

RIGHT JESUS, WRONG KING

Mark 11: 1-11 Palm Sunday
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Who is this Jesus who rides into the city on a humble donkey?
What is it that he represents? What is it that he promises to those who follow him?
Those with power consider him a nuisance, even a threat. Why?
Who is he?

To us, he is the resurrected Christ.

We know how the story ends. We see the Palm Sunday story through post-Easter eyes. We understand where this is all going. But those inside the story do not. They don't know about Maundy Thursday or Good Friday or Easter morning. They don't know about the crucified and resurrected Christ.

All they know about is Jesus of Nazareth, itinerant rabbi, teacher and healer. All they know is that they are living under a brutal, repressive, government that has invaded and occupied their country and they want nothing more than someone, anyone who can drive the foreigners out and restore Israel to its former glory.

You say the word "messiah" to them and that's the picture they have in their head: David, the warrior king, the "slayer of tens of thousands" who drove the infidels out and established the nation state of Israel.

The fact that Jesus has ridden into town not in a war chariot but on a donkey has gone right over their heads. The dozens of times that he has preached about love and peace and gentleness and kindness have all gone right by them. The parables about forgiveness and love, the healings of unclean people – lepers and gentiles and women – have been forgotten if they were ever really heard at all.

Someone has said the word, "messiah," and they have become blind to everything but their own fantasies, their own desires, their own need to justify their anger and their hatred.

They have declared Jesus to be king and that's right. But their understanding of "king" is way off the mark.

It's a case of "Right Jesus, Wrong King."

They just don't get it.

A LITTLE STREET THEATER

If you're going to say something really subversive, something really dangerous, something that challenges and offends the powers that be, the best way, the safest way to say it is to couch it in comedy or theater.

Preferably, both.

And that is exactly what we get on Palm Sunday. Call it “guerilla theater.”

Bible historian and theologian John Dominic Crossan tells us that the Roman government was based on a belief system, a doctrine that went like this: Religion. War. Victory and oppression. Peace.

In the time of the Roman Empire the state religion declared the emperor, Caesar, to be divine, and Caesar’s empire, Rome, to be the best of all possible worlds. That was how the Romans justified spreading their culture throughout the known world through a doctrine of war and oppression that would, ultimately, lead to a forced peace.

The *Pax Romana* may have been peaceful but it was a peace brought about by the brutal and ruthless oppression of millions of people.

Christianity offered an alternative to the *Pax Romana*. Call it the *Pax Christi*. The Peace of Christ.

Like the Roman belief system, it started out with religion. Only instead of a divine Caesar, Christianity offered a divine Christ. Not a conqueror emperor but a humble itinerant rabbi.

Instead of a policy of war, victory and oppression leading to and enforced peace, Christianity offered a policy of love, justice and conversion leading to a voluntary peace.

Make no mistake, he was offering a radically different kind of kingdom. And he offered it to people, insisting that they could not serve both God’s Kingdom and Caesar’s. They had to make a choice.

It was subversive. It was inflammatory and seditious. And it was dangerous.

Every good, Roman citizen believed that they best served God (or the gods) by serving Rome. The two were inseparable. Certainly, the gods had chosen and favored Rome to be a successful, powerful, prosperous nation to be Olympus on earth. To serve Rome was to serve the divine will.

To suggest otherwise was both blasphemy and treason. And there was a special kind of capital punishment reserved for those who committed treason against Rome. It was a slow, painful, agonizing death called crucifixion.

So, on this Sunday, Jesus carefully couches his message in a little piece of well planned, tightly orchestrated, comic, absurdist, guerilla street theater.

He enters the city as a king, true, but as something of a clown king.

When King Herod, entered a city he came in a war chariot surrounded by soldiers. When Pontius Pilate first entered the city of Jerusalem, he came on a black stallion with all of the

symbols of Roman power and authority, with soldiers and swords, and weapons and a demonstrated willingness to use them.

