

Truly the Son of God

Mark 15:1-41

March 28, 2021 (Palm/Passion Sunday)

First Presbyterian, Luling

This is a long reading from Mark's Gospel, just about the whole chapter. And it's still only a piece of Mark's version of Jesus's last days. And within this one chapter, there are so many things we could talk about. Even though we began our worship with a triumphant, celebratory parade, we're already thinking about the cross. I imagine the disciples and those at that Palm Sunday celebration felt like the cross had come too quickly, too. Maybe something new caught your ear or eye this time through the story of the crucifixion.

What caught my attention this time is the centurion, a Roman soldier. He says, at the very end, "Truly this man was God's Son." The centurion hasn't appeared before, and all he does after this is confirm to Pilate that Jesus has died. Yet he says the most true words in the Gospel, words that—up to now—only unclean spirits have identified Jesus as the Son of God. And now that it seems like it's too late, this centurion does so. He's a Roman, a soldier. Not a Jew, not a disciple, not a follower of any kind. He's just there because it's literally his job to be there. But he speaks the truth that no other person has spoken. It's the truth that Mark began his Gospel with, in the very first line: the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The centurion confirms that truth. And nobody responds. Nobody does anything with it.

It's just one of the many things that Mark leaves unexplained. As I was pondering this verse this week, and doing some reading, I came across a suggestion that I had never thought of before. And it wasn't a suggestion made by just one person. Several writers suggested that maybe this centurion was being sarcastic. So what he meant was something like, "Oh sure. *This* was God's Son. That's why he's hanging on a cross, completely defeated. Could there be anyone *less* likely to be God's Son." I immediately discarded this idea as kind of ridiculous, but I kept reading and the reasoning makes some sense.

Everyone, representing every group of people, has ridiculed and rejected Jesus, right here at the last. Random bystanders, in verse 29, chief priests and scribes in verse 31, and even the other people being crucified on either side of him in verse 32. They all make fun of him for not saving himself. The soldiers had mocked him earlier, with the crown of thorns and purple cloak. That's a definite sarcastic move—dressing him as a pathetic version of a king, while they call him

King of the Jews. The disciples had humiliated him by abandoning him. So really all that's left is for someone representing the Roman Empire to ridicule him, and the centurion does so. Sure. This guy is the Son of God and the King of the Jews. Right. Sarcasm is all in the tone, right? The centurion could be saying "Truly, this man is God's son?" (sarcasm) or (reverent) "Truly, this man is God's son." It's all in the tone, and Mark doesn't tell us the tone.

And that's why I'm disagreeing with the scholars. Because in every other of those instances where someone is making fun of Jesus, Mark gives us a clue as to the tone. Here are those words: mocking, deriding, mocking, and taunted. Those are pretty clear. But the Roman centurion simply says.

He just says the words, "Truly this man was God's Son." Mark doesn't give us those verbs that would tell us that the centurion is making fun of Jesus. He's speaking the truth, a truth he has belatedly realized, that Jesus was God's Son. I don't know that he understood what he was saying, but in that way he fits right in with the disciples, who claimed Jesus was the Messiah but didn't know what they meant by that.

And the centurion fits in with us, too. We claim all manner of things about Jesus. Messiah, God's Son, Savior, Teacher, Rabbi, Friend, Brother, Emmanuel. And I would think that most of the time, we're speaking in the way of the centurion. We catch a glimpse, a glimmer, of a truth, and we speak that truth, but we are far from understanding that truth completely.

Holy Week reminds us that the mystery of Christ is beyond our complete understanding, that the depth of Christ's love for us is greater than our imaginings, and that the life and calling that Jesus the Christ expects of us is more complex and more challenging and more true than anything else. We will speak truths about Jesus that we can only begin to grasp. Let us live into the mystery and challenge of this week.