

April Book Summary

By Dan Brent

The Last Week

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Harper One, 2006, 238pp., \$14.

“What was the last week of Jesus’s life about? And because this story is seen as revelatory, as speaking to us today, what *is* it about?” (p.vii)

In this book, the authors take each day of Holy Week – from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday – and explore what was happening and what its significance was. They use Mark’s gospel account of those days to build around but they call on the other evangelists to fill in.

They see the real “passion” of Jesus not so much as his *day* of suffering as his *life* of urging people to join his effort to build God’s kingdom in this world. The authors’ own passion is to move readers to see this as their personal challenge with the encouragement of two Easter insights: *Jesus lives!* and *Jesus is Lord!*

PALM SUNDAY

Jesus entered Jerusalem from the east, riding on a donkey and cheered by peasants. Remarkably, at the same time, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, would have been entering the city from the west with his imperial cavalry. He needed to be in Jerusalem for the commotion of the Pascal Feast. Already there is a symbolic confrontation. Jesus is the preacher of peace through forgiveness and love. Pilate is charged with maintaining the *Pax Romana* with power and violence.

The authors provide a stunning account of how Palestine’s history and politics had created a very rich minority with power and a very poor and oppressed majority. “What we often call Jesus’s triumphal entry was actually an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission.” (p.32)

MONDAY

This is when, Mark says, Jesus drove the money-changers from the temple. The temple priests had become collaborators with the Roman oppression. The authors point out that Jeremiah (Ch.7) had threatened: “If God’s temple is used as a place where worship is substituted for justice, God will destroy that temple.” (p.46)

So “Jesus’s action in the temple was a symbolic fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophetic threat.” (p.52)

TUESDAY

For this day, Mark records arguments Jesus had with the Jewish leaders about his authority, Caesar's tax, etc.

WEDNESDAY

In Bethany an unnamed woman anoints Jesus to the dismay of some of the disciples. He'd predicted his death. The disciples dismissed the idea. She'd acted on it and anointed him, as Jesus explained, for his burial. "She is, for Mark, the first believer. She is, for us, the first Christian. And she believed from the word of Jesus before any discovery of an empty tomb." (p.104)

THURSDAY

"Shared meals were one of the most distinctive features of Jesus's public ministry." (p.113) He ate with sinners and other marginalized members of the society. He sent a clear message of inclusion. So, appropriately, his passion story begins with a meal. And it's with people who will within hours abandon him, deny him, and betray him.

This shared meal he instructs them to repeat in his memory. The bread and wine is his body and blood and these are to be shared because his disciples are to join him in his journey through death to resurrection. In the garden, the prayer of Jesus "reflects not a fatalistic resignation to the will of God, but a trusting in God in the midst of the most dire of circumstances." (p.123)

FRIDAY

Condemned by Pilate after an enigmatic hearing, Jesus hangs on the cross from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon when he dies. His death is our ransom – but not, the authors argue, in the sense that God is demanding blood as compensation for sin and Jesus has been sent to pay that price on our behalf. Rather, God is exposing the futility of the "domination system" in which the rich and powerful always exploit the poor. Put together with the resurrection of Jesus, the message is that God's justice ultimately wins out. The poor, the slave, and the outcast are "free" because they know now that God has the last say no matter how oppressive their lot at the moment may be. "A Roman centurion pronounces judgment against his own empire, which has just killed Jesus: 'Truly this man – and not the emperor – is God's Son'." (p.155)

SATURDAY

Our Apostles Creed says, "He descended into hell." Daniel and the Maccabees expressed confidence that there would come a time when God would restore their mortal bodies. Matthew's passion account tells how, at the death of Jesus, "tombs were opened and saints were raised." Paul would later write (1 Cor.) "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." Greek frescoes made by early Christians capture resurrection scenes in which Jesus rises at the head of an army of holy ones. The gospels say next to nothing about this dimension but it is boldly imbedded in Christian tradition.

EASTER

The message is clearly that Jesus lives! The gospel accounts contradict one another on many details: who was there (e.g. one angel or two), what happened in Galilee, how the apostles found out, etc. But the bottom line is this: “The tomb really was empty . . . and Jesus really did appear to his followers after his death in a form that could be seen, heard, and touched.” (p.191)

“But we are convinced that an emphasis on the historical factuality of the Easter stories, as if they were reporting events that could have been photographed, gets in the way of understanding them.” (p.191)

It’s entirely possible, the authors suggest as an example, that the Emmaus story is a parable, marvelously full of insights for us in considering the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. “The risen Jesus opens up the meaning of scripture. The risen Jesus is known in the sharing of bread. The risen Jesus journeys with us, whether we know it or not. There are moments when we do come to know him and recognize him.” (p.201)

It’s possible that the sightings of Jesus after Easter morning were visions. Paul later saw and spoke with Jesus but his companions heard and saw nothing. The main points of the Easter experience were two. JESUS LIVES – God has vindicated Jesus and said “No” to the powers that executed him and that continue to exploit and persecute the just and the poor. And JESUS IS LORD -- and, in any age, those who have the power and the wealth and the titles are not Lord even if they are able for the moment to control, exploit, and manipulate people!

“Easter is about God even as it is about Jesus. Easter discloses the character of God. Easter means God’s Great Cleanup of the world has begun – but it will not happen without us.” (p.210) Now, today, the conflict between the kingdom of God and the domination system of our culture continues. Pilate and Jesus are entering the city. The authors finish the book with this question: “Which procession are we in?”