

TRULY, WAS THIS MAN GOD'S SON?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Mark 14:1-72, 15:1-39

If Mark's gospel were a "Who done it?" there would not be much of a mystery. He tells us at the beginning everything we need to know. First sentence, first chapter. God did it! This is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," Mark says. From the outset we know the answer to the question, "Who is this man, Jesus?"

He wants us to know this because there will be a lot of guesses as to who Jesus is throughout the gospel, every one of which will be wrong. The unclean spirits, the scribes, the crowds, even his own disciples will each take a turn at trying to guess who he is. They will call him the Holy One of Israel, Rabbi, Son of Man. They will suggest that he is from Beelzebub, the prince of darkness, and that he is the Son of David. After a storm at sea, his disciples will ask out loud, "Who is this that even the winds and the waves obey him?"

And so it goes throughout the gospel. The only one who will even get close will be Peter, who, when asked what people are saying about Jesus will answer, "John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets." But then, when asked his own opinion will say that Jesus is the "Messiah, the Son of the living God," but then prove that he doesn't understand what this means when he denies that Jesus must suffer and die. Close, but not cigar!

It is only at the end of the gospel, that a Centurion, of all people, not even a Jew, stands at the foot of the cross, and says, "Truly, this man was God's Son." But that is a translation that is prettied up, made more elegant than it is, in reality. The rough hewn koine Greek is more inexact than that, lacking punctuation as it does. Some scholars ask if the Centurion's words may not be so much a confession of faith than a question, perhaps even a joke, a derisive and abusive comment. By that reading, the Centurion mocks those who stand by and asks, "This pitiful wretch, this is the Son of God?"

We may not like that rendering, but one might rightly wonder if this Centurion, hardened by the cruelty of what he has done to so many others before Jesus, is no more moved by our Savior's death than he is by the criminals beside him. If the soldiers of Abu Ghraib could remain inured to their inhuman abuse of others, is it realistic to imagine a Centurion of the killing fields with a soft heart?

If the Centurion's words are an expression of faith, "Truly this was God's son!" it would be a dramatic final answer to a life about which there were many questions. But if it is the final question, in a gospel full of mistaken identities, then it is up to us to determine whether this, indeed, was God's son. It is the question that is left hanging in the air at the end of the gospel, "What is a good man like this doing in a God-forsaken place like that, hanging on a cross?"

Mark takes us to Jerusalem to focus on that dilemma. He brings Jesus and his entourage to the great city where all the prophets must go. He begins with the entry into Jerusalem which we, in our love of liturgical drama, have made into Palm Sunday, a

festive celebration, a ticker tape parade in which the townsfolk welcome a conquering hero.

But that is not Mark's take on what is happening, the *triumphal* twist is Matthew's spin. The palms are exclusively John's. Matthew, Luke, and John all take us into the streets of the city, but Mark leaves us at the gate looking in. His Passion Sunday story is a flop by comparison if what you want is a rehearsal for Easter, a grand parade with floats and balloons and confetti tossed in the air.

Mark takes Jesus only as far as the city's gate, where he dismounts, and goes alone to the Temple. There he takes a look, and Mark says, in a monumentally disappointing note that "as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

No cleansing of the temple, no crowds in the city, no children running beside the donkey...; just "as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

It's hard to tell from Mark's version what all the fuss is about. Is this a parade, a protest march, or a funeral procession?

One thing is clear, Mark wants us to keep our eyes on Jesus, and not get swept up in the moment. Jesus will stir up the city, but not today. Today, he will look in the temple, and see what is there, and return to the suburbs.

Mark downplays the entry because he knows the truth about the crowds. You can't have a messiah by opinion poll. They wanted a king like David, so they welcomed him like that. "Blessed is the coming kingdom of David" they said as he passed by, but on the cross there would be nothing about him to make them think of David. How fickle this crowd. How shallow their praise.

