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# The Shape of our Story

Mark 11.1-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 9 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

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Towards the end of his gospel, Mark assembles on stage all the key actors in the drama of his gospel. Here are the Romans, the ones with the ability to force the issue through military power. Here are the Jerusalem authorities, the Jewish leaders who had decided that collaboration with the Romans was the only way to survive in a period of foreign occupation. Here are the rebels, Barabbas and the two prisoners with whom Jesus is crucified, who have set their hearts on clearing out the Romans and don't have much time for the Jerusalem authorities either. These three groups are the main players. And then, in the background, are the two groups with whom the reader is meant to identify. One the one hand is the crowd, the host of people who project onto Jesus their own hopes for national restoration or personal healing, and swing from adulation on Palm Sunday to baying for blood on Good Friday. On the other hand are the disciples, full of promises of undying loyalty and plenty close enough to see exactly who Jesus is, but nonetheless unraveling in a spiral of stumbling timidity and outright betrayal.

Mark does not give us systematic theology or social ethics in propositional form. He gives us a story. But that story gives us all we need to know about who Jesus is and what he requires of us. I'd like to demonstrate this by contrasting Jesus with the three main players in the Holy Week drama – the Romans, the authorities, and the rebels.

Let's start with the Romans. Every time a Roman general had a successful campaign, he would march on his horse in a triumphant procession into Rome. On Palm Sunday, Jesus marches into Jerusalem on a colt. This is a spoof. Jesus is sitting on a donkey, not a horse: an agricultural tool, not a weapon of war; a tractor, not a tank. It's hard to see how the Roman governor would have missed a joke directed at him. Jesus is coming to receive what is rightfully his, yet he is not doing so with armies of soldiers, but surrounded by people coming in from the fields, country people, exactly the people most oppressed by the regime. Jesus' triumphal entry ends not at the Roman palace but at the Temple. It's pretty clear where he thinks real power lies in Israel. Later, Jesus is asked a question about paying taxes to Caesar. This is forcing him to make a direct choice between the Jerusalem authorities, who went along with Roman domination, and the rebels, who regarded taxes as blasphemy. Jesus' deeply ironic response – 'give God what is God's' – points to the fact that everything the Romans think they control in fact lies in God's power. Later again, when Pilate asks, 'Are you the King of the Jews?', Jesus does not deny it. It's not surprising Pilate has Jesus executed. These three episodes show that Jesus is claiming an authority way beyond that which Pilate has, and that, deep down, he doesn't take Pilate terribly seriously.

Let's now look at the Jerusalem leaders. In theory, they were longing for a Messiah to remove the Romans, restore and unite Israel, and inaugurate an unprecedented era of peace. But a bit of historical perspective might be helpful here. There was already a family that regarded themselves as the house of the kings in Israel, and that was the half-Jewish house of Herod. Herod the Great tried to polish off Jesus at birth, and Herod Antipas was now around eager to finish the job. Herod's family had brought in the family of Caiaphas from overseas to serve as High Priests. So the High Priest was in the pocket of the puppet king, who was under the thumb of the Roman governor. And all these people garnered large sums of money through extorting tax from the country people. This was not a democracy, and Mark's gospel assumes that those Jews who exercised power did so by sucking up to the Romans and oppressing their own people. By riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus is saying he is the real leader of Israel. By questioning the status of the Temple, Jesus is saying he is the true intermediary between God and his people. By debating with each rival group in the Temple precincts as the week goes on, Jesus is saying he has more wisdom than the scribes, more holiness than the Pharisees, more authority than the Sadducees and more power than the Herodians. When brought before the Sanhedrin, Jesus says 'You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power' – in other words, if you think you're judging me, the joke's on you.

So then to the rebels. Once Jesus has dismissed the option of living in Rome's pocket, it might seem that armed rebellion was the only alternative left to him. Perhaps the most plausible explanation for Judas' betrayal of Jesus is that Judas assumed Jesus would overturn his own arrest and launch the violent overthrow of Roman rule for which so many longed. So Judas must have found Palm Sunday a bewildering experience: Jesus has the world shouting for him, but does nothing. And even the cleansing of the Temple is a curious kind of revolution: the aggression is directed toward sheep, cattle, coins, tables and doves. No one is hurt, let alone killed. It is a vivid symbolic gesture, not an element of a violent insurrection. When it comes to the arrest in Gethsemane, Jesus says 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a terrorist?' The scene in Gethsemane makes two things clear. One is that Jesus had established a new form of life that others saw as a political threat. The other is that Jesus had no intention of translating that social program into a violent revolution.

Any Christian who had lived in America for the last few years could have come to the conclusion that the story that mattered was really all about the government, the religious leaders, and the terrorists. These seem to be the people who are setting the agenda. But the Holy Week story suggests that Jesus doesn't concentrate on the Romans, the Jerusalem authorities and the rebels. These, in different ways, are the people who put Jesus to death. But they aren't the people the story is all about. The story is all about the other two groups.

The other two groups are the disciples and the crowd. Like everyone else, neither the disciples nor the crowd come out of the story particularly well. But they portray the two key dimensions of what Jesus is doing in Holy Week. The crowd represents what we might call the 'public' aspect of Jesus' Passion. Jesus dies for a whole bunch of people, some who acknowledge him, some who love him, some who misunderstand him, some who are unaware of him, some who hate him. He dies, in short, for 'the whole world'. The whole world doesn't put him to death, but the whole world exhibits the kinds of jealousy, mob spirit, cynicism, fear, and sheer perversity that did put him to death.

Meanwhile the disciples represent what we might call the 'personal' aspect of Jesus' Passion. The death of Jesus is indeed an event in time that brings about the transformation of the whole world. But it is portrayed in the context of an intense story of intimacy and betrayal. It is in the intimacy of the Last Supper, as bread is being dipped in the bowl, that Judas slips out to betray Jesus. It is in the intimacy of the garden, as Jesus holds fast to his Father, that those he has called his friends disintegrate around him. Passiontide is a story not so much about conventional notions of power such as military dictatorship, religious authority or terrorist violence, but about a power that is at the same time far greater and more intimate than any of them – God's enduring love for the whole world, and God's intense love for us, his intimate friends.

So as we gather this Palm Sunday, we begin to make the transition from the politics, betrayal and terror of the characters around Jesus to the very pressing and sometimes similar issues of our own lives as Christians. And the questions for us this Holy Week are these three. Number one, Do I assume politics is all about the government, religion all about the professional religious, and power all about the terrorists? Or do I look where Jesus looked, to the breadth of the endlessly diverse crowd and the depth of intimate discipleship? Number two, Do I realize Jesus' Passion is about the whole world, that these days transformed the nature and destiny of the whole world, not just showing us the full horror of human sin but opening out the full possibility of the redemption of all things? Number three, Do I realize that Jesus' Passion is also about me – that the next seven days are an opportunity I might never get in the same way ever again, an opportunity to discover how Jesus saves not just the whole world but even, wonderfully and astonishingly, saves me?

So these seven days, step out of your assumptions about power – the power that lives in the hands of the government, in the hearts of religious leaders, or in the minds of the terrorists. Gather around the true power in the universe, made present in the fragile form of Jesus Christ – a power that transforms the whole world, and can even transform you.