MARK'S PASSION-NARRATIVE

Four proleptic symbolic acts (10,46-11,25)

By DAVID STANLEY

THE APPROACH of Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem, where the drama of Passion and resurrection is to be played out, is clearly of great moment in the eyes of Mark, who — quite arbitrarily, as the Fourth Gospel will indicate — depicts this visit to the centre of the ancient israelite religion as a unique occasion in Jesus's earthly life.[1] With greater verisimilitude the fourth evangelist portrays Jesus as participating in the great pilgrimage feasts of Passover and *Sukkōth* ('Tabernacles'), even the more recent celebration of *Hannukah* ('Dedication') instituted only in maccabean times. The two other synoptic writers imply, by their inclusion of Jesus's sorrowful apostrophe to the holy city, certain other visits and even an extended ministry in Jerusalem. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem! murderess of prophets, who stones those [God] has sent to her, how often have I desired to gather your children, as the mother-hen gathers her chicks under her wing — yet you would not have it!' (Mt 23,37; Lk 13,34).

The contrived nature of Mark's re-arrangement of traditional data in the section we now consider (10,46-11,25) bespeaks a clearly indicated theological design, and this impression is confirmed by the evangelist's collocation of a constellation of four symbolic actions on the part of Jesus. This marcan attention to symbolism, unusually rare, at least by contrast with the Fourth Gospel, is noteworthy and raises questions in the mind of the reader. A general answer may be given at once: Mark is already preparing the background for the story of the Passion. The four transactions whose symbolic character Mark has chosen, the cure of blind Bartimaeus (10,46-52), Jesus's carefully planned entry into Jerusalem (11,1-11), his curse upon the fig-tree (11,12-14.20-25), which frames the expulsion from the temple-precincts of various traffickers (11,15-19), quite obviously are intended to link the final prediction of his Passion and resurrection by Jesus (10,32-45), with the brief series of narratives about his Jerusalem ministry.

It is instructive to observe that Ignatius, in somewhat similar fashion, makes certain transpositions in the contemplations he suggests towards the close of the Second Week. In the Mysteries of the Life of our Lord he has inverted the matthean ordering (26,6-10) of the supper of Bethany (Exx 286) and the narrative of Palm Sunday (21,1-17; see Exx 287); while for the tenth, eleventh, twelfth days of the Second Week in his text, he has rearranged his own alignment (Exx 161, 288, 285, 287). While Ignatius himself gives no explanation for this double mutation, it is clear that he wishes the exercitant to conclude the Second Week as he began, with the contemplation of Jesus acclaimed as king. Moreover, he appears to wish also to provide a ray of light before the darkness of the Passion. Such alternation of light and darkness will be observed also in the opening narratives of the marcan account of the Passion.

1. HEALING AND VOCATION OF BARTIMAEUS (10,46-52)

10,46 Now they come into Jericho. Then as he was departing from Jericho with his disciples and a considerable crowd, Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus), a blind beggarman, sat by the side of the road. 47 And on hearing, 'It is Jesus the Nazarene!', he began to shout, 'Jesus, Son of David, take pity on me', 48 while many people kept rebuking him to make him keep quiet. Yet he went on shouting all the more, 'Son of David, take pity on me!' 49 Then Jesus stood still and said, 'Call him here'. So they now call the blind man, 'Courage! get up! he is calling you'. 50 But for his part, throwing off his outer garment and leaping up, he came towards Jesus. 51 In response to him, Jesus asked, 'What do you wish me to do?' So the blind man said to him, 'Rabbouni, let me see again!' 52 Then Jesus told him, 'Off with you: your faith has saved you'. Then he recovered his sight at once, and he kept following him along the road.