By Friday they will be ready to lynch him. They were sickened by his teachings of peace and of turning the cheek and forgiving ones enemies and rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. No wonder they spit on him, weak as he was. He didn't act like David at all. For Mark's taste, this is a day of gathering clouds, a day when the inevitable suffering draws close, the portal through which we pass to Holy Week and all its solemn remembrance.

And how disappointing is that, with our Hosanna's all warmed up, our Easter baskets already bought, the dye for the eggs in the cupboard. This cross in his future is not what we bargained for, because none of us does suffering very well. None of us likes to see the dark side of the human experience.

Who likes to read about the wall that separates the Palestinians from the Israelis? Who of us likes to hear about the massacre of innocents that goes on day after day in Darfur and Chad, or the civil war erupting in Iraq as the Muslim family turns on itself? Of course they don't show us the bodies of soldiers arriving at Dover! Too many flag draped coffins are depressing and bad for public morale.

None of us wants to look at the eyes of the woman on the elevator who is wearing the telltale wrap around her head, the sure camouflage of hair falling out stolen by chemotherapy or radiation. We don't do suffering very well. Our own or others. So we'd just as soon look away this week, if you don't mind. Keep busy, and punch in next Sunday when the brass quartet is here. It's a lot easier that way.

And yet, and yet, he haunts us, riding as he does to the city's gate, looking so young, so brave, taking our suffering upon him, knowing our death as he does.

For those who will keep their eyes fixed on him in these coming days, as Mark does, we learn who he is and what kind of *king* he will be.

That was the charge, you know, that he was the *King* of the Jews. But it was really the claim that he was the Son of God that incensed the Temple crowd against him. They didn't need another would-be messiah around making them look bad.

So they delivered him into Pilate's hand and lied. They said that Jesus was a threat to Rome, he who was a threat to them, claiming to be the King of the Jews, a title that Pilate nailed above his head on the cross.

And so, as one writer recalls, they put him through "the burlesque of a coronation, clothing him in purple and giving him a mock crown and scepter before they abased themselves and called out, "Hail, king of the Jews."¹

And there we see laid bare a most dangerous and persistent reality, the attempt of political power to usurp religious authority, mocking God's reign by dressing God in the trappings of the state's clothing. They borrowed the politician's cape and cast it around the shoulders of Jesus, then laughed at God's Son. He dies for political expediency.

And he dies for something much more. He dies to show us the length to which God will go to make our journey God's own journey; to redeem the value and nobility of our life, to make sacred again the profaneness of our humanity, to make as God's own all of human experience so that we are one with God again as if nothing had ever intervened to destroy that proximity.

Garry Wills tells a story about a terrible nightmare his young son had, that woke the child and him in the night. Wills writes,

When I asked what was troubling him, he said that the nun in his school had told the children they would end up in hell if they sinned. He asked me, 'Am I going to hell?' There is not an ounce of heroism in my nature, but I instantly answered what any father would: 'All I can say is that if you're going there, I'm going with you.' If I felt that way about my son, God obviously loves him more than I do. Perhaps the Incarnation is just God's way of saying, that no matter what horrors we face or hells we descend to, he is coming with us.²

I don't know about you, but for me, that is the very best of good news!

In a few moments we are going to hear the story of God's love poured out for us on the cross. It's called the *passion* narrative, because at its heart it is a story of love, a story of the height and depth and breadth of God's passion for us. It's also a story of suffering and sorrow, an account that looks at the worst that we can do square in the face, a story that ends in an affirmation that may also be a question. Words on the lips of a Centurion, of all people, asking "Truly was this man God's Son?" It may also be read as a statement of faith as well, "Truly this man was God's son."

Both readings are valid. And both leave the rest up to us. If this really is God's son, then what has he showed us of God?

And if he is not, then what has he showed us about ourselves?

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¹ Garry Wills, **What Jesus Meant**. (New York: Viking, 2006) 110.

² Ibid. 117-118.