

A SERMON PREACHED ON PALM SUNDAY 2018 AT BETHANY BEACH

CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week. I know, I know, it's so hard to believe that Easter is just a week away. The readings for this morning are somewhat schizophrenic in their approach to telling the story leading up to the big event. First, we have Jesus enter into Jerusalem to the shouts of Hosanna and the waving of palms in kind of a victory fashion, then seemingly moments later he is betrayed, convicted and hung on a cross as a kind of cruel punishment for having gone up against the religious and political leaders of his day. We call this part of the story The Passion, and we just heard a small segment of it (39 verses) to give us a taste of what happened nearly 2000 years ago that was so fateful, so important, we still tell the story even today. It rates up there with the Jews' remembrance of their exodus from Egypt, only we remember it weekly in our liturgy, instead of merely once a year. It is a tale that defines who we are as Christians and it takes no special belief system nor suspension of belief to understand what took place.

We've heard the text of Jesus before Pilate all our church lives, so it is a wonder that there should be anything new for us to learn by this point. Yet the mind cannot contain everything, and it forgets pieces here and there, so I'd like to highlight some portions of Mark's recounting of the trial and the subsequent actions of Pilate and others, especially since there is a large amount of story line to take in. These are some of the experiences facing Jesus that I had not remembered until reading the gospel once again this year. Perhaps some of what I am about to speak will be "new" to you once again also, in what one would call a fresh "remembrance of things past...."

The first thing that stands out in my thoughts regarding this morning's gospel is that it's important to remember it was not the Romans who brought Jesus up on charges, though they probably could have found many reasons to do so, including sedition and incitement to riot among them. It was the teachers of the Jewish law and other religious leaders who handed Jesus over to Pilate; this included the Sanhedrin, a group about whom we hear very little until this part of *Mark*. The Sanhedrin was an assembly of twenty-three or seventy-one rabbis appointed to sit as a tribunal of judges in every city in ancient Israel. As a body they claimed powers that lesser Jewish courts did not have. Therefore, they were the only ones who could try the king, extend the boundaries of the Temple and Jerusalem, and were the ones to whom all questions of law were finally put.¹ They appear in the New Testament 27 times, but mostly in the *Acts of the Apostles*. The fact that they show up in *Mark* at the time of Jesus' trial demonstrates just how much was at stake and how threatened the religious authorities were by the type of revolution Jesus was seeking to bring about. What Jesus was trying to accomplish could easily bring down the imperial wrath on everyone, and all would suffer,

meaning that this group of religious leaders might easily be replaced by other ruling groups if they themselves, under their particular set of laws, could not keep the peace. There was a lot to lose if Jesus and those who followed him could not be brought under their control. All this is to say we can make Pilate the bad guy of this tale, but it was really a small group of Jesus' own countrymen that were responsible for bringing him to trial and seeing that he was condemned to death. Overall, he was betrayed and denied by those closest to him, including those who were members of the power structure under which they all lived.

I had not remembered all the nuances of Jesus' trial before Pilate, which proceeds quickly in *Mark*. Next we encounter the fascinating narrative about Barabbas who was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in a recent uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what it was said he usually did. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.ⁱⁱ For those trying to fully comprehend the entire Passion narrative, Barabbas is a troublesome figure in this gospel as well as in *Matthew*, where his name is given in some ancient texts as *Jesus Barabbas*. Barabbas, in Aramaic, means "son of the Father," a title given to Jesus of Nazareth as well! The fact that there are literally two "bar Abbas" in this gospel version has caused some biblical critics to see a conflation between the characters that is at best problematic, and they suggest the choice between the two is a fiction. It has led some to believe that there was an extant back story that had Jesus the Christ being released and not having gone to his death at all. This of course is a scenario that would have been unacceptable to the gospel writers; yet, as we can see, hints of the old story still linger in what the gospel presents to us. Then there is the action of Pilate himself. According to biblical historian Max Dimont, the plot line of Barabbas as related in the gospels lacks credibility from the Roman standpoint, as it presents the Roman authority, Pontius Pilate, backed by overwhelming military might, being cowed by a small crowd of unarmed civilians into releasing a prisoner condemned to death for insurrection against the Roman Empire. A Roman governor who had done that could have faced execution himself.ⁱⁱⁱ So the Barabbas story line may indeed be the fake news of the day.

The next portion of the gospel that I had not remembered so well brings forth yet a new character, never introduced previously, one Simon of Cyrene in eastern Libya, who we are told is the father of Rufus and Alexander (whoever they were, they must have been well known to the Marcan community). Here Simon takes on the part of The Passion that we often see in films as part of Jesus' role, yet it is Simon who carries the cross (the text does not indicate that Jesus can no longer do so, only that Simon is forced to comply when the demand is made). Some Gnostic gospels (in other words, those that take special insight and foreknowledge to understand, like the *Gospel of John*) make the claim that it was Simon himself who went to the

cross *instead of Jesus*; that Jesus, being divine, could not die. Here we once again have a corrupted secondary version of the gospel that lingers from the past into the present text. These affronts to the veracity of the gospel take a lot of unbelieving, one has to admit; still it is interesting how they have inserted themselves into the text and managed to survive the constant editing of the gospels themselves. An investigative reporter would have had a field day trying to trudge through the mud created by this kind of scenario.

