

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This is lectionary year B, when we read from the Gospel according to Mark. Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels to be written. Matthew, Luke, and John come later, and are each significantly longer. Matthew and Luke use Mark's account as the basis for theirs, but they add details like the Christmas stories and the resurrection appearances of Jesus that Mark leaves out. The reason for the differences in the Gospels has to do with the different audiences they were written for, and Mark is thought to have written his Gospel for the church at Rome sometime soon after the first persecutions of Christians under the emperor Nero, which forced the Christian community there to gather in secret. And this reality of that early church community is reflected in the very first gathering of the church, the disciples. As I have already mentioned a few times since Advent, secrecy about Jesus is one of the themes that runs through Mark, and it colors the whole story. We're going to be bouncing back and forth between Mark and John in Holy Week, and John in some respects is the polar opposite of Mark. In John, Jesus makes himself known to the religious and political powers of the day from the beginning of the Gospel. Already in John chapter two he enters the temple and drives out the money changers, and from that moment the powers that be are looking for a way to get rid of him. In Mark it's very different, almost as if God is sneaking into the world in Jesus largely unnoticed, and accomplishing our salvation out of the spotlight. That's going to be a theme this week in the readings from Mark. Where John's Gospel does a lot of telling and explaining about what Jesus is doing, Mark gives us mostly Jesus just quietly doing what he is doing, ushering in a new reality without all the hype.

This morning I want us to see how that plays out in our Gospel reading so that we can enter Holy Week with maybe a new perspective on what it means for us as people of faith to take this all to heart and to live out our faith in our daily lives.

The first thing to notice here is that Jesus and his disciples are *not* especially noticed. In all of the other Gospels, this entry into Jerusalem attracts attention. In Matthew the city is in turmoil, wondering who this Jesus is. In Luke, the Pharisees tell Jesus to silence the crowds shouting. That's when Jesus tells them, "If these were silent, the stones would shout out." And in John, the Pharisees observing the procession say to each other, "You see, you can do nothing. The world has gone after him." But in Mark there is none of that. Jesus and his disciples, and whoever else might be with them, go unnoticed. How could that be, you maybe wonder? Well, because this was the time of the Passover celebration, and people were streaming into Jerusalem from all over. Jesus and his group would likely have been only one of many pilgrim groups going up into Jerusalem. The only thing different about them would have been their song. All of the other groups would have been singing the so-called songs of ascent, Psalms 120-134, liturgical songs, you might say, for pilgrims going up Mount Zion on which Jerusalem is built. Many of you, I expect, will recognize the beginning of Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." The disciples here are acclaiming Jesus as the one in whom that help is now coming, the one who is coming in the name of the Lord to save them. (That's what Hosanna literally means. "Help, save us!") But in Mark nobody in the story notices, only the ones hearing Mark's story are in the know.

Another thing that Mark helps us notice depends upon context that we modern day readers are not necessarily clued in on, but that Mark's original audience would have been aware of. And that is the contrast of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with the processional entries that the Romans put on on the other side of town, as they brought in reinforcements to control the crowds. Passover

was the most important festival of the year for the Jewish people. It was their origin story, the story of how God saved them in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful enemy, the Egyptian Army. So there would have been a not-so-subtle tone of Jewish nationalism in the Passover celebration. The Romans were well aware of this, and they had their own counter-message to convey. They were masters of the intimidating procession, with their armed and armored legions led by officers on warhorses. These processions were the ancient equivalent of the Soviet Union's parades of nuclear missiles across Red Square in the bad old days of the Cold War. So at the same time that Jesus and his disciples and all of the other Passover pilgrims are going up into Jerusalem from the east, columns of Roman troops are entering from the west as a stark reminder of who is really in charge here. By contrast, the one that Jesus' little band of followers is now acclaiming as king is riding in on a colt. Maybe the colt of a donkey, maybe the colt of a horse. But this is a mount that has never been ridden. A young animal that has not been trained in warfare. And that's because Jesus is a different kind of king. His rule will be different from the Romans and all who seek power by death and violence.

The third thing to notice is the anticlimactic ending of this part of the story. They enter Jerusalem, go up into the temple, have a look around (like you do when you're a tourist or a pilgrim). And then... well, it was getting late, so they left! Wait, what? He didn't seize power? He didn't drive out the money changers? He doesn't have a defiant confrontation with the authorities? Not in Mark. Jesus will come back later and drive out the money changers, but not as part of his entry to the city as he is being acclaimed the Messiah.

What does all of this have to do with us as we being our own observance of our most important festival of the year, Holy Week and Easter? I think that Mark's Gospel more than any of the others reminds us that our faith is not something we are called to wear on our sleeves or force down other people's throats. As I have said before in this year of Mark, in this Gospel Jesus does *not* want people to go and tell about him. He doesn't want them telling people that he is the Messiah, God's agent for restoring the rule of God in the world. Not yet. Not until they have lived through the whole story. And that's because being public about this prematurely ends up conveying exactly the wrong message. And I dare say that that is where so many of our fellow Christians are missing the point, those who want to impose what they understand to be biblical morality on the rest of the world, who would have us seize the instruments of power and enforce the Ten Commandments, to make the United States a Christian nation. It's not only that the U.S. Constitution explicitly separates church and state. That's a separate discussion. It's that the Christian faith itself, the faith that trusts and follows Jesus – I mean the real Jesus conveyed to us in the scriptures – that faith, and that Jesus are not about the good guys taking over from the bad guys and getting their revenge on them. Jesus is not a king like other kings. He is not a conquering, threat-making, pain-inflicting, death-dealing king like the powers that rule this world. Jesus is ushering in a new and different kind of rule that comes down deep into our reality, joins us in our suffering, even in our death, and opens our hearts to God and to our fellow human beings. Authentic faith in this Jesus most often happens quietly and behind the scenes, unnoticed in the headlines and the social media. When we bear Jesus into the lives of others, as we are surely called and compelled to do, we do so not as warhorses, but as a humble donkeys. But before we can do that, we have to live into the end of the story in which Jesus leads us to life through death. May our Lord be with us throughout this week by the power of the Holy Spirit as we trace again his journey to the cross and to the empty tomb. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.