Mark has seemingly found this ancient story in some jewish-christian collection, as his translation of the aramaic name *Bartimaeus* and his use of the emphatic aramaic form *Rabbouni* for rabbi (my master), would suggest. The evangelist tells this lively story in a manner distinctly different from the earlier cure of a blind man at Bethsaida (8,22-26), where the messianic secret was still stressed. The fact also that this is the single miracle-story in this final section immediately preceding the passion-narrative — the last was the cure of the epileptic deaf-mute (9,14-29) — gives a clue to its special significance. Noteworthy too is the performance of the cure in the

presence of all Jesus's followers, the 'crowd' as well as his 'disciples'.

As Fr Schnackenburg has observed, there are several symbolic values present in this tale. The blind man invokes Jesus by the (in this Gospel) unprecedented title, 'Son of David', reminiscent of the royal messianic themes in the Old Testament. Where Matthew makes much of this concept from the opening of his Gospel (1,1.17), Mark rarely alludes to it (see 12,35-37). Yet here Jesus responds to the repeated invocation, and summons the man to himself. The quick *volte-face* in the attitude of the 'many' who were attempting to hush up the importunate beggar adds a subtle touch of humour, and the blind man's own spontaneous reaction to the bystanders' patronizing words of reassurance brings a lively note into the dramatic scene. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the narrative, however, is the fact that Jesus himself acknowledges the royal style, Son of David, by ordering those around to summon the beggarman, whom he then asks 'What do you wish me to do?' The query amounts to encouraging the disabled man to explain why he called Jesus 'Son of David', — a complete departure from Jesus's consistent avoidance of any such publicity. The emphatic *Rabbouni* suggests that this is almost a repetition of the royal title.

It is to be noted that the miracle is not recounted until after Jesus's apparent dismissal of the petitioner, with the important declaration, familiar to the reader from the story of the woman suffering from haemorrhaging, *after* her restoration to health; 'your faith has saved you'. Such faith the man had expressed with his cry, 'Son of David, take pity on me!' Mark seems to be saying that the time for guarding the messianic secret is terminated, now that Jesus is walking to his death. This impression is heightened by the way the evangelist concludes: 'he recovered his sight at once, and he kept following him along the road'. Bartimaeus not only receives sight, but also the implied call to discipleship.

2. JESUS MAKES HIS ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM (11,1-11)

Mark has chosen to underscore the symbolic values in this momentous assumption of the initiative by Jesus. Such a calculated act of courage reflects his awareness, arrived at in the course of his public ministry, that his death at the hands of the Romans with the connivance of the religious authorities constitutes, by God's design, an integral part of his earthly mission of proclaiming the imminent

inauguration of the Kingdom of God. The evangelist accordingly dedicates an impressive portion of his narrative to a detailed description of the preparations for this episode, undertaken wholly by the initiative of Jesus. This writer will employ the same technique when introducing the story of the Last Supper (14,12-16). Moreover, in both accounts, Mark inserts, for the only times in his Gospel, references to the prophetic knowledge of Jesus.

11,1 Now as they are approaching Jerusalem near Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, he despatches two of his disciples, 2 as he says to them, 'Go off into the village facing us: immediately upon entering it, you will find a colt that has been tethered, which no human being has yet ridden. Untie it and bring it here; 3 and should anyone say to you, "Why are you doing this?", say, "The Lord needs it, but he will at once send it back here"'. 4 So they went off and found a colt that had been tethered near a gate outside in the street, and they are loosing it, 5 when some people standing there said to them, 'What are you doing, untying that colt?' 6 So they told them what Jesus had said; then they gave them permission. 7 They bring the colt to Jesus, and spread their cloaks on it, and he mounted it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut rushes that they brought out of the fields. 9 And both those ahead and those who were following cried out repeatedly, 10 'Hosanna! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming — Hosanna in highest heaven!' 11 So he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple-enclosure. Then sweeping his eye round to observe everything, he retired to Bethany in company of the Twelve, as it was already late.

