

Palm Sunday (Mark 11: 1-11)

In Mark's Palm Sunday story, Jesus seems to have no understanding of rank.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 5, 2000](#) issue

Mark's Gospel is some kind of joke. It announces itself as the story of the Son of God, but it doesn't begin with glory. Instead it starts in obscurity in the wilderness. It portrays the disciples—surely the leaders of the church in Mark's day—as bungling fools. They watch Jesus perform one miracle, then doubt his ability to do the next. They help him feed the 5,000, but have no idea how he will feed 4,000. They see and believe, but when it matters, they run away.

Jesus teaches with authority. He is clearly placed to fulfill the longings of Israel, yet he starts talking about his death. When his death does come, and the pathos is the greatest imaginable, he cries out to his Father, saying, "Why have you forsaken me?" The bystanders misunderstand and think he is calling on Elijah, thereby reducing the scene almost to farce. Finally, three women are given a startling message at the tomb—that he is not here but lives elsewhere. Yet they say nothing to anyone, thus begging the question of how the Gospel ever came to be written at all. Is Mark's Gospel really some kind of joke?

Chapter 11 is no exception. Jesus approaches Jerusalem, the heart of Jewish worship and the seat of Roman authority. He comes down the Mount of Olives, the place from which, according to Zechariah 14, God will fight the nations and restore Jerusalem. Simon Maccabaeus entered Jerusalem this way in the second century BC. So, as Mark knew, did the Sicarius leader Menahem. Jesus has what neither Menahem nor Simon had: divine character, unanimity with God. But he seems not quite to know how to do it. At this key moment in the whole Gospel, when all eyes are on him and no one, it seems, can lay a hand on him, he loses the plot.

Where is the horse, the steed that bears the triumphant general, the untamable champion loyal only to the skilled commander, so beloved of great leaders from Alexander to Napoleon? It's not here. In its place is a young colt—hardly the symbol

of leadership. Jesus seems to have no understanding of rank. After all the fuss about procuring, even sequestering, the right animal, just the kind of action worthy of a king, he gets the wrong animal. He chooses an agricultural tool, not a weapon of war; a tractor, not a tank.

The crowd has more sense of propriety and parades him as befits a king. "Save us now," they cry. "Hosanna," they say, calling Jesus "the coming one," the one who restores the kingdom of David. All is well, for despite being on the wrong animal, he is surrounded by followers full of messianic hopes. He is approaching Jerusalem with authority and truth. He enters: this is the key moment. He approaches the temple: this is it. He looks around, sizes up the situation, and . . . goes back to the hotel. Back out to Bethany. What an anticlimax. How can we account for it?

The secret lies in the description of the search for the colt. Mark includes the words "you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden." Luke's Gospel has three new beginnings of this sort. Luke has Mary's womb, which has never before carried a child. More explicitly, he has this same phrase about the colt "that has never been ridden"; and on the night of the crucifixion he refers to "a tomb where no one had ever been laid." Three moments of novelty, or revelation. Matthew shares with Luke the reference to the womb; Mark shares with Luke the reference to the colt; John shares with Luke the reference to the tomb.

Thus for Matthew, the new beginning lies with the miraculous conception of Jesus. From the very start, God was doing a new and unique thing. Jesus is breaking barriers and subverting order from the very moment of his conception. For John, by contrast, there is nothing new in the same way about the conception of Jesus, since the word was in the beginning with God. What was new was that the word became flesh, flesh which died and was laid in a tomb in which no one had ever been laid. There had been many places of death, but this was to be the first from which death would give way to new life.

For Mark, the decisive moment has to do with the new colt which had never been ridden. Others had paraded and would continue to parade on a fine stallion. They would take on the authorities of their day by force of arms and die, gloriously or ingloriously, to be remembered as heroes and patriots. Others again, many more of them, would fall in with the authorities of their day, lacking the courage or the tenacity to hold out for the restoration of David's kingdom. But only Jesus confronted the powers with disarming love, only he rode to certain death with no attempt to

intimidate, destroy or surprise his enemies. In this moment Jesus does many things. He fulfills one prophecy while subverting others. He changes the notion of kingship by riding on a colt rather than a horse. And he makes a short journey from the land where his authority is recognized and his priestly power to heal and forgive is formidable, to the city where the people will reject him and his disciples will betray him.

This is perhaps the defining moment of Jesus' ministry. It seems, like so much of Mark's Gospel, to be some kind of joke. The defining moment of our ministry may leave us feeling foolish too. It comes when we, like Jesus, realize we are near the end of our journey; and we finally face up to evil, bringing nothing in our hands but what he had: peace and truth and love.