So, Jesus will enter the city on a donkey surrounded by, well, peasants. Think of it like this: Caesar enters in a motorcade of black limousines. Jesus enters waving through the sunroof of a Cooper Mini.

So, which one are you going to serve? Jesus says you must choose. You can't serve both.

THE CLUELESS CROWD

Do you see the delicious irony at work in this scene?

Do you see the difference in the kingdom he offers and the kingdom of Caesar? The kingdom of love and justice verses the kingdom of power and might and violence and war and oppression?

Do you see the choice he is asking people to make?

Well, unfortunately, if you do, you are in the minority. The people along the road did not.

Mark leaves it for us to draw that conclusion but John, in his description of this scene, lays it right out there: "His disciples did not understand these things..." (John 12: 16b)

In Mark's longer version of the scene the people along the road say this: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Okay, nothing wrong so far. That's a pretty fair description of Jesus. But then things go awry: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

No! No, wait! That's not it. You've got it wrong!

In spite of everything, in spite of the donkey and the palm leaves and everything he's done, they have missed the point. David was a warrior king. He took the land and established the kingdom by ruthless force and violence. That is not what Jesus is about. Don't you see!!

But that's just the problem. They don't see. They don't get it.

They've got the right Jesus but the wrong king. They are still putting their faith in a king who will free them not by love and grace but by violence and war.

They just don't get it.

INTO THE TEMPLE

Mark, who writes his gospel in scenes rather than chapters, ends the scene there.

Verse 11, the final verse of this passage, is a different scene all together: ***“Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”***

The little piece of street theater is a bust. They don't get it. Like Peter a few weeks ago, the crowd has put their mind on their own human will and not on what God desires. They have looked at a humble rabbi riding on a donkey and seen a warrior king riding on a stallion.

But Jesus is committed to play this thing out and he does so in three stages.

FIRST, he enters the city of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, the Holy City, the city of God. Jerusalem, the very heart of ancient Judaism. But it is also the city which holds the greatest threat for him. In the previous chapter he has explained in plain and simple terms the fate that he expects awaits him, here:

They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again." (Mark 10: 32-34)

There is a cloud hanging over Jerusalem and when Jesus enters the city, we feel the weight of that cloud. The soundtrack changes and becomes more ominous. Danger lurks here. This is not a safe place to be.

The **SECOND** thing Jesus does, after entering the city, is to go to the Temple.

If Jerusalem is the heart of first century Judaism, the temple is the inner chamber of the heart. It is the heart of the heart. Let's walk with him as he goes there.

He and his disciples pass through the outer court yard, that surrounds the temple, the Court of the Gentiles. This, as we have said a few weeks ago, has decayed into a marketplace. Originally, it was where those seeking to know Yahweh could come and approach the temple. Converts and proselytes who were seeking to accept Judaism as their religion but who had not yet undergone circumcision could worship God in this outer courtyard. But that was no longer the case. Now it had become a marketplace where people exchanged foreign money and Roman money for the local currency and where they purchased unblemished animals for the sacrifice. The bigger and more expensive the sacrifice, the more influence it had with Yahweh...or so the popular theology went.

Jesus would walk through all of that, the profit taking, the wheeling and dealing, and then he would go up the steps and into the temple itself.

The first room he would enter would be the Hall of Women. Here, Jewish women were allowed to come and worship, separate from the men.

After that came the Hall of Men and the high altar where the sacrifices were made by the priests on behalf of the people.

And then, the Holy of Holies where Yahweh himself lived, separate and away from his people, tended to and approachable only by the high priests.

And it is here, inside the temple, that Mark says: ***“And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.”***

He looked around at everything.

My seminary professor, Van Bogard Dunn would remind us, at this point, that “when Jesus is doin’ the lookin’ it ain’t just eyeball lookin’ that’s goin’ on.”

