

Procession with Palms

First Children's Time / Homily with the Young

There are four 'tellers of the Good News about Jesus' (four Gospel writers) in the New Testament. Can you tell me who they are? [... answers ...] Each one tells the story of Jesus their own way, to make **their** understanding of Jesus (their belief in Jesus) clear.

This year (from last Advent through to next Advent), we – like many mainline Christian congregations – focus mostly on the Gospel writer Mark's account. So, **now** in our first conversation today [*there are two of them!*], I want to help you hear the points that Mark wants to make clear about Palm Sunday.

Some 'background' information is necessary: First, in Mark's telling, everything is urgent; everything moves fast. The whole ministry-of-Jesus takes just one year! Jesus begins as a baptized disciple of John the Baptizer. When John gets imprisoned, Jesus goes from the Jordan river wilderness (in the south of Israel) to Galilee (in the north) – that region, Galilee, including the little village Nazareth where he grew up – and he begins proclaiming the **fulfillment** (or the **completion**) of what was John's message. Jesus says, "the kingdom of God **has come near**" (... not that it is coming, but that it already has come near). The earliest in the calendar year this could be taking place, in Mark's portrayal, is in the month of March, the beginning of the dry season when, with crops planted, people of the land could do nothing but wait for the harvest to come in the Fall. It is **only during the dry season** that folk travelled around (by land or sea). This was when ordinary people could get to *see* and *hear* Jesus and decide to follow him. Mark tells us how many, **many** people did just that.

It is the very **next** Passover (i.e. the following late winter or early spring) when-and-where we find ourselves now, in Mark's account. Jesus has had his huge impact on the people of Galilee. He has taught them like no one they've ever heard. When encountering people previously pushed out of community, he has forgiven them, bringing them back into community. He has healed people who were ill and sick. He has won every argument by which the Pharisees and their scribes (or scholars) have confronted and challenged him.

What we remember today, then (according to Mark), is Jesus' one and only journey to Jerusalem, and coming with him are his people. Another question: how many are involved as "Jesus' people"? [... answers ...] We first think of the twelve who were especially called to be disciples (close students, followers and emulators) of Jesus. But Mark makes it clear, all along, there were a bunch more people **literally following** Jesus in the many travels of his ministry.

- There are those who had heard him teach and were so helped by *what* and *how* he taught that they followed on, to hear and witness more.
- There are people like Bartimaeus who, once healed, followed Jesus.
- Mark makes a special point, *later on in the story*, that there are many women following Jesus, including three who were the financiers of his whole ministry. These three end up being the only followers to stay with Jesus right through his dying on the cross.

So, then, it is a **crowd** of followers from Galilee whom Mark (and, along with him, by the way, the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke) **say** make up the parade, with Jesus riding on the young colt never ridden before, entering Jerusalem from Bethany. The Gospel writer John tells about the parade's make-up and 'whole point' differently ... I'll leave you to investigate; but, for one thing, where we have waved Palm Branches to re-enact

the story today, we follow John's account. Mark instead describes that a few people put their cloaks on the colt for Jesus to sit on; many people in his crowd spread their cloaks on the road; others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields (not fronds from trees) [they put branches from the field] onto the road. **The overall impact of Mark's scene is this:** That colt does not even touch the ground or stones on which ordinary people tread, that colt – itself unriden, untamed and untainted by the world of human use – [that colt] is completely “apart” which is to say “fulfilling a sacred function”; namely, to carry this consecrated (holy) man, Jesus, into the consecrated (holy) city of Jerusalem, the center of religious and political power for the people of Israel.

Finally (for now): what is it that Jesus' people shout as the parade makes its way? [... Answers ...] “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Do you remember what “Hosanna” means? It is not like Hallelujah, a declaration of praise. It is, instead, a plea. It calls out, in desperation and need, “Save us”, or “Rescue us”. ‘Save us from the tyranny of life under the rule of Rome but – more immediately – under the religious and political power of the elites here in Jerusalem.’

We are now going to broaden the focus of our worship from Palm Sunday to the whole of Jesus' last week (... the whole of what Christianity calls the Passion of Jesus). To open up our hearts and minds to this broadening, we have music. I invite you young people to join me, and come sit with Susan in the front pew, to listen. After Bev and Brian have sung, we'll come back up here for some more exploration.

Second Children's Time / Homily with the Young

Okay, so, it was the Sunday before Passover when that parade-on-a-colt took place. Mark tells us that, once in Jerusalem, Jesus “went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany ...” back to Bethany where the colt had come from, and the parade had begun. He and his people stayed there overnight.

