

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for Palm Sunday
March 29, 2015 (Year B)

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Reflections on Mark 14:1 - 15:47

HOMILIST: Please sit down. The passion is long, and we will get to it in a moment. It is a story that needs more to be experienced than talked about, so I will not give a homily afterwards, but will try to set the scene at the beginning and make a few observations along the way.

For weeks we have been singing about the grain of wheat that must die. Today's readings from the prophet Isaiah (the suffering servant) and from Paul's letter to the Philippians (Christ emptying himself), each in its own way, contemplate this difficult truth. Like us, Jesus's followers, especially the chosen group of The Twelve, have also been forewarned, no fewer than three times in Mark's gospel, that Jesus has to die. But they cannot wrap their minds around it.

We all have a hard time facing death, especially when it gets close, or when it is untimely, and especially when it is as brutal and unjust as Jesus's was. This week is an invitation for us to look at Jesus's death "up close and personal," but with the support of our community and a religious tradition that gives it meaning.

We know that the Twelve will be tested and they will fail: one by betraying him, the others by running away in fear, and in Peter's case, by trying to follow but losing his courage and denying that he knows him. Their failure is something we recognize, because we fail too. Jesus will suffer and die alone, misunderstood and abandoned by his closest disciples. But Mark's gospel also

gives instances when someone has a flash of insight into who Jesus truly was and what he was about—though that insight does not come from those closest to him!

Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Jerusalem after a long walk from Galilee. Mark's focus is on Jesus and his core group of 12 men, but we know the group was larger than that; much later, for example, we will hear that there were many women among his disciples, "following Jesus and ministering to him."

It is about a hundred miles, give or take, from Galilee to Jerusalem, something like walking from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles. The distance is not only geographical, but also cultural and political. Galilee is governed by Herod Antipas. Herod, although officially Jewish, has no interest in religious matters, as long as he is not being personally attacked (that was the mistake John the Baptist made), so the government does not enforce religious orthodoxy; the chief priests who run Jerusalem have no jurisdiction in Galilee.

Judea and Samaria are governed directly by a Roman procurator. Pilate doesn't care about religious orthodoxy either, and avoids Jerusalem whenever possible. He prefers to stay in the seaside town of Caesarea, which the Romans built to their tastes, with a forum, a theater, a hippodrome, and water brought in by aqueduct for Roman baths. But he has a big problem: Jerusalem, the ancient capital associated with King Da-

vid and messianic hopes, is a potential flashpoint for nationalist and religious passions. In deference to the feelings of the Jewish populace, Rome has ceded local governance to the high priestly families of the city, assisted by the “elders” (the leading lay families) and the “scribes” (religious scholars). But the Romans maintain a permanent garrison in the Antonia fortress, strategically overlooking the temple grounds. Pilate comes to Jerusalem only at critical times, like Passover.

Jesus and his disciples are part of an immense influx. The population of Jerusalem quadrupled during Passover, with pilgrims from all over Judea; Galilee; and the Jewish diaspora. Security, naturally, is an issue. The “city fathers,” as we might call the chief priests and elders, are hoping for a festival that is a spiritual, civic, and com-

mercial success. As a pale comparison, we might think of security measures taken during Fiesta in Santa Barbara. The “city fathers” also know that things could get out of hand, as sometimes happens at Deltopia or Halloween in Isla Vista. They have their security forces on the alert to avert any trouble.

Jerusalem is crowded, but Jesus is not staying in the city itself. Every night he walks to Bethany, leaving the plateau on which Jerusalem sits, going down into the Kidron Valley to the east, and climbing up the Mount of Olives and over its crest to Bethany, which lies on the slope facing away from Jerusalem. It is not far, not quite two miles, perhaps a forty-minute walk. And that is where Mark’s Passion begins, not with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, but the day before.