The evangelist, as has been noted, takes every care to indicate that this important act by Jesus, his entry into Jerusalem and its sequel, the prophetic action of reforming the divine cultus, is all carefully planned by Jesus and thought out in advance. Thus Mark depicts Jesus, when his little company is a few miles from the holy city, preparing his sacred and solemn ingress. This is the thrust of the introduction: 'as they are approaching Jerusalem near Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives'. It was to be the reverse of the route taken by David as he fled at the rebellion of Absalom from his royal city: 'David wept as he went up the slope of the Mount of Olives; he was bare-headed and went bare-foot' (2 Sam 15,30). The prophet Zechariah had described his vision of the final triumph of the Lord, located on this same eminence: 'A day is coming for the Lord to act. . . . On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is opposite Jerusalem to the east . . . and the

Lord my God will appear with all the holy ones' (Zech 14,1-5). Mark will allude to this final chapter of Zechariah in his drama of the cleansing of the temple-precincts by Jesus (Zech 14,21c).

Jesus's minute instructions to 'two of his disciples' suggests his exact prescience of what these emissaries will experience. They are to find a young donkey, 'a colt . . . tethered which no human being had yet ridden'. This was the mount of ancient royalty, as can be seen from Jacob's prophecy concerning the kingship of Judah: 'The sceptre shall not pass from Judah, nor the staff from his descendants. . . . To the vine he tethers his donkey, the colt of his ass to the red vine' (Gen 49,10-11). The prophet Zechariah had thus announced the future triumph of Judah: 'Rejoice, rejoice, daughter of Zion, cry out for joy, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king is coming to you — a just Saviour he, meek and mounted upon an ass, a colt, the foal of an ass' (Zech 9,9). St Matthew will expressly draw attention to this text by employing it as one of his 'formula-citations' to interpret the present happening (21,5). The statement, 'The Lord needs it', is the unique instance in this Gospel of the proleptic use of the title for the risen Jesus, 'the Lord', and Mark puts it in the mouth of Jesus himself. The dignity of Jesus is also implied in his use of 'a colt . . . which no human has yet ridden'. It is again suggested by the action of the disciples as 'they spread his cloaks on it' — a sign of honour bestowed on dignitaries. This is the point, finally, of the marcan reference to an ancient near-east custom: 'many people spread their cloaks on the road'.

The invocation by those who form Jesus's royal suite, *hošīyāh nā'* ('Save us!'), taken from Psalm 118,25, is the equivalent of *vivat!* The same psalm is also the source of the acclamation, 'Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord!' (Ps 118,26). It was the customary benediction bestowed by the priests upon all pilgrims as they mounted for the great festivals to Jerusalem. Mark has drawn attention to the messianic meaning he has intuited in this joyous procession by adding a prayer-wish found in no other Gospel: 'Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming!' In the Old Testament David is not called 'our father', an honour reserved exclusively for Abraham. Mark now includes an invocation to God himself, as it is his kingdom that is being symbolically inaugurated: 'Hosanna in highest heaven!'

The inevitable question in the mind of the modern reader, 'What really happened on this occasion?', remains without a satisfactory answer, particularly if one assumes that this dramatic scenario is

something more than a symbolic dramatization by our evangelist. That it did not occur as Mark has presented it may be inferred from the fact that such a demonstration never became an issue at either trial during the Passion.

Mark concludes his story of Jesus's entry into the holy city with a brief notice: 'he went into the temple-enclosure. Then sweeping his eye round to observe everything, he retired to Bethany'. Thus the evangelist suggests some premeditated plan for the morrow in the mind of Jesus.

3. PROPHETIC CURSE OF A FIG-TREE: JESUS'S MIMED PROPHECY IN THE TEMPLE-PRECINCTS (11,12-25)

The editorial adjustments by which Mark uses the cursing of the fig-tree and its fulfilment to frame Jesus's liberation of the area surrounding the temple from any vestige of commerce, are worthy of close consideration. They provide a deeper appreciation of our evangelists's inspired insight into two of Jesus's most enigmatic actions.

A curse for a fig-tree

11,12 Now on the morrow, as they came out from Bethany, he was hungry; 13 and catching sight from a considerable distance of a fig-tree in leaf, he went up to it to see whether he might find anything on it. But when he came to it, he found nothing on it but leaves, as the season for figs had not come. 14 In reaction he said to it, 'No longer for the future may anyone eat any fruit from you!' And his disciples were listening.

