

The Passion Narrative

Plans to arrest Jesus and the anointing at Bethany (Mark 14:1-11)

At the start of the Passion narrative we read plans to arrest Jesus (14:1-2) and the agreement of Judas to hand Jesus over (14:10-11). In between Mark sandwiches the story of a woman anointing Jesus. God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt is remembered at Passover with the sacrifice and eating of a lamb (Ex 12:1-28). It is joined to the eight day festival when only unleavened bread could be eaten. Raymond Brown describes the chief priests as a 'Jerusalem priestly aristocracy with positions of privilege and power over the Temple and its treasury'. Scribes were experts in the Law of Moses and elders were wise counsellors. Probably all these were the people through whom the Roman prefects or governors ruled at the local level. There had been earlier conspiracies to kill Jesus (e.g. 11:18). Since the leaders feared the crowds (12:12) Passover, when the population of Jerusalem quadrupled, would be a time when the leaders would be afraid to capture Jesus publicly. Jesus had already warned his followers to be alert (13:23).

Whilst the officials were hoping to capture Jesus secretly, and Judas went off by himself to betray Jesus to the chief priests, women acted openly. At the start of the gospel, Simon's mother in law, once healed, served them (1:31); in Jerusalem, a poor woman gave an offering at the treasury (12:42), whilst here a woman comes to anoint Jesus. This is anticipating the death of Jesus, but also has Messianic overtones since, like kings and priests, Jesus was anointed on the head. This story is in all four gospels but only Mark says that the host was a leper. Maybe Jesus had healed this Simon, or perhaps it gives a message that Jesus dined with those who were not powerful. The woman was extremely generous. At Passover people were expected to give alms. However, 'You always have the poor with you' is not saying that it is inevitable that some people will be poor, but rather that their presence should be a stimulus to give to the poor. You will not always have me (14:8) links the incident with the imminent Passion, whereas the next verse envisages the worldwide spread of the gospel.

The Passover with the disciples (Mark 14:12-25)

Here, like on Palm Sunday, (11:1-6) Jesus sends two disciples who were clearly expected and welcomed, to prepare things. Note that the first few verses have 'disciples' then it changes to 'the Twelve'. Mark was not there himself so could have combined two sources. However, since they were shown 'a large room' (14:15) one commentary suggests that the group could have been larger than twelve. We don't know! The householder must have known Jesus since he refers to 'my guest room.' Possibly this 'furnished' room had couches for guests to recline on one elbow, in the now customary Greco Roman manner, for a special meal. They ate in the evening i.e. the Passover meal would begin between sunset and darkness. From this point 'disciples' only occurs twice (14:32 and 16:7); Mark speaks now of the Twelve, mainly in a negative sense e.g. in 14:20 Jesus announces the betrayal: readers have known since 3:19 but only now do the Twelve discover, in distress (14:19), that it will be one of them. In the meal that celebrated freedom from slavery in Egypt, the Twelve discover that the one who was sharing that meal will deny Jesus (cf Ps 41:9). There are four references to 'Son of Man' in the Passion narrative – the two in 14:21 and that in 14:41 refer to the suffering and betrayal of Jesus whereas 14:62 is about his return in power. Although 14:21 says 'as it is written' no OT text specifically mentions a betrayed and suffering Son of Man but the early Christian view was, as 1Cor 15:3-5 indicates, that Jesus' death and resurrection was 'according to the

Scriptures'. The use of 'woe' in 14:21 is reminiscent of the warning of all the eighth century prophets, that evil doers will face judgement and destruction e.g. Micah 2:1-2. After this warning, Mark returns to the Passover meal, but does not mention the lamb. This is one of several accounts of the institution of the Eucharist. Note the four actions always present: took, blessed, broke and gave. Whole books have been written on the Institution and I am not going to launch into lengthy comment! There are numerous books. Do note however, that they all drank from the one cup (14:23). This, of course, is why in this time of pandemic we can sadly not receive from the chalice. Reference to the kingdom of God links back to Jesus' initial proclamation (1:14-15) and forward to Joseph of Arimathea, who was waiting for the kingdom (15:43-6), whilst foreshadowing the ironic acclamation of Jesus as king (15:2f).