VOICE 1. (Mk 14:1-11)

Now Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to begin the next day. And the chief priests and the scribes were exploring ways that they might secretly capture Jesus and put him to death. For they were saying: *Not in the midst of the crowded festival, or a riot may break out among the people.*

Now Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, and during dinner a woman came in carrying an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment, genuine nard; and shattering the alabaster jar, she poured it over his head. But some who were there muttered indignantly to themselves: *Why the total loss of this ointment? It could have been sold for almost a year’s wages, and the money given to the poor.* And they loudly berated her. But Jesus responded: *Leave her alone; why do you trouble her? She has treated me with honor. For you will always have the poor everywhere in your midst; and whenever you wish, you have the power to do good for them; but you will not always have me. But she has done what she could; in advance, she has anointed my body for burial. Amen, amen, I tell you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of in memory of her.*

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to hand Jesus over. When they heard of his plan they were happy and promised to give him money. And he kept looking for the best way to hand him over.

HOMILIST: Mark introduces his Passion with this scene, in which someone has one of those flashes of insight into what Jesus truly represents. She comes out of nowhere, she says nothing, and she is given no name, but her action stands out as a beacon of light, in contrast to the framing episodes that tell of the treachery of the chief priests and Judas’s plan to betray Jesus.

Her action is simple – breaking a jar of ointment over the head of Jesus. This action has deep scriptural echoes, because that is how the prophet Samuel had anointed Israel’s first king, Saul, and later the great King David. Did she wish to acclaim Jesus as the one who was ushering in the Kingdom of God? We don’t know what she had in mind, since she spoke no words,

but she obviously has seen something in him. Jesus affirms her instinctive grasp of a truth too deep for words. He also makes explicit another dimension of his mission when he comes to her defense against the clueless and censorious on-

lookers: her anointing of him is not only for kingship, but also for burial. *Unless the grain of wheat shall die . . .* Her affirmation is the last flash of understanding and recognition that Jesus will have before he dies.

VOICE 2 (Mark 14: 12-15)

Then on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed, Jesus's disciples asked him: *Where do you want us to go and prepare so you can eat the Passover meal?* And he dispatched two of his disciples with the following instructions: *Go up to the city, and a person carrying a jug of water will meet you; follow him. And wherever he goes into a house, say to the owner of the house: 'The teacher says, where is my guest room, where I am to eat the Passover meal with my disciples? Then he will show you a large upper room, well-furnished and ready; and there you shall prepare for us.* And those disciples left, came to the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared for the Passover.

HOMILIST: It was a religious duty for the residents of Jerusalem to offer hospitality free of charge to Jewish pilgrims coming to celebrate the great national feast. Mark's gospel tells us that Jesus and his disciples were given a large, comfortably furnished room on the second floor, above the hustle and bustle of the ground floor. How many would be in attendance? We don't know. Jesus and "the Twelve" would arrive later. In the meantime, there were a lot of preparations to be made, though Mark does not spell them out. Someone would have to take a lamb, probably purchased earlier, to the inner court of the Temple complex. He (or they) would have

to be men, since women were not allowed that far into the temple. There they would probably have to wait with a lot of other men for their turn to have it sacrificed. The lamb would then be brought back and cooked. Someone, perhaps the women who came with Jesus from Galilee, would have to provide the other symbolic elements of the feast, unleavened bread and quantities of wine, along with bitter herbs and all the other makings of a festive dinner. We have no idea what the seating (or reclining) arrangements were for the whole group, though it seems that Jesus and the Twelve dined together.

