

Triumphal entry? (Mark 11:1-11)

The term better fits Matthew than Mark, and neither Gospel justifies the church's celebration of Palm Sunday as though it were an Easter before Easter.

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue



Unknown, Osnabrück altarpiece, Westphalia, 1370s

Even if we've set out on the Lenten pilgrimage on Ash Wednesday and taken every step in penitence and prayer, we are still not prepared for the arrival. Neither were those who joined Jesus in Galilee and made their way up to Jerusalem. For many it was an annual pilgrimage, this Passover. Others, having to travel greater distances, saw the Holy City through the joyful tears of those who know they will never make

the journey again. But in one particular year, the pilgrimage was a once-in-a-lifetime experience because it was made in the company of Jesus of Nazareth. For him too, Jerusalem was the end of a pilgrimage.

The portion of the journey to which Mark draws our attention goes from Bethany, a town just east of the Mount of Olives, to Jerusalem. It is difficult to listen to Mark describe the scene because the event has been elevated into a major Christian celebration, Palm Sunday or Passion Sunday, and celebrations tend to draw upon all the available resources in order to enlarge the drama. Matthew contributes the children, John the palms, and all the Evangelists except Mark describe the pilgrimage as going into the streets of the city. Only Mark speaks of the procession going to the entrance of the city, and says that Jesus went alone into Jerusalem. He alone enters the temple, not to occupy it, not to cleanse it, but to survey it, and then to leave it and the city, retiring with the Twelve to Bethany. Simply put, Mark's account is not only brief, it is restrained and without the claims about Jesus found in the other three Gospels.

This is not to say that the journey from Bethany to Jerusalem is for Mark an unimpressive parade. There is the mysterious locating and commandeering of an unbroken colt, the silence of Jesus except for instruction to two disciples, the large and loud crowd, the garments and branches to pave his way, and the bursts of praise and blessing. But this description is subdued compared to that of Matthew, who makes Zechariah 9:9 the centerpiece of the event, calls Jesus King, says the people hailed Jesus as Son of David, enlarges the crowd and pictures all Jerusalem in turmoil over the celebration. The relatively modest narrative in Mark is consonant with the secrecy surrounding Jesus throughout this Gospel. The popular description "triumphal entry" better fits Matthew than Mark, and neither Gospel justifies the church's celebration of the day as though it were an Easter before Easter. As we sometimes have early warm weather called "false spring," so it is possible to observe a "false Easter." Those who keep the last Sunday of Lent as Passion rather than as Palm Sunday avoid the problem.

Whatever may have been in the minds of the crowds, whatever may have been in the minds of the Twelve, the reader knows there is more going on than a parade honoring Jesus. One might describe the event as a protest march. Although there is only a dramatic hint of protest in the passage before us—he entered the temple, looked around and left—the larger context justifies the term. 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. Jesus protested the subordination of human need and welfare to the rigid and unfeeling application of law. As early as chapter three, Mark reports that Jesus' positions on key issues brought threats against his life. And, of course, once Jesus was in Jerusalem, protest followed protest, beginning with Jesus' interference with temple practices.

The stakes are higher now—he is no longer in the villages and open country of his home province. This is the capital and the seat of religious and civil authority, where chief priests and elders have power. To what extent the crowds of pilgrims or the residents of Jerusalem supported his protests is not fully clear. The crowds were “spellbound by his teaching,” and Jesus' popularity with them caused his opponents to fear the crowds.

The final Sunday of Lent is therefore marked by a celebratory parade, which was also a protest march. Only Jesus knew that the same event was also a funeral procession. The Twelve should have known; on three occasions Jesus had told them of his approaching death in Jerusalem. Their response after each prediction makes it evident, however, that they did not comprehend his words. It is painful to read of their continuing claims of adequacy for what lies ahead and of their divisive competition for seats of favor in the coming kingdom.

But we must not rush to judgment. The Twelve spent much time with Jesus listening and observing, it is true, but that time together lay on the other side of the cross and the empty tomb. After the resurrection they remembered—and for the first time, they understood. To their credit, they regrouped. Records subsequent to Mark testify to faithfulness in continuing the work of Jesus, even in the face of opposition as strong as any Jesus himself had to endure.

It is important for the reader to remember that we know the end of the story and view the whole through an empty tomb. This realization checks our impatience with those who walked with him from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. But this realization is also a burden, a burden of knowing. How solemn and heavy is the joy of being admitted into the circle of those who now understand, at least in part. “To whom much is given . . .”