The Mount of Olives and Gethsemane (Mark 14:26-42)

The hymn (14:26) would be the *Hallel* (Pss 114-118) sung at the end of Passover. The Mount of Olives is a small ridge running across the Kidron valley, east of Jerusalem. Mark's theology that Jesus' suffering is willed by God who is probably understood as the one who 'will strike' (14:27) is indicated in the reference to Zech 13:7, where 'the sheep will be scattered' refers to the disciples, foreshadowing their flight in 14:50. However, just as here and in 14:36 God is that agent of suffering, so also he will raise up Jesus (14:28) for a new mission in Galilee (16:7), where Jesus first called the disciples and did most of his teaching and healing. Just as Jesus predicted the betrayal of Judas, so now he foretells Peter's denial and the flight of the disciples – suffering and death does not fit in with their Messianic hopes. It is ironic that in 8:34 Jesus says that the disciples should 'deny themselves' yet now it is Peter who will deny Jesus (14:30). Whilst Jesus will go to the disciples three times in Gethsemane (14:37-41) Peter will soon deny him three times. Mark probably wrote at a time when Christians in Rome were enduring persecution. Pliny in his Epistle X:26 to Emperor Trajan, wrote that if Christians confirmed their Christian belief three times they were executed. Maybe Mark had this in mind when he referred to Peter being questioned three times. There is more irony – the disciples too said they would not deny Jesus, yet they slept instead of staying awake in Gethsemane (14:34, 37) and fled at his arrest (14:50).

Gethsemane is a garden on the side of the Mount of Olives. Just as Peter, James and John were present at the Transfiguration (9:2-8) and at the raising of Jairus' daughter, (5:37-43) so they accompany Jesus as he goes to pray. Whereas Jesus' divinity is shown at the Transfiguration, here it is his humanity. Mark tells us Jesus is the Son of God, but here he is clearly human, and fearing his impending death, but submits completely to the will of his Father (14:34-6). 'This cup' and 'the hour' refer to his suffering and death. Note that Jesus refers to Peter as Simon, (14:37), implying that in his denial he is the old Simon from the days before his call in 3:16. Jesus' words reflect the Lament psalms e.g. Pss 42:5, 11; 43:5. These verses and Ps 22 in 15:34 connect with Jesus as 'the man of sorrows'. This whole passage shows a contrast between the heroic Jesus and the weak, cowardly disciples. However, Raymond Brown observes that when the disciples did eventually understand what the suffering and death of Jesus meant, they did go obediently to preach the Gospel. They had a second chance! I talked to young seminarians in Uganda about the second chance God gave me, at the end of my working life, to go and work in Africa, but if they refused God's call to priesthood they may not get a second chance.

The betrayal and arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:43-52)

This starts with the Greek word *εὐθὺς* (immediately), but is now not associated with Jesus but his ‘betrayer’, Judas, sadly ‘one of the twelve’ (14:43-4) using a kiss, the sign of friendship, as the signal for his betrayal. Judas, with this greeting used between rabbis and their pupils, is cynically ensuring they get the right man; once more, it is ‘immediately’ (14:45). Peter uses ‘Rabbi’ at the Transfiguration (9:5) and it is used with reference to the withered fig tree (11:21) but it has not been used otherwise. At this date it was probably a sign of respect and not yet a title for a Jewish teacher. On numerous occasions Mark refers to the hands of Jesus, which bring healing (e.g. 1:31; 5:23,41; 7:32) but here Jesus is betrayed and his accusers ‘laid hands on him’ (14:46). The vague phrase ‘one of those’ (14:47) possibly suggests that for Mark it was someone other than a disciple who cut off the slave’s ear. Jesus complained, that he taught daily in the Temple (Mk 11-13) without being arrested, but now the Scriptures would be fulfilled (14:49-50); this is again a reference to Zech 13:7 ‘the sheep will be scattered’. The disciples, who left their homes to follow Jesus, now leave him at the beginning of his Passion. Apart from Peter’s denial, male disciples do not reappear until after the Resurrection (16:12). It was the women who were there at the death of Jesus (15:40-41). This passage would have presented a challenge to Mark’s early readers who were being persecuted – would they follow the example of Jesus, betray him like Judas, or run away like the disciples and the unknown young man(14:51)? I always thought this was Mark himself, but we do not know who it was!

Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Peter’s denial (Mark 14:53-72)

The Sanhedrin (or Council), composed of chief priests, elders and scribes, was the highest court in Judaism. Jesus was charged with threatening to destroy the Jerusalem Temple, and with committing blasphemy. They could not find evidence against him – some told untruths and the evidence of witnesses did not agree; it was rigged against him from the start. When Jesus declined to say what it was they testified against him, the high priest (Caiaphas, on the evidence of Matt 26:57 and from Josephus) asked ‘are you the Messiah?’ (14:61). The first response, ‘I am’ (14:62) would immediately remind them of the answer God gave to Moses when he asked at the burning bush, ‘What is your name?’ (Ex 3:14). Jesus could thus be accused of taking the divine name in vain, i.e. of blasphemy, which he had been accused of from the time he told the paralysed man that his sins were forgiven (2:7). However, affirming the title of Messiah (or Christ) and Son of the blessed One (i.e. God) would also be regarded as blasphemy. Mark has combined both titles from his very first verse. Peter confessed that he was Messiah (8:29), the voice from heaven at his baptism (1:11) and Transfiguration (9:7) confirmed him as Son of God, as also did the demons (3:11; 5:7). Just as after Peter’s confession, Jesus does not reject the title but prefers ‘Son of Man’. The OT background to the Son of Man title is complex, but here ‘seated at the right hand of the Power i.e. God (14:62) is reminiscent of Ps 110:1 and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’ of Dan 7:13 i.e. Jesus is depicted as a glorious figure coming at the end of time. By tearing his clothes (14:63) the high priest is indicating that his reaction to Jesus’ response is as great as if he had heard about the death of a loved one. By affirming the various titles, and maybe by saying he would build the Temple, Jesus is guilty of the charge of blasphemy. The chief priest had rigged the trial but asks ‘what is your decision?’ (14:64) so the condemnation is not his alone, but that of the whole Sanhedrin. Jewish punishment for blasphemy was death by stoning (Lev 24:16) but they handed Jesus over to Pilate (15:1): Roman punishment was by

crucifixion. Mark does not explain why but John 18:31 says the Jews were ‘not permitted to put anyone to death’. By spitting on Jesus and asking him, whilst blindfold, to say who spat on him (14:65) Sanhedrin members mocked Jesus. Beating him (14:65) recalls Is 50:6. Jesus has been portrayed by Mark as an innocent victim who is now identified as who he is: ‘Messiah’ is correct but ‘Son of God’ and ‘I am’ better describe him, complimented by ‘Son of Man’. Mark has been influenced by OT references from Isaiah and the Psalms and is making a theological statement. Issues of historical accuracy are for another forum! By contrast, Peter had followed at a distance to what was probably the house of Caiaphas and waited outside whilst the trial took place (14:54, 66). Whilst Jesus proclaimed the truth about himself, Peter denied that he knew him (14:68). Jesus, who spoke the truth, died whilst Peter, who denied him three times, lived. It’s a tragic story. Peter, who had vowed never to deny Jesus, ‘broke down and wept’ (14:72) when he realised what he had done. (Note: ‘immediately’ the cock crowed, starts this sad verse). One commentator notes that during persecution in Mark’s day Christians could be faithful like Jesus, and suffer, or be cowards like Peter and apparently be safe. However, Peter went on to be an apostle and eventually was martyred. Peter is both an example to be avoided and a reminder that after denial and betrayal, repentance and forgiveness are still possible.