VOICE 2 (Mk 14: 16-31)

When it was evening Jesus arrived with the Twelve. And while they were reclining and eating the meal Jesus said to them: *Amen, I say to you that one of you will hand me over, one who is eating with me.* They began to be very sad, and to say to him one by one: *It's not me, is it?* But he replied: *One of the Twelve, the one who is dipping bread with me in the dish, for the Son of Man goes forward as it has been written of him, but destruction awaits that person by whom the Son of Man is handed over; it would be better for that one if he had never been born.*

And during the meal he took bread, blessed it, broke it into pieces, and then gave it to them and said: *Take, this is my body.* And he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them; and all drank from it. Then he said to them: *This is the blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for all. Amen, I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I will drink it new in the kingdom of God.*

And after singing hymns they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them: *You will all fall away, because it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'* But after I am raised up I will go before you into Galilee. But then Peter said to him: *Even if everyone falls away, it will not be I.* Then Jesus said to him: *Amen I*

say to you that today, on this very night before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times. But he responded vehemently: *Even if I have to die along with you, I will never deny you.* Then the others said the same thing.

HOMILIST: With full stomachs and heavy eyes, after a festive meal with several cups of wine, Jesus and the Twelve set out toward the Mount of Olives. The disciples must have

thought they were on their way back to Bethany for the night, but Jesus stopped at a place named for the vats used for catching the oil of an olive press: Gethsemane.

VOICE 1 (Mk 14: 32-52)

And they came to a plot of land whose name was Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples: *Sit here while I pray.* And he took along Peter and James and John with him, and he began to be distressed and troubled. And he said to them: *My soul is sorrowful unto death. Remain here and keep on watching.*

And going forward a little, he fell on the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. And he said: *Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take away this cup from me. But not what I wish but what you wish.* And he came back and found them sleeping, and said to Peter: *Simon, are you sleeping? Were you not strong enough to watch one hour? Keep watching and praying lest you enter into testing. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.* And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came back and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy. And they did not know how to answer him. And he came a third time and said to them: *Do you go on sleeping and taking your rest? He is being paid off. The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is being handed over into the hands of sinners. Get up. Let us go. Look, the one who is handing me over has come near.*

Just then, while he was still speaking, Judas arrived, one of the Twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and wooden clubs from the chief priests and scribes and elders. The betrayer had given them a signal, saying: *The one whom I kiss—he is the one. Seize him and lead him away securely.* And when he came, he approached Jesus right away, and said: *Rabbi.* And he kissed him warmly. They laid hands on him and seized him. One of the bystanders drew his sword, struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. And in answer Jesus said to them: *Have you come out as against a bandit with swords and wooden clubs to arrest me? Day by day I was with you in the Temple, teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled.*

And they all left him and fled. And a certain young man was among those following him, clothed with a linen cloth on his naked body. And they seized him. But he left behind the linen cloth, and fled naked.

HOMILIST. The guards would then have walked Jesus back up into the city and around to the official residence of the high priest, who

called together his council, the Sanhedrin, consisting of the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes.

VOICE 2 (Mk 14: 53-72)

And they led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter followed him from a distance right into the courtyard of the high priest, and he was sitting with the attendants and warming himself at the blazing fire.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were seeking testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, and they were not finding it. For many were bearing false witness against him, and their testimonies were not consistent. And some were standing up and bearing false witness against him, saying: *We heard him say, 'I will destroy this sanctuary made by hands, and within three days I will build another not made by hands.'* And even so their testimony was not consistent.

And the high priest stood up in their midst and asked Jesus, saying: *Have you nothing at all to answer to what these men are witnessing against you?* But he was silent and answered nothing at all. Again the high priest ques-

tioned him, saying: *Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?* And 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.* But the high priest tore his garments and said: *Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy. What does it seem to you?*

They all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face and strike him and say to him: *Prophecy.* And the attendants took hold of him, slapping him.

VOICE 1. And while Peter was down in the courtyard one of the servant women of the high priest came. And she saw Peter warming himself and looked at him, and said: *You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus.* But he denied it, saying: *I do not know nor understand what you are saying.* And he went out into the forecourt, and a cock crowed. And the servant woman saw him there and began to say again to the bystanders: *This man is one of them.* But he kept on denying it. And after another short while the bystanders were saying to Peter: *Truly you are one of them, for you too are a Galilean.* And he began to curse and swear: *I do not know this man of whom you speak.* And immediately a cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered the word Jesus said to him: “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he rushed out and wept.

