

MARK 11.1 – 16.8: HOLY WEEK – AN OVERVIEW

[Sunday evening seminar – 5 April 2009 Chelmsford]

Holy Week has become the established title for the last week of Jesus' life – a week spent in and around Jerusalem. This evening I want us to look at the shape of the last week, particularly as that week is portrayed in Mark's Gospel, and then to comment on some of the events described there, hopefully bringing out new insights as also fresh challenges from the story.

(PALM) SUNDAY

Mk 11.1-11: Jesus enters Jerusalem – and then returns to Bethany

[Mark does not tell us specifically that the triumphal entry took place on a Sunday ('the first day of the week'). However, John in his Gospel (12.1) states that Jesus came to Bethany "six days before the Passover". He places Jesus' entry on the next day: i.e. on the first day of the week, our Sunday]

Mark 11.1-3: "As they approached Jerusalem... Jesus sent two of his disciples on ahead with these instructions: 'Go to the village there ahead of you. As soon as you get there, you will find a colt tied up that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. And if someone asks you why you are doing that, tell them that the Master needs it and will send it back at once'".

I'm told that "*The commandeering of a beast of burden was the prerogative of a king in ancient times*" (JR Edwards), but what a strange king Jesus proved to be. Instead of riding on a white charger, he came riding on a "colt" i.e. a young donkey.

The GNB heads Mark 11.1-11: "*The triumphant entry into Jerusalem*". The truth is that it wasn't a triumphant entry at all. It would have been a bit like the Queen riding to the State Opening of Parliament on a motorbike.

What we have here is a parable - not the sort that Jesus told - but an acted parable. This was not the only time Jesus did this: when he broke bread and poured out wine, he was acting out a parable - pointing to how his body was to be broken/blood to be shed; when he washed disciples' feet he was acting out a parable, giving theological undergirding to his death; - likewise here.

Jesus was claiming to be God's Messiah - but a Messiah with a difference:

- he was claiming to be the "**Prince of Peace**", foretold by Isaiah (9.6);
- in particular he was claiming to be the king described by Zech 9.9,10: "**Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion! Look, your king comes to you! He comes triumphant and victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey - on a colt, the foal of a donkey**". This kind, said Zechariah, "**will make peace among the nations**".

Almost to underline that he was no traditional Messiah figure, Jesus failed to make anything of the occasion, but allowed the triumph to become a fiasco. "**Jesus entered Jerusalem, went into the Temple; and looked round at everything. But since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the 12 disciples**" (11.1). In the words of Eduard Schweizer, Mark 227: "*Jesus looks at the temple as a tourist might & then*

leaves"!

Jesus didn't even cash in on the crowd's enthusiasm: there they were shouting away "Hosanna", but Jesus failed to deliver the goods. The flattest of flat triumphs!

Challenge: Jesus never forces himself upon anybody

MONDAY

Mk 11.12-19: *Jesus curses the fig tree and cleanses the temple*

[Mark specifically places these two events "on the next day" (Mark 11.12)]

Mk 12.12-14: **"The next day, as they were coming back from Bethany, Jesus was hungry. He saw in the distance a fig tree covered with leaves, so he went to see if he could find any figs on it. But when he came to it, he found only leaves, because it was not the right time for figs. Jesus said to the fig tree, 'No one shall ever eat figs from you again'"**

The cursing of the fig tree poses a problem. For unlike any other miracle in the Gospels, it is a miracle of destruction. Bertrand Russell accused Jesus of "*vindictive fury*" for blaming the tree for not producing figs out of season: "*I cannot myself feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history*". Even Christian scholars have had difficulty with this story: acc to TW Manson, a noted Manchester scholar, "*It is a tale of miraculous power wasted in the service of ill-temper.... As it stands it is simply incredible*".

However, there is an explanation, an explanation that interprets this story in the light of the cleansing of the Temple and sees the story as an acted parable.

Although it was not the season for figs (mid-August to mid-September was the time for the fig harvest) by the Spring time one would have expected to see the figs developing – they would have been still quite small, and still very green, but nonetheless they would have been figs alright, figs you could even have eaten if you had been hungry enough. But when Jesus came, there were no figs at all – just leaves. For Jesus this leafy fig tree was deceptive – just as the temple was deceptive. Just as the fig tree was not producing the goods – nor was the temple producing the goods either. In cursing the fig tree Jesus was to all intents and purposes acting out a parable – and this time a parable of judgment. The fig tree was unfruitful – and so too was the temple.