Jesus before Pilate (Mark 15:1-15)

‘Immediately’ it was morning the Jewish Sanhedrin bound Jesus and handed him over to Pilate (15:1) who was Roman Prefect of Judea. Mark appears mainly to blame the Sanhedrin for Jesus’ death and portrays Pilate as reluctant to condemn Jesus. It isn’t clear whether this was a second trial or whether they planned to dispose of Jesus: ‘consultation’ (NRSV) suggests the latter. By binding him they were treating Jesus as a convicted criminal. This action is just what Jesus had predicted (10:33): they would ‘hand him over to the Gentiles’. Pilate’s headquarters were in Caesarea on the coast but had probably come to Jerusalem to work with the Jewish leaders in peace keeping during the Festival. Thus, by asking Jesus if he was King of the Jews (his translation of the Jewish term Messiah) Pilate may have been trying to find out if Jesus was one of the Messianic pretenders who had previously caused unrest. Jesus answered only, ‘You say so’ but it was the Jewish chief priests who were accusing him (15:3). Pilate seemed surprised by Jesus’ refusal to say any more and may have been trying to be fair to him. Jesus’ silence seems to be an allusion to the Suffering Servant (Is 53:7). After failing to get Jesus to defend himself, Pilate, who himself would have had power to release Jesus, tried to persuade the crowd to ask for his release. There is no extra biblical evidence for a custom of releasing a prisoner. What is significant is that Barabbas was in prison with rebels who had committed murder (15:7). His name is composed of ‘bar’ meaning son and ‘abba’ meaning father. There is thus irony in the fact that the crowd chose him rather than the Son of God. The people influencing the crowd were the Jewish chief priests, who had handed Jesus over ‘out of jealousy’ and who ‘stirred up the crowd’ (15:10-11). Pilate gave in to the crowd fairly easily i.e. he gave up on any pretence of justice. Analysis by scholars of reports by Josephus of Pilate’s other confrontations in Judea suggest that this weak, vacillating position may not be entirely out of character. Jesus was condemned to crucifixion without any answer to the question, ‘what evil has he done?’ In the end, Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified ‘to satisfy the crowd’ (15:15) who had been ‘stirred up’ by the Jewish chief priests. Flogging was done with a whip studded with metal and bone. It was meant to weaken a person who was to be crucified and may explain why Jesus died so quickly (15:44-5).

The mocking and crucifixion of Jesus (Mark 15:16-32)

The courtyard, or Praetorium, was the Roman Governor's local residence. A cohort was usually 600 soldiers who would be Gentiles drawn from the local area (15:16). Whilst Jesus had been mocked and beaten as a prophet (14:65) he is now mocked and beaten as a king (15:17-20); a purple cloak signified royalty; the crown may have been intended to inflict pain, or else to mock his royal claims. Similarly, they mockingly saluted and paid homage to him. It echoes the greeting, 'Hail, Caesar'. Mark's readers, of course, did see him as a king, but his power was that of the Son of Man, who 'came not to be served, but to serve' (10:45). Mockery turned to physical abuse. The reed was a mock version of a king's sceptre. Spitting could be an allusion to Is 50:6. Kneeling was part of royal court ritual. Note that the Gerasene demoniac knelt before Jesus (5:6-7). Removal of the purple cloak marks an end to the mock ritual.

Mark's account of the crucifixion is brief (15:21-7). Most modern translations omit 15:28, which is absent from the best manuscripts. The simple questions of the *Sacra Pagina* commentary are a good guide:

Who? Mark has Simon, Jesus, the soldiers and the bandits present. Simon was from what is now Libya; he was probably a Jew in Jerusalem for Passover. The condemned person usually carried the crossbeam, but maybe Jesus was too weak. Where? Golgotha, the place of a skull, was a suitable place outside the city walls. When? The third hour i.e. 900am. This differs from John's chronology, but what matters is the meaning, not the detail of events.

