

## Mark's Gospel: Jesus' Death Is the Reason He Became One of Us

by **Daniel S. Mulhall**

From Palm Sunday through Easter, the events of Holy Week shape the Christian faith.

The Gospel of Mark presents the events that happened during this week as a rich and intriguing story. Mark took great care to chronicle Jesus' last week, day by day, and on Friday, hour by hour.

A careful reading of these passages in the Gospel of Mark can help us understand better the events of Holy Week and why Jesus' actions moved the authorities to seek his death.

The week begins on Palm Sunday.

In Mark 11:1-11, we see the familiar details: (1) the disciples are sent to find a colt, which Jesus then rides into Jerusalem; (2) the people greet him joyously—Hosanna!—and pave his path with palm branches and their cloaks; (3) Jesus goes to the Temple, looks around, and then goes with his disciples to the nearby town of Bethany.

In *The Last Week*, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan explain that the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, came to Jerusalem for the major Jewish feasts, such as Passover. He arrived with a great procession and fanfare.

Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem can be seen as a counter-procession or a demonstration—something planned in advance. Using symbolism from the prophet Zechariah, Mark makes clear that with Jesus the real king has arrived.

Mark shows the difference between the Kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of this world, a central motif in Mark's Gospel.

Mark's Gospel continues this way: "The next day as they were leaving Bethany he was hungry" (11:12). In chapter 11, verses 13-15, Mark relates the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree because it did not provide him fruit out of season.

In Mark's Gospel, the Monday that follows his entry into Jerusalem ends with the explanation that the Jewish temple leaders wanted to put Jesus to death but feared the crowd. Mark explains in chapter 11, verse 19, that Jesus and the disciples left the city at dark.

Now why would Jesus curse a fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season? The passage makes more sense if the reader understands Mark's use of "frames," a technique where two incidents are paired for emphasis.

Scholars suggest that the story of the fig tree should be understood as a parable: what happens to the fig tree (it dies) is what will happen to the Temple.

Mark takes three chapters (11:27-13:37) to describe the events of Tuesday of this holy week. He begins with an examination of the withered fig tree, which Jesus uses to discuss the importance of faith and the power of prayer (11:20-25).

Jesus next returns to Jerusalem, where the religious leaders challenge his authority to teach (11:27-33), to which Jesus responds by telling the parable of the vineyard owner and the unfaithful stewards (12:1-12), an

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in-your-face castigation of the leaders' failure to serve God faithfully.

This event is immediately followed by the discussion of paying taxes to Rome (12:13-17), whether there is life after death (12:18-27) and about what is the greatest commandment (12:28-34).

In each of these passages, Mark makes clear that the religious leaders are attempting to trap Jesus into saying something that will get him in trouble, either with the great crowds that supported him or with the Romans.

Jesus nimbly evades these traps, each time turning the question back on those who ask, and each time teaching a vital lesson about the Kingdom of God.

Next, Jesus teaches the meaning of being a disciple, while in the Temple, in the style of the poor widow who gives more than she can afford, not the scribes who put on airs (12:35-44).

Tuesday ends with a foretelling of the end of Jerusalem and the need to be prepared for what is coming soon (13:5-37).

Mark begins the Wednesday of this holy week with the news that the religious leaders were looking for a way to secretly arrest and kill Jesus because they did not want his followers to riot (14:1-2).

This is followed by the woman who anoints Jesus with costly ointment and the discussion of selling the ointment and giving the money to the poor. Jesus retorts that the woman has done him a kindness by anointing his body for burial (14:8) and that her action will be remembered for all time (14:9).

Judas then betrays Jesus to the religious authorities (14:10-11).

Scholars see here another of Mark's frames, a juxtaposition of the follower who anoints and the one who betrays: some understand who Jesus is, others do not.

The remainder of the Holy Week story—from the Last Supper on Thursday to the Resurrection on Sunday—is familiar to most. However, Mark shows that the events of the Passion can only truly be understood through the lens created by the actions of the previous four days.

Not only do Jesus' actions during those days cause the religious leaders to seek his death, they also bring to conclusion his teaching about what it means to be his disciple. Jesus' actions during this week bring to completion his mission on earth.

For Mark, Jesus' Death doesn't happen by chance; it is the necessary reason why he came to us.

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***This article was originally published in CNS's Faith Alive!***

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