Challenge: to what extent are we bearing fruit in our lives?

TUESDAY

Mk 11.20-13.37 Jesus comments on the withered fig tree & teaches in the temple

[Mark again makes clear that it was the following “**morning**” that Jesus & his disciples, on their way to Jerusalem, passed the fig tree, now withered, and that Jesus then made his way to Jerusalem where a host of incidents appear to have taken place. Whether they all took place at this time is, however, questionable. Just as the Sermon on the Mount was never just one sermon, so it appears that Mark may have collected a whole number of incidents and placed them together as if they all happened on one day... A simple reading of Mark’s Gospel might give the impression that the so-called ‘triumphal entry’ was the occasion when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. In fact as one looks at the Gospels carefully, it is clear that Jesus had been in Jerusalem a number of times before: “Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me” (Mk 14.49) – similarly Lk writes: “every day he was teaching in the temple” (Lk 21.37). Indeed, according to John’s Gospel, Jesus was in Jerusalem for a good length of time – from the Festival of Shelters (7.10) and on to the crucifixion].

According to Mark the teaching of Jesus on that Tuesday centred above all on events surrounding the destruction of the temple: 13.1: “**As Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said, ‘Look teacher! What wonderful stones and buildings’. Jesus answered: “You see these great buildings? Not a single stone here will be left in place; every one of them will be thrown down”**”.

Solomon’s temple had been replaced by Herod’s temple. Although still incomplete, it had the reputation of being the most beautiful building in the whole world. According to Josephus, the Jewish historian: “*Now the outward face of the Temple in its front wanted nothing that was likely to surprise men’s minds or their eyes, for it was covered with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendour and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun’s own rays. But this Temple appeared to strangers, when they were at a distance, like a mountain covered with snow, for, as to those parts of it which were not gilt, they were exceeding white*”. The blocks of stone that were used in its construction were huge – according to Josephus some of the blocks were 60 feet in length, 7 feet in height, and nine feet in breadth. It was a vast and stupendous building. Not surprisingly the Jews were incredibly proud of the temple.

For Jesus to say, “**Not a single stone here will be left in placed; every one of them will be thrown down**”, would have come as an incredible shock.

But in due course the temple was destroyed – it was destroyed in AD 70, when Titus marched upon Jerusalem.

Jesus also predicted that in the run-up to the destruction there would be immense suffering. And so it proved to be. By the time Titus’ siege of Jerusalem was over, 1m Jews had perished, either by slow starvation or by the sword.

Challenge: Every thing we believe that will last forever will one day collapse. The temple must have seemed the summit of human achievement – but that was doomed to pass away. We may pride ourselves on our achievements in science and technology, but with the passage of time their grandeur will pass away.

13.8: **“Countries will fight each other; kingdoms will attack one another. There will be earthquakes everywhere, and there will be famines. These things are like the first pains of childbirth”**. The great German preacher, Helmut Thielicke, said: *“Our greatest anxieties do not stem from the intensity of our pain. They arise when we cannot see any point or sense to the pain”*. But once we understand that war and famine are but the final death throes of the evil one, then we can accept whatever the nature of calamity it is that faces us.

WEDNESDAY

Mk 14.1-10 *Jesus is anointed in Bethany*

14.3: **“Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon, a man who had suffered from a dreaded skin disease. While Jesus was eating, a woman came in with an alabaster jar and poured the perfume on Jesus head. Some of the people there became angry and said to one another, ‘What was the use of wasting the perfume? It could have been sold for more than 300 silver coins and the money given to the poor!’ And they criticised her harshly”**.

Who was this woman? Mark does not tell us who this woman, but as we discover from John’s Gospel, this unknown woman was in fact Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. If so, then perhaps Simon the Leper was their father.

She came **“with an alabaster jar full of very costly perfume”**. The English word **“jar”** could suggest a large container; however, the NEB speaks of it being *“a little bottle”*. We know that in Palestine women often carried little phials of highly concentrated and very precious perfume - these phials were worn on a chain around their necks. This perfume was so concentrated & so precious that it could only be used one drop at a time. I.e. this was no ordinary perfume - indeed, we discover that it was so expensive that it would have made even Chanel No 7 seem like cheap toilet water.

“She broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head” (v3). This must have been an incredible act. Instead of pouring just a single drop, she poured out the whole lot. Just imagine the pungency of the smell of the perfume. Needless to say, everybody was stunned - they were shocked by the sheer extravagance of her action. And then their shock turned to anger: v4,5: **“What was the use of wasting the perfume? It could have been sold for more than 300 silver coins (lit.300 denarii), and the money given to the poor!”** This was an extraordinary sum of money.

