

Palm Sunday Reflections

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.*

[Jesus'] royal entry into Jerusalem was to be of a piece with the rest of his ministry, his majesty hidden under an outward appearance that was far from kingly. So the King comes riding on a borrowed, untrained foal, and the acclamations and attentions of his followers are apparently so insignificant that the Roman authorities do not even notice them. The messianic hiddenness is still maintained.

--THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MARK, by C.E.B. Cranfield

Today church sanctuaries reverberate with Palm Sunday celebrations--bewildered children lined up by anxious adults to parade down the aisle waving palm fronds, pipe organs swelling with sound, and eager choirs offering up long-rehearsed anthems. Sanctuaries will be full, though not quite so much as next Sunday. Occasional worshipers have come with a vague sense that something important is being celebrated and they should be there. The Christian community once again begins the journey through Holy Week. Will it be a week that merely stirs our religious emotions and sentiments? Or will it be a week that awakens us more clearly to our relationship with God and God's call in Christ to live our lives today for the sake of the world?

It has been several years since I served churches that held elaborate Palm Sunday celebrations. It is a relief to my soul to be where things are simple and modest. I am able to give more attention to the meaning of things without the distractions of complex liturgical preparations and performances. That is why I find the Gospel of Mark's version of Jesus' so-called "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem so compelling. 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 inflating the size of the crowds. In John's gospel the scene closes with the Pharisees looking at the throngs of shouting people, exasperated 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.

Mark knows that there is a profound tension in the story, as in Jesus' whole life. It is simply this: Jesus IS the one God has sent with redeeming love and power, BUT he is unlike every expectation of what the messiah/king should look and act like. Mark's story tones things down. Its simplicity is charged with spiritual meaning. It forces us to reflect more deeply on who Jesus is and who we are to be as his community.

Jesus sends two disciples to a village up ahead to find a colt that has not been ridden and bring it to him. If anyone questions you, 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. How did he know about the colt? Maybe he had some kind of clairvoyance. Maybe someone in the village had heard of him and had offered to lend the animal. We just don't know, and ultimately it is not important.

There is something about this detail of the story that touches me. 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 sometimes seen in high profile religious leaders and their followers, a spiritual arrogance that passes over matters of common courtesy, kindness, and right dealings with others. One of Jesus' parables comes to my mind [Matt. 25:14ff]. A man is going on a journey and entrusts his servants with smaller and greater amounts of money. When he returns, he gets an accounting from them. Two of them used what was entrusted to them to increase it. The master says to them: "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." One of the servants, however, did nothing with what was given him except bury it, for which he is condemned. 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 is a wonderful reminder to give more 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 "leafy 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. The people shout the words of Ps.

118: Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! “Hosanna” means something like “save us now”! It is both a cry for God’s help and a hope that Jesus embodies that help. This is the only direct witness to Jesus’ being God’s messiah that Mark allows. Unlike Matthew, he does not explicitly tell us that the colt symbolizes Jesus’ royal peacefulness and humility, a reference to the words of the prophet Zechariah (Zech. 9:9). He leaves it to us to perceive that Jesus does not come as a conquering political, military, or religious leader.

So Jesus and his little band of followers enter the city. 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. That’s it. It’s all over. 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 what it’s about. Maybe what we need most 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 into Jerusalem are a small group that, according to Mark’s gospel, keeps misunderstanding what Jesus is about. Yet they have 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 for them “the way, the truth, and the life.”

Every time they get excited and think he’s going to install God’s new regime and overthrow the powers-that-be, Jesus talks about giving up power. He talks about loving your enemies instead of knocking them off. When the disciples argue about who should have the top positions in this kingdom Jesus keeps talking about, Jesus takes a child on his lap and says that unless they 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 tells them to learn from the flowers and birds how to live with trust and not anxiousness. 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, Jesus 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 a widow who has hobbled into the temple, unnoticed except by Jesus. She puts her whole pension in the offering. And Jesus says, Now that’s what I’m talking about!

I think that’s pretty much who we are. We are following Jesus who seems to have a plan, but for the life of us, we just can’t always get a handle on 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 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. He asks us to learn faith by DOING it, living it. Jesus embodies the picture of the servant of God in Isaiah, who speaks only what he hears from God, listening every morning for what God might say. There is no plan, no program, no “purpose-driven life.” The life of faith and faithfulness is a moment by moment inner listening to God. Only in that way can the servant know the right thing to do or to say in each situation.

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

Mark’s story of Palm Sunday leaves 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. It calls for us to be cultivating spiritual awareness and attention, becoming those whose ears are awakened by God, morning by morning. Being those who speak only as we listen, who act only as we are led in each situation. When we talk about the inward journey, I think that is what we are talking about—continually growing in our awareness of and attentiveness to God each day and each moment of our lives. And then doing what we hear, knowing that it will bring struggle and sometimes suffering.

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 I try to follow him, where will he lead me? Into what opportunities to love in a way that is willing to suffer? Into what encounters with others or myself where, if I pay careful attention, I 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? These are questions only each of us can ask ourselves, and then live out what we hear in our hearts. If we enter Holy Week in this way, we will be changed. We will awaken to God's voice and leading.