Cleansing of the temple area

15 So they come into Jerusalem, and entering the sacred enclosure he began to expel buyers and sellers in the enclosure, while he overturned money-changers' tables and dove-sellers' seats. 16 Nor would he permit anyone to carry a vessel through the enclosure.

Teaching with authority

17 And he continued teaching them and instructing them, 'Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?" — Yet you have made it "a robbers' cave"'. 18 Now the high-priests and the scribes came to hear of this, so they went on seeking means to destroy him. Yet they were afraid of him, as the entire people remained spell-bound at his teaching. 19 Then since it had become late, he went off outside the city.

Teaching on prayer

20 Now, early in the morning, as they were making their way past, they saw the fig-tree had withered up from the roots. 21 And drawing his attention to it Peter remarked, 'Look, rabbi, the fig-tree you cursed has quite withered up!' 22 In response Jesus says to them, 'Keep your faith in God! 23 Amen I tell you: anyone who tells this mountain, "May God pick you up and throw you into the sea" — and does not doubt in his innermost self, but believes that what he declares will happen, God will do it for him!

24 Consequently I am telling all of you: everything, whatsoever any of you keep asking for in prayer, continue to believe you have received, and God will do it for you. 25 Now whenever you stand for prayer, be forgiving — should you hold anything against anyone — in order that your Father in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.'

In his text of the Second Week, Ignatius directs that the entire tenth day be devoted to the theme, 'Our Lord preaches in the temple' (Exx 161: see 288), one of the very rare instances where the Saint suggests a contemplation on Jesus's teaching. He has intuitively grasped the significance attached by all the evangelists (see Jn 7-8) to the activity of Jesus in this locale and at this juncture in his public ministry. It may appear puzzling that Ignatius provides for this day but a single lucan verse. 'And he was teaching daily in the temple-area' (Lk 19,47). Yet, like Mark in this present narrative, Ignatius desires the exercitant to become engaged in seeing how this 'teaching' is communicated principally by Jesus's activity, rather than through any words.

In order to assist his reader to understand the message Jesus communicates through this symbolic act prophesying the reform of divine worship, Mark has resorted once again to a technique characteristic of him — already familiar to us from his interweaving of the cure of the woman suffering from haemorrhages with the raising of Jairus's daughter. Here the evangelist interrupts the strange story of the cursing of a fig-tree by Jesus — itself a symbolic act — to recount the prophetic 'charades', by which he foretells the renovation of the cultus. Mark then resumes the story about the fig-tree, which offers him an opportunity for one of his very infrequent instructions on the nature of christian prayer.

The story of a curse uttered by Jesus by which he destroys a fig-tree has caused grave difficulties both for the critic of the gospels and for the pietist — for contrasting reasons. The pious fundamentalist, in his anxiety to accept the incident with ingenuous over-

literalness, is 'disedified' at what appears to be a 'real, historical' example of bad temper on Jesus's part. The critic who rejects out of hand the historicity of the tale attempts to explain it as Mark's historicizing of the parable involving the fig-tree, which appears in the eschatological discourse (13,28-31). Neither approach is very productive, and hence it seems more helpful to grasp the significance of the symbolism of what is in effect a prophecy of the religious bankruptcy of Judaism — without worrying oneself with the historical character of the incident, now beyond our powers of verification.

It will be recalled that the prophets of Israel frequently had recourse to a wordless miming of a message from God for his people. Isaiah, during the peril to Judah from the Assyrian, Sargon II (711 B.C.), went about naked for three years at God's command — a warning to his people not to go to the relief of Ashdod (Isai 20,1-6). After the defeat of Egypt by the Neobabylonians at Carchemish (605 B.C.), Jeremiah was given a divine injunction to bury a loin-cloth in the banks of the river Perath (the Euphrates?), where it rotted (Jer 13,1-11) — a prophetic sign to Judah of the destruction to be visited upon Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. Ezekiel in his turn was bid carry out a series of complicated symbolic actions to prophesy the doom of Jerusalem (Ezek 4,1-5,17).