HOMILIST: It would have been a long and lonely night of anguish for Jesus, for Peter, and for all his followers, none of whom knew what

the dawn would bring. How far would the high priest and his council go to make their point?

VOICE 2 (Mark 15: 1-20)

And as soon as it was morning the chief priests convened a council with the elders and the whole Sanhedrin; and they bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. And Pilate questioned him: *Are you the King of the Jews?* But he answered him, saying: *You say so.* And the chief priests were accusing him of many things. But Pilate questioned him again, saying: *Don't you answer anything at all? See how many charges they are bringing against you.* But Jesus answered nothing more at all, so that Pilate was left wondering.

At the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested. There was a man named Barabbas imprisoned with rebels who had committed murder in the uprising. And the crowd approached and began to ask that he do as he was accustomed to do for them. But Pilate answered them, saying: *Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?* For he recognized that the chief priests had handed him over out of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas to them instead. Pilate in turn answered, saying: *What then do you want me to do with the one you call the King of the Jews?* But they in turn shouted out: *Crucify him.* Pilate kept saying to them: *What evil has he done?* But they shouted all the more: *Crucify him.* So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them. And he handed Jesus over, after having him flogged, to be crucified.

VOICE 1. But the soldiers brought him inside the courtyard (that is, the praetorium), and they summoned the whole cohort. And they clothed him in purple, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him: *Hail, King of the Jews!* And they were striking his head with a reed, and spitting on him, and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had finished mocking him they took the purple garment off and put his own clothes back on him. And they led him away to crucify him.

VOICE 2 (Mk 15: 21-39)

And they pressed into service a passerby, a certain Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the countryside, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to a place called Golgotha (which means “place of the Skull”). And they crucified him. And they divided his garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide who might take them. It was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him was “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two bandits, one at his right and one at his left. And those who were passing by kept vilifying him, wagging their head and saying: *Well, well! You who are destroying*

the sanctuary and building it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross. So too the chief priests were mocking him to each other along with the scribes, and were saying: He saved others. Himself he cannot save. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross that we may see and believe. And those who were crucified with him were also reviling him.

And when the sixth hour came, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And in the ninth hour Jesus shouted in a loud voice: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*, which means, *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?* And some of the bystanders, when they heard, were saying: *Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down.* But Jesus let out a loud cry and expired. And the veil of the sanctuary was rent in two from top to bottom.

And when the centurion who had been standing there opposite him saw that he had expired, he said: *Truly this man was the Son of God.*

HOMILIST: Another surprising flash of insight, from another nameless outsider, a Roman no less! *Truly this man was the Son of God.*

VOICE 1 (Mark 15: 40-47)

And there were also some women looking on from a distance; and among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Younger and Joses, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, were following him and ministering to him, and also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

It was already late, and since it was the day of Preparation (that is, the day before the Sabbath), Joseph of Arimathea, a respected councilor who was looking for the reign of God, plucked up his courage and came before Pilate to request the body of Jesus. But Pilate was surprised that he had died so soon. Summoning the centurion, he questioned him about whether he was already dead. And having heard from the centurion, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen cloth, and placed him in a tomb that was hewn out of rock, and rolled a stone at the opening of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were observing where he had been placed.

HOMILIST:

It was the women—whose discipleship and service are unmentioned in Mark's gospel until now—who were prepared to see the events of this day through to the bitter end. They remained at Golgotha long enough to witness the body being released to Joseph of Arimathea, and to see where he laid it to rest. Their intention was to complete for Jesus what the anonymous woman in Bethany had begun – to anoint his

body for a proper burial. Because of the lateness of the hour, and the approach of the Sabbath, they would have to wait--not only overnight, but a full 24 hours beyond that. Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Joses would be back, to become the first, indispensable witnesses to the astounding truth about Jesus. But in the meantime, they must wait, and ponder in silence what they had just experienced.

Let us take time to do the same!