Another detail of The Passion that struck me as I reread it was that as Mark marches forth, he tells us that it was nine in the morning when Jesus was crucified (he relates this without fanfare or embellishment as if it were a news report). This seems to fly in the face of most modern day Good Friday services which have Jesus on the cross from 12 to 3, but that is due to a simple misunderstanding and un-careful reading of the text. Mark says that Jesus was placed on the cross at 9 a.m. and darkness covered the land from noon until Jesus' death at 3 p.m. Earlier in the day the Jewish leaders came to Pilate around 6 a.m. or soon thereafter. The hearing before Herod took place around seven o'clock Friday morning. Jesus' second trial before Pilate began around 8 a.m. and according to Mark it ended and the crucifixion took place at "the third hour," which using the Jewish method of counting, would correspond to nine o'clock in the morning. Around noon, while Jesus was on the cross, total darkness surrounded the area, until about 3 p.m. (cf. Matthew 27:45) when he cried out, "It is finished" and died (John 19:30).^{iv} So he was on the cross a lot longer than three hours - - namely 6, at the very least. The confusion is due to trying to sync the four gospels and other texts, plus a misremembrance about what they say and to what they are referring in the timeframes that are mentioned. It seems that once folks got it wrong, they continued to remember it incorrectly despite the correct versions that their teachers and preachers offered.

I was further struck by how new, at least to me, were Jesus' last words on the cross. As we come to the portion of the tale that details Jesus death, we hear him say "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). Some present at the cross thought he was crying out for Elijah, because they heard the "El" part of Jesus' lament, so they went to get wine vinegar to help ameliorate Jesus' pain, hoping he could hold on until Elijah came down to rescue him. (One has to remember that Elijah had not died a conventional death - - it was said that he was merely taken up by God, like Moses, into God's arms, so to speak. Would not God do the same for Jesus?) But Jesus' cry was not what it appears at first look. He recites aloud the first line of Psalm 22, a psalm that as a rabbi he would have known well, that ponders does God abandon us? However if one examines and

remembers the entire psalm, as Jesus undoubtedly had in mind and on his lips, the end verses are ones of joy: They proclaim:

Yet you brought me out of the womb;
 you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast on you;
 from my mother's womb you have been my God.
I will declare your name to my people;
 in the assembly I will praise you.
For he has not despised or scorned
 the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
 but has listened to his cry for help.
 those who seek the LORD will praise him—may your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth
 will remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
 will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the LORD
 and he rules over the nations.
They will proclaim his righteousness,
 declaring to a people yet unborn:
 He has done it!^v

Clearly Jesus believes that God will be with him. Even at what seems like the end, Jesus can say, using other words - - and without the temptation of testing God to see whether or not God still loves him - - Jesus can still proclaim "for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen." The Christ is not abandoned on the cross; he is lifted up, but in a way never seen before; therefore he states he believes this will happen as it has been promised to him. That is his so-called "lament on the cross," but it is really a cry of ultimate belief and joyful resignation.

Finally, I was astounded how little I recalled about the end of this portion of the gospel, with the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, seeing how he died, saying, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" No one knows for sure who this centurion was, though tradition has it his name was Longinus, who served in Judea under Pilate, and who went on to be one of the of the

apostles, bringing the word of God and his experience of the cross and the resurrection (because he was also one of the soldiers who guarded the tomb) to all those he encountered after Jesus' appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost. That Mark and the other gospel writers would hang their conclusion to the story on an unknown character, once again, should tell us something: the most important witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the everyday worker, the lowliest of believers, the one least expected to be moved by the story, the Christmas and Easter Christian, the seeming non-adherent to the faith -- in other words, you, me, our neighbor in the seats next to us, those who did not make it here today, those who will have no experience of church this Holy Week; the atheist, the universalist, the sideline watcher and waiter.

God is speaking to us -- to them -- in this story, saying we are connected, we are united in ways we rarely understand (as we learned at yesterday's rally); the tale of how we are human comes down to God's own participation in our death and the promises of our rebirth, for in the end, for those who believe it, life is made whole, hearts are healed, visions are realized through the portions of the story we have read and contemplated this morning. From Hosanna to Hallelujah is our song! From underground to heaven is our journey! From limited self to unlimited godliness is our mindset! It all begins with palms as we enter, and lilies as we leave. Like the theologian Craig Lounsbrough wrote, "Sooner or later I will realize that the very things I most desperately need are the very things I am unable to give myself. Therefore, I will either be left despising the fact that I am doomed to live out a life that is perpetually empty, or I will realize that an empty tomb is the single thing that will eternally fill me."

And so, due to all I've forgotten about The Passion story, I pray, in the words of the old hymn:

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at mine end, and at my departing.^{vi}

With that said, Go in peace then, to love and serve God.

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanhedrin>

ⁱⁱ *Mark 15:7-9*, NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barabbas#Modern_views

^{iv} <http://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/what-time-day-did-crucifixion-happen>

^v <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+22&version=NIV> (in portions)

^{vi} <http://www.beliefnet.com/prayers/christian/guidance/prayer-for-gods-guidance.aspx>