

Reality check: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11; 14:1-15:47

by [Susan Andrews](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

When I was a child, I loved Palm Sunday because we got to act out the biblical version of a ticker-tape parade. Later I learned of the ephemeral quality of stardom and parades and decided that Palm Sunday and Passion Week belong together. As a pastor, I have accepted the dismal fact that most of our people skip Thursday, Friday and Saturday, slipping from parade pandemonium to Easter ecstasy with none of the suffering and pain. This first day of Holy Week is a crucial time to set the scene and tell the truth about the cost of God's crucified love.

Unlike those of the other Gospel writers, Mark's version of Holy Week is stark, lean and filled with vivid pain. It has none of the rage of Matthew, none of the warm weeping of Luke, none of the victory and power of John. Even the Palm Sunday parade, from Mark's perspective, is dark and dismal. The crowds are smaller, the cries are dimmer and the turmoil has dwindled away by the time the stragglers reach Jerusalem. And Mark's Jesus is an enigma—quiet, pensive, tense, withdrawn—a most unkingly monarch riding on a colt, a rich symbol of royalty. Why is Jesus so withdrawn? What is going on behind that stoic gaze? Why is this parade filled with so much pathos?

What is most intriguing about Mark's version of Palm Sunday is the last sentence in the text: "Then [Jesus] entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything . . . he went out to Bethany." Unlike Luke and Matthew, in which Jesus storms into the temple and hastens his death through anger and confrontation, here he wanders quietly into the temple and looks around. He does a reality check, and then slips away to Bethany. He withdraws to a place away from pressure and danger and decision—a place away from the inevitability of pain and suffering and death.

Mark's second Gospel reading for the day adds to the tension. Here we see Jesus loved and touched and nurtured in Bethany while the priests and scribes plot to kill him and Judas schemes to betray him. What is this retreat? Is Jesus running away from the truth? Is he taking a deep breath before the end? Is he recoiling from the reality he's seen—admitting that the world is no better off than when he first began

his ministry?

And what about us? What do we see when we stop to look around and do a reality check in the temples and the tension points in our lives? If we have the courage to really look, to admit the way things are, we will see brokenness and evil, sin and disease, greed and injustice. We will see a bruised and scarred and empty world. This honest seeing will leave us sad, scared, hesitant, tired, in need of a time and a place to withdraw. And yet this seeing and this feeling are important. If we cannot see what needs to die in us, if we cannot put on the cross with Jesus all the darkness and sadness and needs of our lives, then there cannot be new life.

Jesus doesn't stay in Bethany. He goes back to Jerusalem, where he breaks bread with his disciples, breaks his body for the world, tears the curtain of the temple in two—and irrevocably weds God to the fullness of human pain and suffering. The reality check that Jesus starts in the temple only becomes more real through the passion of the cross. Instead of running away, Jesus embraces the ugly truth, and the energy of that embrace gives birth to new life and hope. The mystery of how that happens is the mystery of the Passion. We can't explain it; we can only experience it—the whole ugly truth of it.

The last church I served shared sacred space with a Jewish congregation. We regularly worshiped together, studied together and joined hearts and hands in the work of *tikkun olam*—"repairing the world." We discovered how much we had in common. But there was one place where we differed—sharply and emphatically.

During a seminar, I asked the Jews in the room to suggest images that came to mind when they heard the word *cross*. They answered: "Pain, prejudice, Holocaust, suffering, hate, punishment." I then asked the Christians, and their responses were "love, forgiveness, mercy, grace, salvation, rebirth." We had uncovered the central truth of the gospel: what the world sees as bad, we Christians claim as good because God can transform the blood of passion into the beauty of passion—and life has the last word.

Dying to the brokenness of the old, we can rise to the wholeness of the new—in the name of the One who humbles himself and is exalted to be the Lord of the world.