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE AND I SAW WHAT YOU DID

Back in 1965 Joan Crawford and John Ireland and Leif Erickson teamed up in a tightly drawn little thriller called “I Saw What You Did.” It was directed by the king of low budget, film noir thrillers, William Castle and it was about two teenage girls who get bored one night and decide to make some prank phone calls.

They pick some local numbers at random and when the person answers the phone they whisper into the phone: “I know who you are and I saw what you did.” Then they hang up and giggle over the mischief they have caused.

Unfortunately, one of the numbers they pick is that of Steven Marek (played by an aging John Ireland) who has just murdered his wife and buried her body in the woods. Haunted by the phone call Marek believes he is about to be blackmailed and sets out to find and eliminate the witness.

Nearly fifty years after it was made, the movie still works in spite of its over-the-top, campy acting and some pretty unbelievable plot twists. In fact, it works well enough that it was remade as a TV movie in 1988. But why does it work? Because we can understand the motivations of the villain. Those anonymous words – “I know who you are and I saw what you did.” – have a haunting and chilling effect upon us all, even if we haven’t done anything to be ashamed of.

What did they see? What did they think they saw? What have I done that I should be afraid of being revealed or could be construed as such? What should my next step be?

The device of the unknown eye witness and the vulnerability of the one who has been seen is a common one in fiction.

In South African author Alan Paton's wonderful novel, *Too Late the Phalarope*, the main character, Pieter van Vlaanderen is a police officer, an Afrikaner who was raised in a family who firmly believed in the racist, apartheid philosophy that ruled that country for so many horrible years.

Then, through a series of events, he meets, falls in love and has a torrid affair with a black woman, the victim of a crime he is investigating. He is aware that, if his affair is found out, his life as a police officer and an Afrikaner will be ruined and his family will be shamed. So, he goes to great pains to keep the relationship a secret.

Then, one day, an anonymous note is slipped onto his desk. Three words: "I saw you."

The rest of the novel is an account of Pieter van Vlaanderen's life coming apart at the seams as he tries to discover the author of the note and somehow prevent the devastation that he is sure is about to happen.

Finally, after he has suffered a near nervous breakdown, confessed to the affair, been disowned by his family, wrecked his career and put his life in shambles, and come to realize the horrible power that the apartheid laws have, he discovers that the note was a joke left by a colleague, a fellow stamp collector who had seen Pieter buying a rare stamp that he, too, desired to own.

"I know who you are and I saw what you did."

To be known and seen is a powerful thing and it is not just a person but a whole people, a popular religion as it was at that time practiced, who are known and seen when Jesus walked into the temple and looked around that day.

What, we may well ask, did he see?

He saw the Courtyard of the Gentiles corrupted by greed and profit as he walked through it to the temple door.

He saw men and women, gentile and Jew, rich and poor divided and separated, estranged from each other and from God by a corrupt priesthood intent on preserving their own power and influence and feathering their own nests with the profits they took from the moneychangers and the sale of the sacrificial animals.

He saw the sacrificial altar that had, during the feast days, become a twenty-four hour a day profit making machine where sacrifices were performed around the clock and blood flowed from the altar in gutters created for that purpose. He saw people's hopes and dreams held for ransom by a religious system that sold God's grace for money and demanded the suffering and death of innocent animals to atone for the sins of human beings.

He knew who they were and he saw what they did. He saw God being sold to the highest bidder. And he thought what?

Here's what I think he thought at that moment: "I'm gonna need a bigger broom."

The next phrase in the story lifts the irony that has been at work in this scene to its highest level.

Mark notes that "it was already late..."

Do you hear that? It was already late.

He's not just talking about the time of day, there. This is an existential observation. A theological summing up.

It was already late. Too late? Maybe not. But late nevertheless. Things had gotten completely out of control. It was going to take more than a little guerilla street theater to clean up this mess.

It was going to take a sacrifice the likes of which these people had never seen before.

It was going to take passion and pain and blood.

It was going to take a crucifixion to shock these people back into a proper relationship with God.

A crucifixion...

...and maybe something else.

AMEN