That Jesus's curse pronounced on the fig-tree belongs to this category of prophecy becomes clear once the marcan text is read with attention. Jesus 'was hungry', which explains his search for figs despite the notice that 'the season for figs had not come', even though 'the fig-tree' was 'in leaf'. Thus it becomes a sign of the showy fruitlessness of the religion of Judaism, that will be superseded by Christianity. It is important to note that Mark, who, alone of the evangelists, has elsewhere depicted the anger of Jesus (3,6), gives no hint of such emotion here, or, for that matter, in the following scene. The lessons for the crucial need of faith and for prayer which this symbolic curse entails will be given later.

In order to grasp the particular meaning which Mark, by contrast with the fourth evangelist, draws from the prophetic mime of chasing all 'buyers and sellers' from the sacred enclosure, it should be remarked that what might strike the modern reader as desecration was in reality necessary for the carrying out of the ancient cult of God, which enjoined the sacrifice of animals or birds. Thus the 'buyers' mentioned were those devout Jews who wished to offer sacrifice to God, the 'sellers', those who provided on the spot whatever was necessary for it. 'The money-changers', who set up

their tables in the court of the Gentiles within the temple-area, were on hand to assist those who wished to pay the annual temple-tax, required of each jewish male, a tyrian half-shekel, coinage now for two hundred years no longer current. The 'dove-sellers' offered the means for the poor of making an uncostly sacrifice. Ignatius's evident sympathy with this group of vendors is expressed through a detail probably borrowed from Ludolph the Carthusian: 'to the poor vendors of doves he said kindly, "Take these away. Do not make my Father's house an emporium"' (Exx 277). The Saint, it may be noted, was reading this benign interpretation into John (2,16). Mark says nothing of this. He is, however, alone amongst the evangelists in including the detail of Jesus's refusal to 'permit anyone to carry a vessel through the precincts of the temple'. Conceivably Mark may be alluding to the apocalyptic description of the renewed cult of God on 'the day of the Lord', found at the very end of Zechariah. 'On that day . . . every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holy to the Lord of hosts. . . . On that day there shall no longer be any merchant in the house of the Lord of hosts' (Zech 14,20-21).

This series of prophetic actions by Jesus is now interpreted with the help of Isaiah (56,7): 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'. An english commentator on the second Isaiah observes that here its 'highest title' is bestowed upon Israel's unique shrine. Mark's intention, however, is to remind the christian community that it must strive to live up to its lofty call as 'a house of prayer for all'. That this is the evangelist's purpose will become clear from his ensuing remarks on prayer for his original addressees. The fourth evangelist constructs his version of this episode — which he places early in his account of Jesus's ministry — with the help of Psalm 69,9 (a psalm that frequently figures in the passion-narratives): 'Zeal for your house is devouring me'. But he makes no use of the isaian citation in Mark, since he puts a distinctly different interpretation upon the incident. It is the risen body of Jesus that will become a new sign of God's presence to his people, replacing the ancient Jerusalem shrine with 'the sanctuary of his body' (Jn 2,22).

Mark adds a brief allusion to the words of Jeremiah, 'Do you think that this house, this house which bears my name, is a robber's cave?' (Jer 7,11). This was part of that prophet's 'Temple-discourse', shortly after the death of Josiah at Megiddo (609-608 B.C.), condemning the superstition and evil practices perpetrated under Jehoiakim: thus in Jeremiah's eyes the temple in Jerusalem was simply a 'hideout' for the wicked. Consequently, one may assume

that our evangelist probably intended the brief citation as a demand for moral conversion, which the new cultus inaugurated by Jesus's death and resurrection would require, rather than as any indication of fraudulent practices in the selling of offerings for sacrifice.

