

## **Lenten Luncheon Reflections**

**Tuesday, March 11, 2008**

### **Jesus is Arrested and Put on Trial before the Jewish Council and Peter Denies Knowing Jesus**

Opening Hymn No. 32 “This is My Father’s World” stanzas 1 and 2.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for all of the assurance that comes to our lives as we can remember and can sing that this is your world. We praise you for all of the bountiful provisions that you make for our lives in this world that we have been able to share around these tables this day, both in terms of food and fellowship together with one another. Most of all we thank you for that assurance that though the wrong seem oft so strong you are the ruler yet, and that in the life, death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ your Son you have not only shown us your love for us and for the whole world, but also your power to enable us to know that that love is indeed the most powerful force in the universe. For all that it means to us to know that love and that power in our own lives we give you praise and thanks in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son and our Lord. Amen.

The four Gospels have often been called the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus with an introduction. Such a description reminds us of the way in which all four Gospel writers give far more details of the last week of the life of Jesus and then of his resurrection appearances than they do of all the rest of his life, or even of the rest of his ministry. This means as we shall see today and

next week that we have some of the longest chapters in the Gospel of Mark centered especially around the events of the Thursday and Friday of Holy Week, or as we often now call them Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. This is also true for the other three Gospels as well, though, the details they report may vary. Since during Lent this year our attention has been centered on the events of Holy Week as recorded in the Gospel of Mark this is where we will continue to set our attention.

Last week we traced part of the events of the Thursday of Holy Week as Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples and then went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. The last words we heard from Mark's Gospel last week were, (Mark 14:42) "Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand." These words mark the conclusion of the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus had asked the disciples to stay awake and to watch and pray and they had all fallen asleep. These words also prepare the way for what follows as we read (Mark 14:43-50): [43] Immediately, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. [44] Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." [45] So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. [46] Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. [47] But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. [48] Then Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? [49] Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled." [50] All of them deserted him and fled.

Rather than a crowd of people with swords and clubs that the chief priests, scribes and elders had roused up from people in Jerusalem to go out to arrest Jesus

it is far more likely that this was a group of temple police or temple soldiers. Except for security purposes the whole thing may seem a little strange to us that religious leaders would have a police force or a group of soldiers, but as the local collaborators with the Roman authorities the chief priests and all those in charge of the temple were permitted by the Romans to have a small military force, more than a police force, but less than a full blown army.

Judas identified Jesus with a kiss. Was this really necessary? Certainly the chief priests and the scribes and the elders knew who he was, but this may not have been the case with those whom they sent out to arrest him. In any case it was also probably getting dark by this time so it may not have been so easy, even if they knew Jesus, to recognize him in the midst of the disciples.

Mark reports, “One of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.” The report seems surprising. Was it standard practice for the followers of Jesus to carry swords? Or is this another instance of Mark showing how his disciples had failed to hear and to follow his message as the Prince of Peace?

It is interesting to see how the details of the story expand in the other Gospels. Luke is the only Gospel to report that Jesus heals the man whose ear had been severed. John reports that it was Peter who wielded the sword and names the slave as Malchus. In both Matthew and Luke Jesus tells the disciples to stop acting in this way.

Mark concludes the story of the arrest of Jesus in two interesting ways. First of all he says that “all of the disciples deserted him and fled.” In Mark with the exception of Peter, as we shall see shortly, we hear nothing further of the rest of the disciples until Easter Day.

Mark alone has this very interesting aside when he says, (Mark 14:51-52): [51] A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, [52] but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

Since Mark is the only Gospel to record this very revealing incident it is often suggested that this may be an autobiographical note and that the young man was John Mark himself, and that the Last Supper had been held in his home and then he had followed Jesus and the disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. Since Mark himself does not more clearly identify the young man it is impossible to prove who he was. The interesting thing is to think back to Genesis 3 and to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve seek to flee and hide away from God because of their sin and failure and their awareness of their nakedness. Like them with their own failure and sin the followers of Jesus flee away, one of them, very much like Adam and Eve in his naked state.

As we continue the story we see again how Mark starts one story and then brings in another one which helps to interpret or to stand in contrast to the first. The first story stands as we have said other weeks as the bookends holding the story in the middle. The first story begins as we read, (Mark 14:53-54) They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. [54] Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire.

It is at this point that we leave Peter warming himself by the fire in the courtyard of the home of the high priest.

There in that home we read, (Mark 14:55-59); [55] Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. [56] For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. [57] Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, [58] "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands,

and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.' " [59] But even on this point their testimony did not agree.

In these words Mark records what is often called the Jewish trial of Jesus, before the Council or the Sanhedrin. In the first stage of this trial the witnesses disagree amongst themselves. Twice Mark says 'that they gave false testimony' and "that their testimony did not agree. Under Jewish law, testimony was required from 'two or three' witnesses who had to agree in order to convict someone.

