

Mark's Gospel has a consistent question running throughout his Gospel: "Who is this Jesus?" When he showed up in the Jordan with John, he was presented as Messiah. Would he drive out the Romans? Would he rule like David? Was he a miracle worker? A great rabbi? Was he a prophet come back from the grave? Who was he?

Over and over again someone would see a glimpse and Jesus would respond: "don't tell anyone!" What he meant was "not yet." For until the week of Jesus passion, death, and resurrection, how could anyone understand the beauty, grace and power of God's love for all creation? That question echoes throughout the Gospel of Mark as people gathered to decide if Jesus fits their expectation.

In the familiar story of what we call Palm Sunday, we see a colorful representation of those questions and confusions. We begin to understand why Jesus was so adamant that people wait to see who he was rather than making a decision and walking away before they had seen him complete his mission. For jumping the gun would be like reading half a gripping novel, then quitting and telling others how it ended. It would be like watching part of a close football game and being confident you could explain to everyone who won the game and by how much.

As Jesus prepared for the climactic conclusion to his earthly ministry he rode into the city of Jerusalem. It was the city of David. It was the city of the temple. It was the home of Herod's palace. It was where the Roman governor resided. The crowds were huge because they were there to celebrate Passover. The temple was packed with pilgrims buying animals for the Passover sacrifice and priests busy with getting everything in order. The Roman soldiers were nervous as they always were at this time of year. Pilate hoped nothing would happen that would get him in trouble with Emperor. The leaders of the nation were nervous as hundreds and hundreds entered the city following a rabbi named Jesus.

Throughout the Gospel there was clarity by Jesus and confusion by those around him. As Jesus moved confidently and purposefully toward this climactic week, Mark presents Jesus as increasingly being misunderstood, alone, and isolated. The religious leaders turned against him, and then the crowds as well. Even disciples betrayed him and ran into hiding. In the end, he was alone ... or so it seemed. That is why Jesus told people to wait for there would be nothing worth sharing until what happened after he was placed in a tomb. And just as we all face that moment in our lives where all seems lost and nothing matters anymore, he came to surprise us with the greatest and most unexpected miracle of all.

One of the most famous paintings of da Vinci was the Last Supper. For centuries people gathered to view it and over time it had been distorted by grime and grease and pollution. The colors faded and details were lost. Finally, it was decided to clean the painting, and for 20 years restorers slowly, painstakingly, layer by layer removed all that had built up and distorted the painting. In 1999 it was brought back into view and people were amazed to see what the original really looked like!

Mark does the same thing in his Gospel as slowly he peels away the layers of misunderstanding and confusion. During this last week which Mark devotes half of his

Gospel to, he slowly strips away, layer by layer all of the confusion until the true nature of Jesus' mission was revealed.

The week began with palms and joy and dancing in the street. The next layer was a Passover supper, followed by prayer, betrayal, and abandonment. Another layer was the joke of a trial, followed by incredible suffering and the horrendous death on a cross. The next layer was the temple curtain being torn, a final cry from the cross, and finally Jesus' lifeless body being placed in a tomb.

As we read the story again, from Mark, see how slowly, carefully, painstakingly each layer is removed we get to the point where Jesus is alone, all is quiet, all his friends and family are gone, and the greatest darkness of all covers the earth in silence.

On this day where we lift up palm branches, alleluias, and the hopes we all have for blessing and good things, Jesus humbly rode into the city on a donkey, as a symbol of a mission of peace. He was getting ready for what he alone could do ... for what he had been born in a manger to accomplish. Listen to the words of Mark's Gospel as he sets the table.

The Passion of Jesus According to Mark Chapter 15

"And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up.

But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify him." And Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him.

And the inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!" So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "Behold, he is calling Elijah." And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.

And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

¹ Text from English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV®) © 2001 by Crossway