

“High Drama or Low Brow Mockery?”

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FCMF #2

Scriptures: Mark 11:1-11, Palm Parade

When they got close to Jerusalem, near Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, he sent off two of his disciples with these instructions: "Go into the village across the way, and right after you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone questions you, 'Why are you doing this?' just tell them, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'"

They set out and found a colt tied up at the door out on the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What do you think you're doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had told them to say and so they left them alone.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. And many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

And he went into Jerusalem to the temple area and took stock of everything, but, since the hour was already late, he returned to Bethany with the twelve.

Sermon

The ancient Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus,

recorded for posterity the story of a certain

Jewish rebel leader named Menahem.

According to Josephus, in the summer of 66 (AD that is),

Menahem along with some of his men took the fortress at Masada

and relieved the armory there of its weapons.

His procession then from Masada to Jerusalem was,

as Josephus described it, "in the state of a King."

And I must note, this "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem

would have occurred only a few years prior to the date

in which most scholars believe Mark wrote his gospel.

Now of course Menahem was not the first revolutionary

to militantly confront an occupying empire

in the streets of Jerusalem.

Simon Maccabaeus, several hundred years before,

had also lead a triumphant military procession into Jerusalem

"with praise and palm branches ... and with hymns and songs."

And throughout her history, many foreign armies

had also triumphantly entered Jerusalem.

In fact during time of Jesus, the Roman Governor,
Pontius Pilate, would travel yearly to Jerusalem
leading a large procession of Roman soldiers.
Pilate would come right before the Passover festival
in order to reinforce the permanent Roman garrison,
since those festivities would often become occasions
for both Jewish religious and nationalist fervor to get out of hand.

But according to Marcus Borg,
Pilate's parade was not only a demonstration
of Roman Imperial power but of Imperial theology as well.
The military superiority on display would have been undeniable.
But Governor Pilate, we must remember,
did not serve a mere mortal emperor.
Inscriptions at the time would have referred to the Caesar
as "the Son of God," or "lord" and as "savior," since the Caesars
would have been given credit for bringing, "peace on earth!"

For those who witnessed Jesus' little donkey ride that day,
and for those who would have been Mark's first readers,
those were the images that would have first come to mind.
So what Jesus actually did that day, on the road leading into Jerusalem,
most certainly had social, historical, and theological context.

Concerning this parade, Ched Myers says,
"Jesus comes to Jerusalem not as a pilgrim, in order to demonstrate his allegiance to its
temple, but as a popular king ready to mount a nonviolent siege on the ruling classes. ...Jesus has
arrived at the heart of the dominant order, and the time has come for a showdown in the war of
myths. The Lord is now visiting his temple, as promised by Malachi since the beginning of the story
(Mark's Gospel, sic), and in his actions we will witness the one whom Ghandi referred to as
'the most active resister known to history...'"

Now of course, each of the images that I referred to earlier
were overtly militant, and yet, so many other
aspects of the story point us in the opposite direction.
By giving such detailed instructions to his disciples,
Jesus seemed to be deliberately planning,
(or shall we say choreographing?)
some form of "street theater."

And similar to any military campaign,
necessary provisions must first be procured.
In this case, Jesus sent his followers to procure a lowly beast of burden,
so that the real Son of God can be at the head of
a triumphal entrance "meek and riding upon an ass."

This was certainly effective theater,
full of drama, and dripping with satire
mocking all of those pretentious rulers
who had come to Jerusalem prior to Jesus.
All of those who had come before,
whether they be foreign empires or domestic revolutionaries,
had failed God's designs because they had relied on military might
and violence in their attempts to bring "peace on earth."
Jesus, by attempting to ride on the back of that young donkey,
was putting into stark contrast God's rule
and the militaristic necessities
of both empires and revolutionaries.

Jesus was calling the crowd (and for us as well)
to embrace God's preferred strategy of nonviolence
and to reject any earthly empire's claim
of legitimacy and/or supremacy.
In the end, what was really the most dramatic part of the play,
was Jesus' outlandish claim that God's way is nonviolent
and that he, Jesus, and not Caesar nor Menahem,
was the rightful heir to God's Imperial rule!
Those in the crowd, which now include us as well,
who were waving palms and shouting "hosanna!"
are, knowingly or not, affirming that claim!

But there is another point, I need to point out,
and that is, as we learned in the children's time this morning
any colt which has never been ridden,
will naturally resist any efforts to domesticate, or dominate it.

Maybe this too was meant as an object lesson for the crowd?
Could that stubborn, yet persistent resistance
of this donkey become an inspiration?
An inspiration for those who are being called to follow Jesus
and thus resist those forces of violence and Imperial domination?
What a sense of humor Jesus must have had?
Just try to imagine the scene,
as a couple of the disciples are desperately trying
to hold on to the donkey as Jesus chases after them.
And then each time, when he does manage to actually climb aboard,
that little burro promptly bucks him back onto the dusty street.
But sometimes those who are oppressed
must be just as stubborn, persistent and as poorly behaved
if they want to shake off their oppression!

Another powerful object lesson should naturally follow,
and that is, that those who really want to follow Jesus
will not find truly just solutions when they dominate others
or by being in collusion with any empire or any system
which seeks to dominate others rather than to serve.
According to Jesus, God's way is through emptiness.
True power comes to those who seek to humble themselves
and ultimately seeking not their own way but the way of God.
The power to change ourselves and thus to transform our world,
does not happen when we bend and break others through force.
True transformation only occurs when we freely open ourselves up
to be transformed fully by the love of God,
a love then that compels us to forgive and to serve others.
A love so powerful that it can break open our hearts
to understand the sufferings of others
and to desire healing and to build true community.

It is only through transformed lives
that our world is unalterably shaped and healed!
Fully reconciling power cannot come from those
who are willing to kill and to destroy
but only from those who have learned how to forgive and to love.
Truly redemptive power cannot flow
through those who will resort to violence in order to control,
it can only flow through those who freely give,
giving themselves in service to others.

The transforming power of resurrection,
which Jesus claims can bring us back to life,
cannot be ushered in by those who take life.
True resurrection occurs when one is willing to sacrifice,
yes, even be willing to sacrifice one's very life for another!

Wow, did you ever think that a little bit
of satirical theater could say so much?

While in Palestine with CPT,
I was able to participate in a modern day parade
that actually used a donkey to satirize
the oppressive Israeli military occupation.
(Show a picture of Palestinian demo with a donkey
dressed up on Israeli military uniform and explain)

What issue would you be willing to be bucked off a donkey for?
What would it look like? Would you even need a donkey?
What other symbols would you use?