As the first stage of the trial fails we see how the chief priest becomes more anxious and so begins to interrogate Jesus directly. It would appear he was hoping now for a confession. As Mark says, (Mark 14:60-62) [60] Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" [61] But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" [62] Jesus said, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.' "

Although the testimony about Jesus and his sayings about the Temple had not been sustained by two or more witnesses, the judges were aware that his words about the temple constituted a veiled claim to royal authority. He was making moves that could only be explained if he thought he was the true King, the Messiah. Now there was nothing wrong, let alone blasphemous, with thinking oneself to be the Messiah. It might be dangerous. It might be laughable like we laugh about people today who claim to be Jesus Christ, but it was not a capital offence under Jewish law. Nevertheless the court knew, and Jesus knew they knew, that if someone claimed to be a king, and the Roman governor heard about it, there could only be one result. Crucifixion, though practiced widely in the Roman world for various offences, was the standard treatment for would-be rebel leaders. This prompts the High Priest's key question when Jesus remains silent

about the Temple. His response begins with what is translated as an affirmation, “I am.” The Greek phrase though could be translated as an affirmative or as a question, “Am I?” The High Priest clearly hears it as an affirmation, and this becomes the basis of his guilty verdict. Jesus as we see though is not content simply to respond with the “I am,” but goes on to add, “‘and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’” The words are in quotation marks because of the way in which Jesus is combining words from Psalm 110 and Daniel 7:13. The description of himself as the Son of Man based on this vision in the Book of Daniel is the way in which Jesus has chosen to speak of himself earlier in his ministry according to Mark. The implication is that the future kingdom of God to be brought by one like a Son of Man in Daniel is not just future but present now in the person of Jesus. The kingdom has yet to be revealed in power and glory, but it is already here in humility and service. Its presence is now known only to those who have faith and who believe, but one day it will be revealed for all to see. The same, of course, is still true for us today. As we have sung, “the battle is not done, Jesus who died shall be satisfied and heaven and earth be one.”

For the present, though, the trial moves to the third stage of verdict and abuse as Mark says, (Mark 14:63-65) Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "Why do we still need witnesses? [64] You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?" All of them condemned him as deserving death. [65] Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" The guards also took him over and beat him.

Jesus has been condemned to death and will now be headed over to Pilate. It is not yet daybreak. When day dawns on Friday, as we shall see next week, Jesus will be handed over to the Roman governor.

After the verdict has been pronounced and the abuse begins Mark returns to his first story, (Mark 14:66-72) While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came by. [67] When she saw Peter warming himself, she stared at him and said, "You also were with Jesus, the man from Nazareth." [68] But he denied it, saying, "I do not know or understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the forecourt. Then the cock crowed. [69] And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." [70] But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." [71] But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know this man you are talking about." [72] At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." And he broke down and wept.

In this case it is the contrast between these two stories that helps to illuminate each one. Jesus retains his integrity at the cost of his life. Peter loses his integrity to save his skin. Peter is interrogated by a lowly servant-girl and other bystanders and responds with cowardice. Jesus is interrogated by the highest officials in the land and responds with courage.

Mark's Gospel was written at a time when many Christians were undergoing persecution and threats to their very lives in Israel during the great rebellion of 66-74 CE. The experience of Peter would have been a temptation for many facing threats to their lives. The setting of the faithful confession of Jesus in the midst of Peter's denials offers those Christians three sources of consolation.

First, those who imitated Jesus rather than Peter would be applauded for their courage. Secondly, even those who imitated Peter rather than Jesus would be consoled with the hope of forgiveness and renewal as was later to be seen in his life. Thirdly, there is the reminder that neither denials nor even betrayals are the

worst sin against Jesus or God. The worst sin is despair – a loss of faith that repentance will always, always obtain forgiveness. We have to believe that had Judas broken down, wept, and repented, like Peter, he too would have been forgiven. In Mark Peter reappears on Easter morning, but Judas never appears again.

We may not face the threats to our lives that Peter or those early Christians faced but the assurance that he came to know even after his denial is a continued source of comfort and strength to us when we fail to be faithful to what we profess as the followers of Jesus. For us the cross becomes the source of our assurance of such forgiveness and acceptance so that as we go forth seeking to live as the faithful soldiers of Jesus Christ it is the cross that goes on before us. Let us remember this cross and all it means to us as we sing the hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” found at No. 28. We will sing stanzas 1 and 4 and the refrains.

Closing Hymn: “Onward Christian Soldiers” stanzas 1 and 4 and refrains

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for the faithfulness of Jesus that stands in such contrast to the lack of faithfulness by his disciples. Grant us your strength to follow his example rather than theirs each and every day. Above all, help us to continue to hear the good news of your forgiving love even when we fail, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

*Much of the material for this presentation was drawn from the book, “The Last Week,” by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. HarperCollins, 2006, and Mark for Everyone by Tom Wright. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.*