tells them to keep working with their fear and lack of trust. When the disciples are dazzled by the rich and powerful, Jesus points to an old widow who hobbles unseen except by Jesus through the temple and puts her whole pension in the offering. Now that's what I'm talking about!

I think that's pretty much who we are. We are following this Jesus who seems to have a plan, but for the life of us, we just can't always get a handle on it. He seems to want to make some kind of statement as he enters the city, about the way of true power being that of humility. But he has to borrow an animal to do it! He

doesn't launch a revolution, at least the kind people want. He gets into disputes with the religious authorities and suffers at the hands of those who really hold the power—Rome—but you could hardly call his week in Jerusalem a head-on confrontation with "the system." Jesus is just about as much a disappointment to the left as he is a threat to the right. He just keeps being who God calls him to be and doing what God calls him to do and asking us to follow him and do the same.

In the end, instead of hiring a battery of lawyers or calling down an army of angels to save him, he sweats blood, experiences gut-wrenching fear of the suffering that lies ahead of him, and goes through pretty much like the African American spiritual puts it: "He never said a mumblin' word." And while he's being dragged off to his death, not a single one of his followers has been able to hang in with him.

Mark's story of Palm Sunday left me with this awareness. Maybe it is always a matter of our being a small group of those who are trying to follow Jesus and love each other, though we hardly know how. We learn who he is and who we are and how to love only as we follow him, as he reveals it to us along the way. Not as we sit around thinking great religious thoughts or constructing theological systems. Not as we draw up great plans for changing the world or building up an impressive church or religious movement. We best discover who he is as we continue on the journey of following him, discerning the things he gives us to do, great or small, and in the process become the people God made us to be, people through whom God can do something for the world.

My favorite part of Palm Sunday is just where Mark's story ends. It is the evening when everything calms down, when my own spirit grows quiet. The crowds are gone. The celebrations have died away. I look around and I wonder: Where is Jesus going? What will the next days bring as he keeps on being faithful to God alone? As we try to follow him, where will he lead us? Into what opportunities to love in a way that is willing to suffer? Into what encounters with others or ourselves where, if we pay careful attention, we will learn how and where God is really present? What will Jesus give us to do to live out our own love of God and our devotion to that kingdom for which he lived and died?