

Lesson of the Fig Tree (Mark 13:28-32)

This section continues the Eschatological Discourse of Jesus on the Mount of Olives in response to his disciples' questions.

[28] "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.

[29] So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

[30] Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.

[31] Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

[32] "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

I. THE "WHEN"

On the Mount of Olives the Apostles asked Jesus "**when**" the destruction of the Temple would occur (v.4), and the "**sign**" of the end of time. Jesus now returns to the first question asked him in verse 4.

Jesus replies that just as the budding fig tree heralds the summer, so "these things" will mean "**he is near even at the gate.**"

Jesus advises his disciples to read the signs of the times; when they see the events he has just described begin to take place, they should be aware that the end is close at hand.

He is near could also be translated **it is near**, and is an enigmatic statement. Jesus could be referring to the destruction of the temple about which the disciples had questioned him.

Or is Jesus referring to his coming in glory (v. 13:26), or even possibly to the Antichrist, the “desolating abomination standing where he should not be?”

Verse 29 seems to be an echo of the “desolating sacrilege” prophecy of verse 14, the only other place where Jesus refers to a specific coming event as a signal for the elect.

It is not clear whether this is the enemy or the Son of Man.

A. “THIS GENERATION WILL NOT PASS AWAY . . .”

“Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.”

In traditional Jewish reckoning, a generation was 40 years. And indeed, the events in the foreground of Jesus’ discourse – the fall of the earthly temple and the cataclysmic transition from the former age to the new – did take place within 40 years of his prophecy.

Here, Jesus is repeating his promise that the kingdom of God would come with power within the lifetime of his contemporaries (9:1).

“But was Jesus mistaken in placing these distinct events in such close proximity? Was he wrong to assume that the ruin of Jerusalem meant his return in Glory was imminent?”

The idea that Jesus, and much of the new testament erred in assuming that the second coming will happen soon has influenced much modern Biblical interpretation.

But this view fails to take into account the symbolic and figurative way in which Jesus and the early church interpreted history, in which past and future events both shed light on and are understood in light of Jesus and his Paschal mystery.

Jesus was not asserting that the end of history would come immediately but rather that his passion, and with it the transition

from the old covenant to the new, is the beginning of the end, the entrance into the final stage of God's plan that will culminate in a new heaven and a new earth" (see *Gospel of Mk - Mary Healy, p271*).

II. BE WATCHFUL (13:32-37)

[32] "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

[33] Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.

[34] It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

[35] Watch therefore -- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning --

[36] lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

[37] And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

While there will be a sign that the destruction of Jerusalem is at hand, there'll be no way of knowing the moment of the glorious coming of the Son of Man verse 32.

- This is the Father's secret not given even to the Son to reveal.

Finally, though the question was asked by four of the original disciples, Jesus' answer is meant not only for them but for all the disciples, and for us: **"What I say to you I say to all: Watch."**

THE HOUR of DECISION (MARK 14:1-31)

I. THE CONSPIRACY TO KILL JESUS

A. Overview

At this point Mark brings us to the climax of his gospel, Jesus' passion and victory over death. The evangelist began preparing us for this already in 3:6 with the plot of the Pharisees and Herodians to destroy Jesus.

But from 8:31 on, with Jesus' repeated predictions, the gospel really becomes a journey to Jerusalem and the cross. With chapter 14 the passion story begins.

[1] It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him; [2] for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people."

B. The Passover

The **Passover** was the yearly Jewish feast celebrating God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery as related in the book of Exodus (Ex 12). It was their main national and religious festival.

Passover began in the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan, when the lambs were slaughtered in the temple. After sunset the lambs would be eaten in the ceremonial Passover meal, the Seder.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread began with Passover and continued for a full week during which the Israelites allowed no trace of yeast in their homes.

- Jesus' passion was to be the fulfillment of this event, God's definitive deliverance of his people from slavery to sin and death.
- The essential rite of the Passover meal consisted in eating the Paschal Lamb sacrificed (14:12) in the temple the afternoon before the feast.

At sundown families or small groups would gather to eat a Seder meal of lamb, unleavened bread, wine, and herbs.

Combined with the festival of **Unleavened Bread**, the liturgical celebrations ran seven days, from the 15th of the month of Nisan (Mar/Apr) until the 21st of the month.

Passover and the feast of **Unleavened Bread** were originally separate feasts, the latter beginning immediately after the former and lasting for a week. In practice, though, the feasts merged into a week-long celebration called the **Passover**.

C. The Chief Priests and the Scribes

The **chief priests and the scribes**, along with the elders, were the religious authorities whom Jesus had prophesied would “hand him over” and condemn him to death (8:31); (10:33), and who had been plotting his death.

It is the third day of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem, the day that runs from Tuesday evening to Wednesday evening of holy week.

II. ANOINTING AT BETHANY

While in Jerusalem for Passover, Jesus stayed overnight in Bethany, a village on the south eastern slope of the Mount of Olives.

[3] And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster

flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.

[4] But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted?"

[5] For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her.

[6] But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.

[7] For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me.

[8] She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying.

[9] And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

A. Anointing for Burial

In Bethany, Jesus is attending a formal meal in the house of Simon the leper. While reclining at table, a woman approaches Jesus with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfumed oil called nard (or spikenard).

Nard, and aromatic oil made from a root native to India, appears in the Song of Songs as the bride's perfume for the banquet of the king (Song 1:12).

Mark does not identify the woman, though John identifies her as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 11:1-2).

The woman boldly breaks the alabaster jar and, in an extravagant gesture, pours the expensive nard over Jesus' head. Her boldness in doing so, risked the indignation of hosts and guests.

B. A Beautiful Thing

“What did she mean by this gesture? On one level, it was her way of giving Jesus the very best she had. To anoint someone’s head with oil was a gracious and hospitable gesture. This woman must have experienced Jesus’ healing, forgiveness, or unconditional love, and wanted to express her love in return.

But for Jews steeped in the Old Testament, to anoint the head with oil also had another unmistakable meaning:

- It is the way to crown a king (1 Sam 10:1; 16:13), and
- To ordain a priest (Ex 29:7).

This woman’s gesture is a symbolic recognition of Jesus the Messianic King and High Priest! Although she may have been only dimly aware of the significance of her act, Jesus recognized and affirmed it, “***She has done a beautiful thing to me.***”

- Moreover, her anointing was a *prophetic* gesture, anticipating his death: ***she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.***

“Because Jesus would die like a common criminal, his body would not be properly anointed for burial. In fact, the passion account ends with women going to anoint his body (16:1) – but only this woman succeeds because she has done it *beforehand*” (See *Gospel of Mark: Mary Healy, p 277,278*).

C. Some Were Indignant

Some of those present, perhaps some of the disciples themselves, are taken aback by her “wastefulness.”

"Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her.

Jesus interrupts their scolding of the woman and tells them to **let her alone**. Why do you make trouble for her? Who authorized you to sit in judgment of this woman?

- Jesus defends her action: **she has done a beautiful thing for me.**

You can just sense the self-righteous indignation of the protesters.

But what about their argument? It is good to do beautiful things for Jesus, but it is even better to help the poor – in this case, to use a year's earning to feed a destitute family for a year rather than blow it all on one luxurious head anointing?

Jesus' response is, **the poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them.**

III. JUDAS PLOTS TO BETRAY JESUS (MARK 14:10-11)

10] Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them.

[11] And when they heard it they were glad, and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

In stark contrast to the woman who anointed Jesus, Judas, one of Jesus' intimate circle, plots to betray him.

The chief priests would welcome his collaboration since Judas could easily locate Jesus amid the estimated quarter of a million (some say a million) pilgrims jamming Jerusalem for the Passover.

And he could do it stealthily when Jesus was away from the protection of the crowds.