Why? The charge against Jesus was, 'The King of the Jews'. The inscription would be a warning to Messianic pretenders; to early Christians, ironically, it was the truth. How? Jesus refused wine mixed with myrrh. Some scholars say myrrh killed pain; others say the wine did that and myrrh made it more fragrant. Clothes became the property of the executioners. Their action evokes Ps 22:18-19. The bandits, on Jesus' right and left, are a reminder of the request of James and John (10:37). Later, the bandits join in mocking Jesus (15:32). Only Luke mentions the 'good thief.' In this short section, the key phrase, mentioned three times, is 'they crucified him'.

The next few verses are summarised extremely well by Raymond Brown: 'On the cross Jesus has no friends; he is a solitary righteous man closely surrounded on all sides by enemies!' Whether passers by or chief priests they all mocked and vilified him. Crucifixion was a terrible way to die. Cicero called it, 'a most cruel and disgusting penalty' and Josephus 'the most pitiable of deaths'. Paul said it was 'a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'. (1 Cor 1:23). Mark, rather than stress the physical horror, focuses on the rejection and lack of understanding of almost everyone.

The death of Jesus (Mark 15:33-41)

However the darkness from noon to three (15:33) is to be explained it is as though the Universe is mourning the death of Jesus, whilst tearing of the curtain of the Temple (15:38) can be seen as God opening a way between heaven and earth through Jesus' death. It could point, for Mark's readers, to the forthcoming destruction of the Temple, but also to the fact that Gentiles could become disciples. Offering of the sponge filled with sour wine (15:36) may indicate that someone, at least, had compassion on Jesus. Reference to Elijah may be mockery – it is not clear. The cry of Jesus at 300pm is from Ps 22:1. Most commentators point out that this is NOT a

cry of despair – why if it were would Mark write a Gospel, i.e. Good news? Jesus could have felt unsupported in his last moments but he as a Jew would see Ps 22 overall as a statement of confidence that God would not abandon an innocent sufferer. Here we can see clearly the humanity of Jesus who, though without sin, suffered terribly as he died for us. However, the Gentile centurion, as Jesus was dying on the cross, confessed his divinity: ‘Truly this man was God’s Son’ (15:39). This is the wonder and mystery of our faith; as I have quoted often, but do not have here the name of the author: ‘Godhead into Manhood cannot go, and yet has gone.’

It is so important, in the light of recent events, that we see not just the male disciples who abandoned Jesus, or bystanders who jeered him, but women, who could not witness in Jewish courts, yet who were there at the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdalene saw Jesus die and watched his burial (15:40-47), went to the tomb on Easter Sunday (16:1) and was first to see her risen Lord (16:9).

The burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42-7)

Joseph came from Arimathea; wherever it was, it was not in Galilee, so Mark does not see him as a disciple. As a member of the Sanhedrin (15:42-3) he was an observant Jew. His concern probably was not so much for Jesus as for OT law – the body needed to be buried before 600pm i.e. before the start of the Sabbath (Deut 21:22-3). It was unusual to be allowed to bury someone who had been crucified. Probably Pilate gave permission because of Joseph’s standing in the community. The action, because of the limited time, would be hasty and may have been done by servants. This event confirms that Jesus really died. The women watched and so would know, after the Sabbath was over, where to find the tomb. The details are all confirmed, ready for the events of Easter Day.

This is the end of the usual Palm Sunday Passion from Mark. Do let me know if you found the notes helpful. Mark 16:1-7 is read on Holy Saturday but on Easter Sunday the Gospel is John 20:1-9. The remainder of Mark 16 is read on Ascension Day. Before then, I shall write some notes on these passages and textual issues which are mentioned in some Biblical versions. Note that all of Mark 16 is part of the Canon of Scripture.

Bible quotations (including numbering of Psalms) are from the NRSV.

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