Mark makes the reader cognizant that wind of the affair reached the religious authorities, who remain guarded in their hatred of Jesus and their plotting upon his life, since 'they were afraid of him, as the entire people remained spell-bound at his teaching'. This issue will be given prominence in the evangelist's report of the trial of Jesus before the supreme tribunal of Judaism (14,58). The notice of Jesus's withdrawal 'outside the city' may serve as a sign in Mark's eyes that our Lord dissociates himself from any profanation of the divine worship. Ignatius suggests (Exx 288) another motive: 'since there was no one in Jerusalem who would receive him'.

Mark has created a reply for Jesus to Peter's keen-eyed observation of the total destruction of the fig-tree, from a series of independent sayings preserved in the tradition. While the phenomenon to which Peter drew attention provides the occasion for this brief but profound instruction on prayer — the only such teaching in the marcan Gospel (see 9,29) — the evangelist seems to insert it here to disclose his own interpretation of Jesus's prophetic action in cleansing the temple-precincts. To his mind, Jesus was actually teaching the community about its privileged role 'as a house of prayer for all nations'.

The essential foundation for all prayer, 'faith in God', is given the place of privilege by the marcan Jesus, and in a manner characteristic of his pedagogy (see the very serious condemnation of all who cause others a loss of faith at 9,42-48). He teaches through a dramatic exaggeration — Paul's 'faith that can move mountains' (1 Cor 13,2b). As a wise teacher, however, he carefully defines the minimal faith he requires by his 'does not doubt in his innermost self'. And Mark immediately subjoins another saying of Jesus which quite concretely illustrates the utter sincerity and simplicity of the trust and confidence required: 'everything, whatsoever any of you keep asking for in prayer, continue to believe you have received, and God will do it for you'. The strange turn this teaching about prayer takes was very early seen as a difficulty by some ancient copyists of the greek manuscript. However, it is to be preferred as the authentic reading. Mark gives a graphic presentation of the sense of 'does not doubt in his innermost self'.

The concluding saying is of particular interest, as it discloses

Mark's familiarity with the dominical prayer, the *Pater noster* — almost certainly in the form known to Matthew (Mt 6,9-13), as three details would indicate. There is the allusion to the normal jewish, the jewish-christian, posture at prayer: 'whenever you stand for prayer', the characteristic matthean phrase 'your Father in heaven', and the greek term, translated as 'trespasses', in Matthew's comment on the absolute need of forgiveness of others, which he adds immediately after his citation of the Lord's prayer (Mt 6,14-15). Our evangelist here attests his conviction that there cannot be any genuine openness to God's action in oneself, a prerequisite for true faith, without the corresponding compassion for, and receptiveness to, those with whom we deal. In this tiny gem of a treatise, directed towards the community. Mark, it will have been noted, speaks chiefly of petitionary prayer, the kind of prayer stressed constantly by Jesus himself in all the gospels. That Ignatius was persuaded of the paramount importance of prayer of petition may be seen in his consistent directive for the third prelude of all contemplations, 'to ask what I desire'; and in his use of 'ask' and 'beg' in the colloquies he suggests as the conclusion of each contemplation.

Mark's unusual emphasis on the symbolic is here meant to alert the reader to real, if hidden values in Jesus's Passion. The Bartimaeus incident becomes a sign that Jesus will die as the rejected davidic Messiah: an interpretation carried forward into the entry-narrative by the strange acclamation, 'Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming'. And the elaborately planned entry itself signifies Jesus's acceptance of his death as an integral part of his ministry. The prophetic cursing of a fig tree, which (only in Mark) brackets the symbolic cleansing of the temple enclosure, announces to the young Church that its role is to be a house of prayer for mankind. By the power of Jesus's death and resurrection it is to vindicate the real sense of the charge by suborned witnesses at the jewish trial, 'I will destroy this sanctuary made with hands, and within three days build another not made with hands' (14,59).

NOTE

[1] This article was originally a chapter in David Stanley's *The call to discipleship, the Spiritual Exercises with the Gospel of Mark*, published as *Way Supplement* 43/44 (January 1982). It was omitted for lack of space.