D. Price of Betrayal

“Promised to give him money . . .”

Judas was given “thirty pieces of silver” (Mt 26:15). His cold, calculating act of treachery for personal profit contrasts sharply with the woman’s lavish gift of love in the preceding episode.

Greed blinded Judas from seeing Jesus’ true identity and worth.

IV. PASSOVER PREPARATIONS (MARK 14:12-16)

Mark carefully notes that what follows occurs on the feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread. According to the Jewish calendar, Passover was celebrated on the 15th of Nisan (Mar/Apr) and began on the full moon.

The feast would begin on the 15th of Nisan at sunset.

Jesus comes to the Holy City to celebrate the night of Israel’s redemption from Egypt (Ex 12), a night which Jewish tradition also held to be the night of Israel’s *future* redemption.

He chose the setting of the great feast for the culmination of his mission. He is the true Paschal Lamb that is about to be sacrificed, and the Unleavened Bread about to be given.

- In him the Passover of Israel is fulfilled and revealed in its deepest meaning.

The Passover meal (15th Nisan) is the setting for the betrayal and institution of the Eucharist.

12] And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?"

[13] And he sent two of his disciples, and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you;

follow him,

[14] and wherever he enters, say to the householder, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?'

[15] And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us."

[16] And the disciples set out and went to the city, and found it as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

A. First Day of Unleavened Bread

"The combined feast of Passover and **Unleavened Bread** began with the late evening Passover meal. In preparation for the feast, that afternoon each family's **Passover Lamb** would be brought to the temple (14th Nisan). After passing inspection, the lamb was sacrificed and its blood sprinkled on the altar. It was then returned to the family to be roasted" (*GM – MH, p281*).

B. The Passover of Passovers

Jesus sends two of his disciples to go and make preparations for the eating of the Passover meal. In Luke the two disciples are Peter and John.

It appears that Judas did not know the location of the Passover meal.

Given what had taken place earlier in Mark's Gospel, for example, Peter's declaration of Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem where he was hailed as King and Son of David, there must have been great excitement on the part of the disciples.

According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah was expected to celebrate Passover and establish his kingdom in Jerusalem. Could this be the night? Was this to be the Passover of Passovers? Had the long-awaited time finally arrived?

C. The Upper Room

There is an ancient Christian tradition that the house of the Upper Room (Cenacle) was owned by Mary the mother of St. Mark, to whom, it seems, the Garden of Olives (Gethsemane) also belonged.

This room was probably also the place where the 120 disciples waited in prayer after Jesus' ascension, and where the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost (Acts 1:13; 2:1).

V. PROPHECY OF BETRAYAL (MARK 14:17-21)

[17] And when it was evening he came with the twelve.

[18] And as they were at table eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."

[19] They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?"

[20] He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me.

[21] For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

A. The Passover Meal

From the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels it is apparent that Jesus' last supper was simultaneously the celebration of the Jewish Passover and the institution of the Eucharist.

Passover meals were eaten after sunset.

In the midst of the celebration, Jesus shocks the Twelve by announcing solemnly that one of them will betray him. He does not mention Judas by name (as if the treachery is too horrible to do so!)

In Judaism and the Near East, table-fellowship was an outward sign of peace, trust, and even amnesty. There was no greater breach of loyalty than to turn against someone whose hospitality you have enjoyed and whose **table** you have shared.

The betrayal is foretold in Psalm 41:9: “Even the friend who had my trust, who shared my table, has scorned me.”

“Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one whom I called to be my disciple and share my life. Jesus shall be handed over to death by a member of his new family by someone who is eating with him.

Reflection: *Have I ever betrayed Jesus by suppressing the truth: The truth about life and death, heaven and hell, salvation and judgment?*

For the Son of Man goes . . . that is, goes to his death but may also be a hint at his going to God as the outcome of his death.

“. . . As it is written of him.” Jesus again speaks of his coming suffering and death being in accordance with what is written in Scriptures (Mark 9:12), perhaps having in mind Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12.

