

## **The Last Week - 2/21/10 – Mark 11:1-11– Collision Course**

This year our Lenten journey centers on “The Week that Changed the World.” For us Christians that week is the last week of Jesus’ life. The details surrounding this week make up the largest portion of each Gospel. It constitutes the heart of our faith. Because of the cost and outcome, we refer to it as “Holy Week.” This last week is also referred to as “the passion of our Lord.” Passion is a word normally used to talk about causes we feel deep in our bones – hunger, homelessness, tutoring children, scouting, or delivering meals to homebound people; people and causes to whom we freely give our time, energy and resources. To understand the last week of Jesus’ life, we need to understand that to which he gave his entire life, namely, the kingdom of God.

The ability and the responsibility to choose is a part of what makes us human. The way in which we make those choices, and the values we use in our decisions, reflect the influence our faith has in guiding us. Walking in God’s way set Jesus’ feet moving in a specific direction. Love of God and neighbor was the guiding principle for all his decisions. He was determined to bring God’s grace, mercy and justice to those deemed ordinary and unworthy. This set Jesus on a collision course with both the political and religious authorities.

The week begins on what has become known as Palm Sunday. It marks the beginning of the Jewish Passover, a time when people paused to remember God’s delivering their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. It tapped into their current longing to be freed from Roman oppression. It was the most sacred week of the Jewish year, and Jerusalem’s population swelled from 25,000 to 250,000 as pilgrims made their way to the temple. Two processions enter Jerusalem on that spring day. One procession comes from the west with Pontius Pilate, governor of the region. He is accompanied by a column of cavalry and soldiers, a sign of imperial Rome in all its majesty and might. Their tolerance level for unrest is zero. Crucifixion is the punishment for acts against the state. From the east comes a second procession with Jesus, the popularly proclaimed Messiah. He is mounted on a donkey and followed by a rag tag group of peasants from the countryside of Galilee. Jesus is a sign of the kingdom of God. These two processions are on a collision course.

As we heard in our Gospel lesson, Mark indicates that Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was a prearranged “counter-procession.” Jesus planned it in advance. The meaning of the demonstration was clear. It used symbolism from the prophet Zechariah. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem “humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” This king would banish war from the land – no more chariots, war-horses, bows or spears. This king would usher in an age of peace; not Caesar’s Pax Romana held in place by force and intimidation, but God’s Shalom held in place by love and choice. Jesus was no self-proclaimed king. People were looking for a warrior king like David, not a non-violent, countercultural revolutionary. He rode headlong into their expectations and called them to embrace a different set of values. The rulers of 30 AD were no more accepting of Jesus than the British were of Gandhi or Americans in the ‘60s of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jesus’ procession deliberately countered what was happening on the other side of the city. Pilate’s procession embodied the power, glory, domination, and violence of the empire that ruled the world. Jesus’ procession embodied an alternative vision, the kingdom of God, empowerment of people, stooping to serve those in need, equality, and non-violence. This contrast between the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of God is central to the Gospel of Mark. Holy Week is the story of this head-on collision between the values and choices of the kingdom of Caesar, and therefore the world, and those of the kingdom of God.

We have to look no further than Iran to see a modern day parallel. A government that rules by intimidation collides head on with a growing movement for freedom and equality. Violence erupts; those threatened clamp down forcibly; people are imprisoned and killed. The kingdom of the world seems to have the upper hand. But we dare not judge in the moment or by what we see. Will it be a lasting kingdom or will the values of the kingdom of God, which stir the longings of human hearts, ultimately prevail?

God’s kingdom never comes without conflict because it calls into question the values of the world in which we live. The cross looms before us both as a sign of the world’s rejection and hatred of God’s way and as a sign of Jesus’ self-giving love and the way we are to live in the world. According to Mark, Jesus proclaimed “that the

kingdom of God had come near” (1:15). Either that is true, and the kingdom is among us and within us, or it is not. If it is, then the only response is to act on Jesus’ words to “repent, and believe in the good news” (1:15). To repent is more than merely being sorry for something. It is more than acknowledging or embracing a set of beliefs. It’s changing our behavior and committing ourselves to walk in the way of Jesus because we trust that God’s way is life-giving. So we stand over against all forms of oppression and systems that exploit.

Two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. We have to make a conscious choice about which procession we’ll be in. The decision we make will reflect the influence our faith has in guiding us. Do we really want the kingdom for which we pray to come even if it means a radical change in our lives? Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold.