

ARE YOU READY?

Palm Sunday Year B

Is. 50:4-9a; Ps. 118:1-2, 19-29; Phil. 2:5-11; Mk. 11:1-11

Gladstone 25/03/2018

Are you ready for Holy Week?

Lent began early this year, with Ash Wednesday falling right in the middle of February—on the 14th of that month. It seemed like we had only just escaped the gravity well of Christmas parties, Christmas Day celebrations with family, school holidays, travel, and were only just getting back into the swing of things when Lent came upon us, seemingly out of nowhere, and we turned our faces intentionally to the nuances of Lent and anticipation of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday—and beyond that for me, at any rate, a couple of weeks vacation.

I'm sure many of us began the 40 days of Lent with good intentions—seriously trying to get our hearts right with God—purifying our souls with prayer and Bible Study. But then life gets in the way—work fires up, the kids have to adjust to a new year of school, university commences—and the solemnity of Lent gets pushed to the side or maybe even forgotten.

No, we are not ready. Easter is early this year and we have not had (or taken) the time to properly prepare for the tragedy and triumph of Holy Week. Our hearts are just not ready—if it is ever possible for them to be fully ready. The divine saga from the Triumphal Entry to Easter is a pilgrimage for which our spirits need to be prepared. But we are not ready. It is too soon upon us.

No, we are not prepared for Holy Week—and neither were the disciples. They had lived with Jesus for three years, watching his every move. Slowly, they had become convinced that he was the long-awaited one, the Messiah, the one like David who would return Israel to its former greatness.

They had been impatient for Jesus to make a move in the grand plan to overthrow Roman rule. They had personally witnessed countless miracles, astounding teachings, and many private moments. But Mark constantly records that they did not understand him.

They especially didn't understand him when he spoke on three separate occasions about his coming death. After the first time in chapter 8, Mark records, "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked

Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'"

The second time in chapter 9, Mark tells the story this way:

"(Jesus said), 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."

The third time in chapter 10, Mark follows Jesus' prediction of his death with this story:

"James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'"

If the disciples weren't prepared, neither were the crowds. It's the time of the Passover. Hundreds, even thousands of Jews have made pilgrimage to the Holy City, Jerusalem. For many it was an annual pilgrimage. For others, perhaps for the elderly and for those coming from long distances, it was the once-in-a-lifetime experience, a journey they would never make again.

They will worship in the temple, and they will celebrate how the God of their people has saved them over and over. They will remember the exodus—how he spared their children, passing over their doors—how he led them out of slavery in Egypt—how he parted the Red Sea—fed them in the wilderness and delivered them to the Promised Land.

And so they have come to pay homage. They include husbands, wives, and children; old and young; strong and weak; rich and poor. While on their journey to Jerusalem they have sung the psalms preparing themselves to enter the Temple, the place where God lives. There they will worship. They will give thanks. They will remember their God. And they will continue to await the coming of the Messiah.

Surely most had heard about Jesus, though they were not sure who he was. Some said he was John the Baptist, others said he was Elijah. Still others said he was one of the prophets. Some even said he was the Messiah come to save them.

Anticipation of the Messiah spread through the crowd like wildfire. They had longed for the restoration of the Kingdom of David for centuries. Could this be the one? Could this be the earthly king who would deliver them from their oppression?

Mark tells the events of this day in two parts. The first part, concerns the acquisition of the colt, and the second is the reaction of the crowds. Interestingly enough, Mark tells us more about how Jesus acquired the colt (six verses) than about what happened when he got it (five verses).

First, there is the mysterious commandeering of an unbroken colt. Mark tells us, "He sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

In one sense he imitated the arrival of the kings of Rome who arrived after successful battles dressed in royal attire and riding a prized stallion. The crowds were accustomed to shouting praises to Roman warriors returning from battle. But that's where it all seemed to go belly-up.

After three years of evading his identity, Jesus has claimed His kingship. The pilgrims were surely thinking, "This must be the one." They were finally convinced that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah. The bystanders were already spreading the word that the King was here. The crowds had gathered to greet the King, who would finally reveal himself to them. Everyone was convinced. Everyone was ready for the revolution. They were all there to see it. They were overjoyed at the prospect of this fulfilment of God's prophecy.

And for one brief moment, they believed that the time had come. The Messiah had arrived, and all of their earthly problems would soon be addressed. God would save them from the tyranny of oppression, and the land given to them after the exile would belong to them once more.

But instead of riding a stallion, like a real king, he chose the colt of a donkey. Instead of arriving with dignity, he arrived in humility. There were no marching armies following him into Jerusalem to declare a new earthly kingdom. It was just Jesus ushering in the Kingdom of God.

Next, Mark switches the focus of the story to the actions of the crowd. The crowd turns the event into a gigantic celebration. They put their cloaks and branches on the road as their way of rolling out the red carpet.

They shout, "Hosanna," which means, "Save us, we pray." "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," a quote from Psalm 118:26.

Mark ends this section with the odd account in verse 11: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

The other Gospels have Jesus riding his donkey right up to the Temple where he proceeds to overturn the money-changers and drive out the buyers and sellers. But Mark portrays Jesus coming to the Temple alone; some time after all the commotion. It was late. He looked around, seemed to take stock of the situation and then left for Bethany where he would spend the night and return the next day for the fireworks in the Temple.

One commentator suggests that the procession into Jerusalem was a parade, a protest and a funeral procession. We have all seen the nature of the event as a parade with the throngs shouting their praises as Jesus slowly rides into Jerusalem. But a protest?

He suggests that while still in Galilee, Jesus had engaged Pharisees and scribes in serious disagreement over the interpretation of scripture and tradition. In addition to the running debate over table fellowship, sharp differences arose over fasting and Sabbath observance. He suggests that Jesus was protesting the subordination of human need and welfare to the rigid and unfeeling application of law.

But this was also a funeral procession. Only Jesus knew that this was the beginning of the end. Jesus knew that the cheering would stop very soon. We have no indication of his attitude or emotions as he rode that donkey into Jerusalem. We don't know if he happily waved to the crowds or if he was filled with foreboding.

On Sunday they shouted, "Hosanna," and treated him like the King of the Jews. On Friday, they hung him on a cross and put up a sign saying, "The King of the Jews."

No, they were not ready for holy Week—and neither are we.

To our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, be all honour, glory, majesty and power. Amen.