Jesus’ suffering and death are in accordance with the will of God (see 8:31) which Jesus freely accepts.

B. Woe to That Man

But even if Jesus’ being handed over to death is in accordance with God’s will, the one who will hand him over will still be responsible for his actions: ***but woe to that man by whom the son of man is betrayed.***

Jesus’ ***woe*** is a cry of sorrow. Jesus still does not name his betrayer but speaks of him as ***that man***. That man’s betrayal of Jesus will result in the death of Jesus, but his betrayal will mean a

fate worse than death for himself: ***it would be better for that man if he had never been born.***

C. God's Will and Human Freedom

Jesus' announcement gives Judas a chance to repent and abandon his evil plans without anyone having to know. He appeals to Judas by warning him in advance of the dreadful consequences of his act.

Judas freely chooses to betray. Now he's fully responsible for it.

God does not condemn us because he's love, but he accepts the choices we make of our own free will. In this case, Judas has chosen to destroy Jesus, and in the process the very essence of his own being.

How dreadful to betray Our Lord Jesus.

Reflection: *Is it I Lord? To what measure and to what frequency does Judas live in me? Am I following Jesus or am I betraying Him? Am I looking for Him, or for something else?*

Love, by its very nature, cannot coerce love. Jesus' words seem to be an insurmountable barrier to the possibility of Judas' salvation, especially when we read: "None of them was lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled (John 17:12).

- This scene depicts the mysterious interaction of God's sovereign will and human freedom.

VI. THE INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST (14:22-25)

[22] And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."

[23] And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it.

[24] And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant,

which is poured out for many.

[25] Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

A. He Took Bread . . .

Jesus uses the ritual of the Jewish Passover supper to introduce a new meaning. A Passover supper would include:

- a blessing by the head of the household;
- the ceremonial foods (unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and the Paschal lamb), and wine;
- the retelling of the story of the exodus, and
- the singing of hymns.

The host of the Passover meal would offer a blessing for a loaf of bread, thanking God for providing food for its people. The host would then break the bread into portions and distribute it among those eating together as a sign of the fellowship they were enjoying.

The breaking and sharing of the unleavened bread recalled:

- The affliction of the people in Egypt, and
- The two miracles of the multiplication of the loaves (6:41; 8:6)
he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them.

Mark uses this same language to recount Jesus' multiplication of the loaves.

"Take; this is my body." But Jesus now identifies the bread as his body, his whole person, which will be present when the disciples celebrate this meal.

Jesus identifies the unleavened bread of the Passover feast with his own flesh (John 6:51). This gift of his humanity in the sacrament is inseparable from his self-offering on the Cross, since together they constitute a single sacrifice in which Jesus is both the priest and sacrificial victim of the new covenant (CCC 1363-65).

B. This Is My Blood of the New Covenant

Among the principal elements of the Hebrew Passover, is the sharing of **four** cups of wine, each having its own special significance.

Jesus' words over the bread are the briefest possible. More attention is given to the words over the cup (in the context of Passover, this is the **third** ceremonial cup – the memorial cup or cup of blessing - taken after the meal).

Jesus gives thanks! The verb in Greek for **give thanks**, *eucharisteo*, is the origin of the church's name for the sacrament commemorating the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist.

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

Three Old Testament passages are evoked by his words:

- Exodus 24:6-8, the Old Testament sealing of the covenant by the blood of sacrifice;

[6] And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar.

[7] Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."

[8] And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, "Behold the **blood of the covenant** which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

- Jeremiah 31:31-33, the promise of the New Covenant (though the word “new” is not used, Jesus reinterpreted of the Old Testament symbol implies it); and
- Isaiah 53:12, “**the many**” for whom the Suffering Servant offers his own life, as already foretold by Mark (10:45).

The Eucharist is therefore a sacrificial meal in which the whole meaning of Jesus’ life and death is expressed. Since the cup also summarizes discipleship (10:38; 14:36), table-fellowship with Jesus is also a commitment to martyrdom.