The next day, Monday, Mark reports how Jesus comes back to Jerusalem, goes into the Temple, and challenges how everything is being done there. He “[drives] out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he [overturns] the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple.” This presence and activity by Jesus **goes on all day long**. **And** Jesus **teaches** both his followers and the people of Jerusalem, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of **prayer** for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”

It is only at evening time that Jesus and the twelve leave this scene and go back to Bethany.

So, for that whole day Jesus had transformed the Temple's life. No people exchanging Roman coins for Temple coins and making profit doing so. No people selling doves for profit, or people being extorted (cheated) while buying doves for temple sacrifice. No one **even carrying** anything ... it was like a fully observed **Sabbath** (no work being done, just an honouring of God) all across the precincts of the temple for the whole day. How

quiet where usually there was marketplace noise! How alert and 'present' and 'on expectant edge' all the people there would have been!

Mark notes two reactions to Jesus and this incredible day in the Temple: For the people of Jerusalem *beyond* any who happened to have seen something of the previous day's parade, this is their first direct witnessing of Jesus; and, for *all* of them here in Judea, this is their first direct hearing of Jesus' teaching, their first in-person experience of Jesus' sense of purpose and authority as God's agent (...in their language, "God's Son"). Mark describes how the ordinary people of Jerusalem are "**spellbound** by his teaching". Jesus, by their direct experience, not just shook up **but right before them reinvented** the machinery *and* practice *and* understanding of the temple. For that whole day, it had been 'inspiring beyond all measure and expectation!' to be in that place.

But, to the religious and political authorities, this was a direct and full-out challenge to their standing (which, in *their* worldview, is to say **their honour**) and to their practices. Up to this point in Mark's Gospel account, it is almost exclusively the **outside**-Jerusalem authorities – the Pharisees and their scribes/scholars – who have been directly confronted by Jesus' ministry; and they, in turn, confronted him over and over again, each time losing their honour to his honour's gain. Now, the challenge is **inside** Jerusalem and therefore targeting not just the Pharisees and their scribes but also the (a) Sadducees (who manage the temple) and their scribes, (b) the priests and chief priests of the temple, and (c) the Sanhedrin (which is the overarching ruling body of the Judeans). Mark reports that, as a result of this Monday protest and Temple-reformation carried out by Jesus, **(1)** the chief priests and *all* the scribes/scholars are **afraid** of him (for, in the eyes of the people of Jerusalem, Jesus was found *in just one day* to be more honourable than they were), and **(2)** they continue what the Pharisees and their scribes together with supporters of King Herod have been trying to do since early on in Mark's account; namely, try to find a means and time to kill Jesus (so as to be rid of the challenge he poses).

Having got you through the Monday of Holy Week, your 'next move' is "off to Bible Quest", for learning and discovery there.

As they go, we adults sing "Teach me, God, to wonder".

The Adult Homily: Sham Shaming -- a “Status Degradation Ritual”

The **Tuesday** of Holy Week, as Mark tells it, is a day centered on the awareness of Jerusalem’s elite that – as of the evening before – the people of the city see Jesus as more honourable than they are.

Remember that their world, unlike ours, is **keenly-and-constantly** aware of living in a situation of **limited goods**. So, a person having more than needed means somebody has less. This is how ‘the math’ gets done concerning honour as well: If someone takes, or by others is vaulted up into greater honour status, then somebody has lost honour. By the end of Monday, Jerusalem’s elite *acutely* felt this “*knocked down a peg*” sting.

While they, in back rooms, think and plot about killing the man Jesus, they also know full well the *ethically* honourable response is publicly to **challenge** him and **win the challenge**, thereby knocking him down and re-elevating themselves (... indeed, their intention is to knock him all the way back down to ‘mere son of a carpenter from Nazareth’ ... and, as everybody in Judea knew anyway, “nothing good can come from Galilee”).

So, as Jesus and his people come back into Jerusalem on Tuesday morning,

the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him ²⁸and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things? *Who gave you* this authority to do them?’

... the day’s first challenge! Jesus makes a skilled, intelligent, highly honourable response by answering question with question.

²⁹... answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ³⁰Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin? Answer me.’ ³¹They argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say, “Why then did you not believe him?”’ ³²But shall we say, “Of human origin?”’—they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet. ³³So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’

And Jesus has won the challenge. He ‘nails the fact down’, first saying,

‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things’

then telling – for the elite to hear as well as Jesus’ followers – the parable of the wicked tenants. The elite find themselves ‘in the crosshairs’ as nothing but wicked tenants in God’s good vineyard. Oh how they long to arrest Jesus and then be done with him!; but they fear what the crowds might do. They withdraw to regroup.

A coalition of Pharisees and Herodians make the day’s next charge: first ‘holding Jesus high’ *in order, by clever question, to entrap him and knock him down*. ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?’ Here again Jesus’ bests them with his own corresponding question. You know how it goes:

‘Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it.’ ¹⁶... ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ ¹⁷Jesus said to them, ‘Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they were utterly amazed at him.

... “**utterly amazed**”, which is to say that they cannot but see the truth of his honour standing.

The final group attempting to bring him down is the Sadducees. They, who do not believe in a resurrection of the dead, pose a convoluted and apparently very clever question:

¹⁹‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁰There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; ²¹and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; ²²none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. ²³In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.’

Jesus slams them in reply:

‘Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ²⁶And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? ²⁷He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong.’

<Pause>

There is one more questioner-of-Jesus; however, this one comes to learn, *not* – in futility – to trip Jesus up. A scribe asks, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’, and Jesus names two:

‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” ³¹The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’

The scribe reflects; affirms how *these are “much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices”*; and thereupon receives Jesus’ commendation: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Mark’s very next statement is **key**. To appreciate it, recognize that this last conversation and all the preceding honour challenges (on this Tuesday of Holy Week) were in full view of a witnessing audience: Jesus’ followers, Jerusalem’s citizens and its elite. Honour challenges *in particular* require that there be witnesses who form a conclusion, and then spread the word. The outcome here?: Mark writes, “After [this] no one dared to ask [Jesus] any question.”

The **truth** that Jesus’ followers knew and proclaimed at his colt-back entry to Jerusalem has been tested and found **unchallengeable** for anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see. Jesus is God’s man (or, in their language *and ours as followers*, he is “the Son of God”).

There is more **content** to the Tuesday story, which I’ll leave you to explore. **More necessary, here**, is for our hearts and souls to catch up with what our minds have heard (... for our hearts and souls *fully to recognize* this man whom Mark has presented). Can you get yourself inside the fervour of the women and men who journeyed with Jesus from Galilee and on Sunday excitedly paraded him to Jerusalem as **the** consecrated/holy One, **the** kingdom bearer, **the** one alone to call upon as Saviour? Can you stand with all those – on Monday, in the Temple – who *in* and *through* Jesus (and for that entire day!) experience the Temple as ‘thin space’, Sabbath rest space, heaven touching earth space?; and can you – like them – be absolutely “spellbound” by Jesus? <Pause> Can you be “utterly amazed” (in the vernacular, “blown away”) by the brilliance, the grounding, the authority, the integrity, and the eloquence experienced across that Holy Tuesday’s challenges,

and convicted about how all-of-it rests in this man Jesus' love for God and neighbour? Whatever you might have experienced in another human being that sets you in awe of them, here is one who deserves devotion above all others. Can you feel what Mark has written for you to feel? Can you **not but say**, "I believe in *what this one is about*; I believe in **him**; I must follow him"?

<Pause>

The Wednesday of Holy Week, writes Mark, has two noteworthy scenes. For one, the chief priests and scribes have given up on ethical ways to take Jesus down; they instead and solely seek a means stealthily to arrest and kill him. The second scene finds Jesus and his followers as guests at table in Simon the leper's house, back in Bethany. *During* their meal, an un-named woman enters and anoints Jesus' feet with profoundly expensive ointment, which Jesus interprets as his burial preparation. And **from** that meal, Judas Iscariot leaves to align himself with the first scene's chief priests and scribes, orchestrating Jesus' betrayal.

The ultimate (and brief remaining) focus of this sermon is on the drama that the chief priests and scribes orchestrate, which drama you will hear played out in this day's scripture lections. Anthropologists would correct what has often been called "the trial of Jesus" by recognizing **not just that pretentious proceeding but** ALL the components played out in order to turn all of Jerusalem -- *just on Tuesday evening convinced "Here, truly, is God's Man"* -- into the crowd which Friday calls for his crucifixion. It is a multi-stage drama ... what scholars term a "Status Degradation Ritual". In their Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh write,

The status degradation ritual is a process of publicly recasting, relabeling, humiliating, and thus recategorizing a person as a social deviant. Such rituals express the moral indignation of the denouncers and often mock or denounce a person's former identity in such a way as to destroy it totally. Usually it is accompanied by a revisionist account of the person's past that indicates he has been a deviant all along. A variety of social settings – trials, hearings, political rallies – can be the occasion for this destruction of a person's public identity and credibility. [p. 413]

Concerning Jesus, the ritual begins late Thursday evening following the Passover meal he shared with the twelve. Into the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus and the *remaining* eleven went to pray after the meal, Judas Iscariot leads what Mark describes as "*a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders*", and Jesus is arrested. In the tumult and felt-threat of this first great humiliation, his core group – all of whom *just an hour or more before* said they would never desert or deny Jesus – [they] abandon him.

Listen, **now attuned**, to the rest of the honour-shattering sham that leads Jesus, the Son of God, to a criminal's crucifixion. And as beckoned before, do not only hear it, for Mark would surely have you fully feel it.