- We begin to get the idea of the sum of money involved, when we remember that at the feeding of the 5000 Philip said that 200 denarii would hardly be enough to feed a crowd of more than 5000 hungry people (see John 6.7).

- As the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard reminds us, in 1C Palestine the average day's wages for a working man was one denarius, one silver coin. So 300 denarii was almost a year's wages. Wow - could you imagine it? In our terms that would be how much: £10,000+ at least. This woman had blown a whole year's wages - £10,000+ at one go!

Jesus here in Mark's Gospel appear to suggest that she consciously anticipated his death **"She did what she could; she poured perfume on my body to prepare it ahead of time for burial"** (14.8). Was Mary psychic? Did she see the gathering storm? Or perhaps 'psychic' is the wrong word. Was she simply an intuitive who somehow realised that Jesus would end up dying on a Cross, and that in so doing he would be unlikely to be given a proper burial? In support of this view is the fact that when Mary anointed Jesus, she actually **"broke"** the bottle - i.e. she didn't just take out the stopper and pour out the oil - she broke it. This is significant because in Palestine the bodies of the dead were anointed, and then the flask which had contained the perfume was broken, and the fragments of it were laid in the tomb with the body.

Jesus may have interpreted the anointing in terms of a preparation for death, but did Mary? I wonder whether her motive was simply that of love. Contrary to what some have suggested Mary was not besotted with Jesus in some kind of romantic or sexual sense. Rather she was incredibly grateful to JX - for JX had done the impossible and brought back to life her brother. No wonder she loved Jesus - wouldn't you? No wonder she poured out 300 silver coins worth of perfume on Jesus - wouldn't you? Who wouldn't be prepared to give up a year's wages if only they could have back their brother, their mother, their father their wife. Her extravagance is understandable - she owed her brother's life to him.

Challenge: How extravagantly do we love Jesus?

Mk 14 begins: **"It was two days before the Festival of Passover...The chief priests and the teachers of the Law were looking for a way to arrest Jesus secretly and put him to death"** (14.1). This was the day when **"Judas Iscariot... went off to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus to them"** (12.10).

Donald English: *"We may all, and we all do, betray our Lord, though not as dramatically as Judas. It remains a heinous thing to do, and we are answerable. What Judas did not discover, though Peter did, and we now know, is that there is forgiveness even for such betrayals... And God can still take the broken and spoiled strands of life and weave them into the total tapestry (Rom 8.28). We should never be complacent about sin, since all sin betrays Jesus: but nor should we be destroyed by remorse or guilt when sin overtakes us – there is forgiveness and restoration"* (1 Jn 1.8-10)"

[Mark places the anointing of Jesus in Bethany on this day – John, however, suggests that it may have taken place the previous Saturday (or were these two separate occasions)]

(MAUNDY) THURSDAY

Mk 14.12-72

Jesus celebrates the Passover – prays in Gethsemane – is arrested and put in trial

14.12: “**On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the day the lambs for the Passover meal were killed, Jesus’ disciples asked him, ‘Where do you want us to go and get the Passover meal ready for you?’**”

What we call the ‘Last Supper’ was clearly a Passover meal. But it was a Passover meal with a difference. For Passover meals were retrospective celebrations – they were occasions when people looked back and reminded themselves of how God had delivered his people. BUT Jesus interpreted the elements prospectively in the light of his coming death. *“It is hard to convey the electrifying effect the original reapplying of the elements to Jesus himself must have caused. To an early Jew the idea of eating someone’s body or drinking someone’s blood was abhorrent”* (BW)

[There is one major difficulty: according to John’s Gospel the Last Supper was not actually a Passover meal, for in Jn 18.28 John dates the trial of Jesus before Pilate as taking place before the Passover. This is repeated in Jn 19.14: “It was the day of Preparation for the Passover”. I.e. as far as John was concerned Jesus died on the day of the Passover – at the very time when all the lambs were being killed, Jesus, God’s Passover Lamb was being slain!]

14.32: “**They came to a place called Gethsemane**”. **Gethsemane** was a garden on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, outside the city of Jerusalem proper.

Jerusalem itself was built on a hill - within the walls there was no room for open spaces - every inch of the ground was of value for building. Wealthy citizens therefore had their own private gardens outside, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. It was there in a private garden, loaned by some nameless friend, that Jesus retired after the Last Supper. But instead of enjoying the peace of the garden, he endured agony of soul. Mark tells us that “**Distress and anguish came over him, and he said to them, ‘The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me’**” (14.33,34).