As the IGNATIUS Catholic Study Bible (ICSB) puts it (see note on 14:24, p 45):

As the Old Covenant between Yahweh and Israel was sealed through sacrificial blood on Mount Sinai, the New Covenant between Christ and the Church is sealed through his own blood poured out in the upper room on Mount Zion.

This new and perfect sacrifice enables us to enter a covenant of communion with the Father for the forgiveness of our sins. The blood of Jesus is forever a sacrament of his divine life for those who receive him in the Eucharist (CCC 610, 1392–93; John 6:53).

C. The Fourth Cup

I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.

It is clear from verse 25, at least, that Jesus did not partake of the fourth cup which celebrated the consummation of the covenant, that is, God’s coming to take his people into the fullness of covenant union.

In Luke, this comment falls between the two phases of the supper, the Hebrew and the Christian.

Jesus’ conclusion reveals two more facts.

First: he would die, but this does not mean that we will celebrate the Eucharist without him. After his resurrection he will once again preside at the meal with us from the kingdom of his Father.

This saying of Jesus, ***I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine . . .***, looks forward beyond the death of Jesus to the fellowship in the Kingdom of God, and that sharing in the drinking of the cup is a token of anticipation of that Kingdom.

Second: the Eucharist, as ritual, will come to an end at the end of time and history, but it will continue as a sharing of life and love with God and among ourselves. The Eucharist on earth is a prelude to, or a rehearsal of paradise. Paradise is the Eucharist fulfilled.

VII. PETER'S DENIAL FORETOLD (MK 26-31)

[26] And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

[27] And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

[28] But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

[29] Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not."

[30] And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

[31] But he said vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same.

A. Sung a Hymn

The *Hallel* Psalms (113-118) were sung during the course of the Passover liturgy. Jesus and the disciples were probably singing

Psalms 115-118, the completion of the *Hallel*, just before they left the Upper Room for the Mount of Olives.

B. Predictions of Failure

Predictions of failure in the followers of Jesus frame the intimate atmosphere of the Supper. It begins with the denunciation of the betrayer. It ends with the prediction of abandonment and denial.

After the last hymn of the Supper, on their way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus abruptly says, "**You will all fall away . . .**" or as Matthew puts it, "**this night you will all lose faith in me**" (Mt 26:31).

The Passion will shake the faith of the disciples and it will be, for the moment, a scandal - an insurmountable obstacle.

C. I Will Strike the Shepherd

Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7: '**I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.**' Zechariah foresaw the messianic shepherd of Israel struck down, leaving his sheep temporarily without leadership.

Jesus implicitly identifies himself as the Shepherd, and his followers as the sheep.

"But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Jesus' resurrection will restore faith. That fellowship which died with the scandal of the Passion will also be resurrected. It will happen in Galilee, a place of the most vivid experiences and heartfelt feelings.

D. Peter's Denial

Peter hears only half of what Jesus has said. He is ready to believe that **all** the other disciples will fail Jesus, but Peter refuses to accept that his own **faith** will be **shaken** and that he too will fail.

"Even though they all fall away, I will not." Peter takes Jesus' prediction as a criticism of his loyalty and brashly contradicts

Jesus, as he had done before (8:31-32). Peter, like many of us, does not know his own weaknesses.

Reflection: *Am I able to face up to my own weaknesses and sins? Or do I suppress the truth about myself?*

We do not know the limits of our own weaknesses. We cannot tell to what point we are prepared to accept the cross in our lives. We must have faith in Jesus' prayers for us, and in the communion we share with him, especially through the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Preparation for Week 12 – Betrayal and Condemnation

- Read Chapter 14 – *Gospel of Mark* – ICSB
- Review Study Questions on Chapter 13, p. 57 – ICSB
- Read *The Gospel of Mark - Commentary* by Mary Healy, pages 256-273.