

A Three-Act Play

Viewing the Gospel of Mark as a three-act play, our readings for this week move us into Act II, as the focus shifts from Jesus as miracle-worker to Jesus as teacher. To be certain, the Jesus in this account is not one of an endearing mentor who greets students with a warm hug and is gently encouraging. In Mark's just-the-facts-mam style, Jesus's teachings are delivered in staccato, like bullet points in a research paper:

- *Whoever wants to be first must be last*
- *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes you*
- *Whoever is not against us is for us*

At times, Jesus seems terse and weary. But who can blame him? He literally has the weight of the world on his shoulders. Despite an array of miracles (including one at the beginning of this week, in which Jesus casts out evil spirits from a young boy), the disciples still don't quite get it. He tells them directly: "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." But they do not understand.

Nevertheless, there's plenty of jockeying for position. Even if the disciples can't quite fathom the resurrection, they recognize that Jesus is an influential leader, and they want to be considered MVPs. Like children, they argue about who is the greatest among them and, later, who gets to sit at his right and left sides. I imagine Jesus as a frustrated parent, pulling the car onto the shoulder after the backseat bickering reaches a crescendo. "To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant... whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And don't make me pull over again.

Jesus's teachings continue to upend conventional norms. To lead means to serve. The kingdom of God belongs to children. Wealth is not a key to heaven. Jesus shocks the disciples, telling them that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Throughout the readings, we see Jesus moving into ACT III, his arrival in Jerusalem and ultimately the crucifixion and resurrection. As foretold in Zechariah, Jesus enters from the Mount of Olives, taking a similar path as the traditional lamb sacrificed in the Passover. As Christians, we celebrate this triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, recalling how Jesus rode a simple colt and was welcomed with palms (or, as Mark says, "leafy branches") and great joy. The people praise, "Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” But crowds can turn quickly to mobs; these shouts of joy become chants for vengeance. “Crucify him,” these same people will bellow. “Crucify him.”

Our reading ends with Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers and merchants, a story present in all four gospels. Many scholars consider Jesus’s direct challenge to the authorities to be the trigger for his death just a few short days later. The end is near. But so too is the beginning.