

The Last Week - 3/28/10 – Mark 1:1-39 – Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

If we believe Mark's Gospel got the Palm Sunday parade right, then we have it wrong. I think we've made it into a Thanksgiving Day Macy's parade with floats, bands and balloons as we sway our palm branches and sing our hosannas and welcome our triumphant king. There was nothing triumphant about Jesus' entry on that first Palm Sunday. It was more like the Civil Rights march on Selma, Alabama, or more recent demonstrations in Tehran: people locked arm-in-arm and surrounded by hostile faces; people shouting racial slurs, police dogs snarling, and water cannons at the ready. Palm Sunday was a blatant demonstration against the oppression and violence of imperial Rome and the injustices perpetrated by the religious authorities who were in cahoots with them. For those who followed Jesus, it was a day filled with boldness and fear as they marched nonviolently through the streets of Jerusalem to the top of the temple mount.

I was struck by an article written by Leonard Pitts in Monday's editorial section, "The Gospel according to Glenn Beck." It seems that Glenn Beck wants to remove any reference to or preaching of what is called "the social gospel." But one cannot do that without shredding the Bible. God is not only a God of grace but also of justice. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God has come near, that it is at hand. It is to be experienced here and now as well as in its fullness after we die. We pray in the Lord's Prayer for God's Kingdom to come and to give us daily bread. Like Jesus, we give ourselves to God as we work for the kingdom's coming. It becomes our passion. It leads us into conflict with all forms of oppression and injustice. There is a cost associated with that: time, energy, resources, and opposition.

The question of Friday in the Last Week of Jesus' Life is this: Why did Jesus have to die? Routinely we say, "He died for our sins." Perhaps better stated, Jesus died "because of sin," which is to say, Jesus died because human authorities resisted God's will and way. They had pushed and shoved their way to be the kings of the hill and were threatened by anyone trying to take their coveted position. They gave their nod to God, but in their heart they were in control. If Holy Week and Good Friday are about any one thing, it is this: control.

It is this struggle for control and how the world should operate and the values by which we live that led to Jesus' death. As Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and those in Iran now experience, people who rule by intimidation and force do not go silently into the night. The clash of the two kingdoms – the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God – are intense and often end in death. Passion for justice often leads to blood being shed. It's in this context that we need to see Jesus' death.

We talk about Jesus "giving his life as a ransom for many." The Greek word translated as "ransom" is used in the Bible not in the context of payment for sin, but payment made to liberate captives or slaves. A ransom is a means of liberation from bondage. Jesus "gave his life" as a means of setting us free from oppression and violence. He was leading us into a new way of living together under God's gentle rule of justice. Every parent who has lost a child in military service knows about this sacrifice. We talk about a person "giving his or her life in service to our nation" as our country fights to maintain freedom in the world. We believe in the cause; we put our lives on the line in order to preserve the freedom of others. Blood is shed.

Palm/Passion Sunday reminds us how tragic life can be. It's tragic because Jesus suffers the violence done to him by those envious and jealous of his popularity; those who sought to protect their positions and traditions; those who could not or would not recognize in the miracles he performed the very presence of God. Where was God while all this was happening? Right there in the midst of it all! Jesus reveals a God who suffers with us, who takes into himself all the violence and hatred we inflict on his Son and each other. God mounts the cross and stretches out his arms in order to save us from ourselves and draw us into the embrace of his love. Jesus could have come down from the cross and played to the crowd. That's exactly what Satan tempted him to do at the beginning of his ministry: throw yourself down from the top of the temple and let God's angels catch you. To do that would have prevented him from doing precisely what God had sent him to do – save the world from itself. Jesus shows another way, the way of nonviolent, self-giving love.

Strength is found in weakness; power in nonviolence; courage in fulfilling God's purpose; victory in the midst of apparent defeat. The death of Jesus on the cross is a paradox that looms before us. It is contrary to the way in which the world operates. Yet the cross is at the heart of following Jesus as we stretch out our arms and open our hands to serve the powerless, forgotten and oppressed. When we look at Jesus hanging there, do we see what the Roman centurion saw: the Son of God? The irony isn't lost at the end of Mark's Gospel: the centurion, who serves imperial Rome by force and intimidation, and who kills innocent people, sees in Jesus another king and kingdom, another way of living together under God's rule. Jesus invites those who would follow him to "take up their crosses, deny themselves, and follow him." Are we ready to march with Jesus, oppose injustice nonviolently, and give our lives freely so that others might experience God's goodness and grace? We have our marching orders. Let's go!