By chance, the very word Gethsemane symbolises something of the suffering of JX. Literally, it means “*oil press*”. It was the place where the olives were crushed.

It was also the place where Jesus went, if you like, through the ‘mangle’, the ‘press’. It was here that his soul began to experience the intensity of that pressure which culminated in his death on the Cross. Gethsemane was a place of suffering.

Ben Witherington: “*It is perhaps worth comparing this story closely with the story of Adam in the Garden of Eden.*”

- *In the story of Genesis a human being is sorely tempted and gives way to temptation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the new Adam, only he resists the severe temptation he faces*
- *In Eden we see a person who does not wrestle in prayer with the decision he faces; in Gethsemane the man in question does do so, and prevails over sin*
- *In Eden we see a man who relies too heavily on his closest companion and her judgment, while in Gethsemane we see a man who wishes to be able to rely on his disciples for moral support and prayer support, but is unable to do so*

- *In Eden we see a man who runs and hides from God's judgement, while in Gethsemane we see a man who faces up to and accepts God's judgement, having run to his God and sought answers from his in prayer.*

Challenge: How do we cope when we experience suffering?

(GOOD) FRIDAY

Mk 15.1-47 ***The Sanhedrin reaches its decision - Jesus is taken before Pilate - Jesus is crucified and buried***

15.22: **“They took Jesus to a place called Golgotha, which means ‘The Place of the Skull’.** The word Calvary comes from the Latin word for skull – *calva*. This may refer to the shape of the hill. E.g. “If the name of the place suggests a location, it suggests some sort of bare nob or hill” (Ben Witherington). Or it may for Mark refer to the fact that this place was a place for executions.

15.24: **“Then they crucified him”**

See Ben Witherington: *“Death on a cross was a horrendous way to die, for it was basically by means of suffocation that one expired, or possibly a combination of exhaustion and suffocation and exposure to the elements. Eventually the man could no longer hold up his chest cavity, and the result was suffocation, often after great gasps for breath”.* It was a ghastly form of dying – it was considered barbaric even by the Romans – indeed, it was so barbaric that Roman citizens were exempt from such a form of execution.

Sometimes people were bound by rope to a cross, but often nails were used in crucifixion: *“The reason for the nails seems to be the prevention of escape, for in noncelebrity crucifixions or during a war there would frequently not be a guard, and often persons lived for a good while, sometimes long enough to be taken down from a cross, especially under cover of darkness. The cross would sometimes be only a few feet off the ground, allowing friends to approach the victim and attempt a rescue. In Jesus’ case, however, the reference to a pole on which was offered a drink in a sponge suggests he was rather high off the ground”* (Ben Witherington)

15.37, 38: **“With a loud cry Jesus died. The curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom”.** These two sentences belong together. For the tearing of the curtain is a sign of what Jesus achieved on the cross.

Although there was a curtain separating the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Women, almost certainly Mark has in mind the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. I.e. Mark is saying that Jesus by his death has destroyed the veil between God and us. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews declared: **“We have, then, my brothers and sisters, complete freedom to go into the Most Holy Place by means of the death of Jesus. He opened for us a living way, through the curtain – that is through his own body... So let us come near to God”** (Hebs 10.19-22).

15.39: “The army officer who standing there in front of the cross saw how Jesus had died. ‘This man was really the Son of God!’ he said”.

The centurion had doubtless seen many other men die by crucifixion. But something in this crucifixion – in the very weakness & suffering of Jesus’ death – became revelatory. The centurion is the first person in this Gospel to declare Jesus as the Son of God – and it was a confession evoked by Jesus suffering and death.

Philip Yancey (The Jesus I Never Knew): *“If Jesus of Nazareth had been one more innocent victim, like King, Mandela, Haven and Solzhenitsyn, he would have made his mark in history and faded from the scene. No religion would have sprung up around him. What changed history was the disciples’ dawning awareness (it took the Resurrection to convince them) that God himself had chosen the way of weakness. The cross redefines God as One who was willing to relinquish power for the sake of love. Jesus became, in Dorothy Solle’s phrase, ‘God’s unilateral disarmament’”*

(HOLY) SATURDAY

Jesus, the Son of God, lay in the grave. What an amazing thought!
But the grave could not contain the Son of God: see Acts 2.24: “it was impossible that death should hold him prisoner”.

(EASTER) SUNDAY

Mark 16.1-8 *The tomb is empty!*