

Very Good News Indeed

We begin this week with a secret plot to kill Jesus and end with his brutal crucifixion. In between, we have Judas's betrayal, Peter's denial, and the arrest and trial of Jesus. It could seem like it would be hard to find good news in these passages. Yet, in the midst of these dark days, Jesus introduces the eucharist during the Last Supper, a sacrament that we hold high and holy today. Further, Jesus acknowledges that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One. And that is very good news, indeed.

We will spend most of the week reading chapter 14, the longest in the Gospel of Mark. Just a few days earlier, Jesus entered Jerusalem to fanfare, with crowds waving palm fronds and shouting Hosanna. But public opinion can turn on a dime. As we begin reading, it is two days before the Passover, a major holiday that recalls the Hebrews' liberation from slavery and how God "passed over" the houses of the Israelites during the last of the plagues.

While Jesus is at a table with his friends, a woman comes with a jar of nard, an expensive perfume. Valued at about 300 denarii, the nard the woman pours on Jesus's head is worth about a year's salary. Understandably, some were upset, seeing the action as wasteful. But Jesus rebukes the criticism: the woman has shown a great kindness, offering her best to Jesus.

After this grand offering of the unnamed woman, we see the pending betrayal by Judas. Matthew's Gospel recounts that Judas is paid 30 pieces of silver for his stunning betrayal—an amount equal to about five weeks' salary, far less than the value of the ointment offered by the woman.

Jesus gathers for dinner with his disciples on the first night of the Passover. This is traditionally the time when the Pascal lamb is sacrificed, a fitting symbol of Jesus as the Lamb of God and his coming sacrifice on the cross for all of humankind. As they are eating, Jesus initiates the first eucharist. In the centuries since, Christians have celebrated the eucharist, breaking bread and sharing the cup of wine as the body and blood of Jesus, taken in remembrance of him.

With Mark's rapid storytelling style, we don't linger long in the upper room. Jesus and the disciples walk to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus foretells that they too will betray him with their denials, even earnest Peter. Then the group travels to the nearby gardens of Gethsemane, and Jesus prays. While at first, he appears to ask God to "remove this cup from me," Jesus ultimately surrenders completely to the

will of God, praying, “not what I want, but what you want.” Meanwhile, Judas arrives with a crowd to arrest Jesus, and they take him before the religious leaders for questioning. By this time, the crowd who welcomed Jesus earlier in the week has turned, giving false testimony. But even so, their testimony does not agree, and the leaders don’t have enough evidence to follow through on the plan to execute Jesus. That is until Jesus provides what they consider the key testimony. They ask, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” When Jesus says, “I am,” they cry, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy!” And “all of them condemned him as deserving of death.”

Meanwhile, Peter has been watching the scene unfold from afar. When he is approached by a servant-girl who asks if he was with Jesus of Nazareth, Peter denies it. She levels the accusation again, and then bystanders ask as well. At the third time, the cock crows, and Peter, knowing he has failed Jesus with his denials, breaks down and weeps.

The next morning, Pilate questions Jesus, asking him, “Are you the King of the Jews” Jesus replies simply, “You say so.” Despite more accusations and questions, Jesus makes no further reply. After the crowd cries for the release of Barabbas, a murderer, instead of amnesty for Jesus, soldiers led the messiah to Golgotha, which means the place of the skull. On the way, they mock him, twisting a crown of thorns into his head, striking him with a reed, and spitting upon him. The charge against him reads, “The King of the Jews,” and all who pass by deride Jesus, clucking that if he were truly the Son of Man, he would save himself. We end the week with the death of Jesus, the light of the world extinguished, the church without a future.

Before we move to the coming days, let us sit with Jesus’s death, mourning with Mary and the others, feeling their fear and bewilderment, the anger and the agony.