

5 April, 2009  
Passion Sunday  
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This is a big Sunday and it seems almost as though that first reading and this passion reading collide. A moment ago, we were applauding the joyful voices of children and the tinkling sound of bells and we were processing happily through the sunshine. In the next moment, we're kneeling in sorrow at the news that Jesus has been crucified.

I think you can imagine this day in some way as a collision also of two processions: The one, the familiar procession that we just celebrated. It was the Feast of the Passover. Jesus consciously chose this date. Mark's gospel is characterized by what's called the Messianic Secret. That is, that Jesus is constantly saying to everyone he talks to and everyone he heals, "Don't tell them who I am." You know, when the disciples say, "You are the Messiah!" [He says] "Don't tell anybody." When he heals and casts out demons, "Don't tell anybody."

My sense of this is that he did not want people to have inappropriate expectations. That there are some ways in which he truly was come to be Messiah, but not in the way people expected. And he was very concerned that people approach the message of the kingdom with open hearts, not blinded by what they think it's supposed to mean.

But there comes a day - and this is the day - when Jesus drops all of that and says, "Alright. I'm going to own this title." And he very consciously demonstrates this. There's nothing g haphazard about this. The Passover is the national holiday of liberation. It's the fourth of July. It's the day when the Jews remember the deliverance from the oppression of Pharaoh. Or the oppression of Empire past.

And Jesus goes to the mountain prophesied by Zachariah on which the messiah is to stand the last battle. And he mounts an animal. Now, folks are pouring into the city tens of thousands. And as the jubilant crowd comes on pilgrimage to the holy city, they gather around the gates to welcome the next comers. And there are great crowds around the city gates, laying down branches and welcoming people in the name of the lord, blessed is he from Psalm 1:18 who comes in the name of the lord. And they're rejoicing. But they come on foot.

Jesus makes very particular arrangements. Mark's gospel is not big on detail and here again we have a good deal of detail in Mark about Jesus procures this colt of a donkey to ride on. And riding he comes.

And John's gospel tells us that people are really anticipating his arrival. And as he comes they not only lay down the traditional branches that welcome the pilgrims, they lay down their coats. That's a sign of Jesus' high office. As he passes, they shout, 'Hosanna!' They proclaim him as savior and call for his saving actions as he rides.

The other procession that more than likely happened that day (Who knows? Maybe even at the same time – its fun to think of it that way, we don't know) was Pilate's procession. Pilate was the Roman governor in charge of Jerusalem at this time. The Herodian kings had been kicked out; they didn't work. They were sleazy vassals but they still didn't work out. So now there's no king in Jerusalem. There's just Pilate the Roman governor who oversees the temple. Pilate doesn't live in Jerusalem. He's not a Jew. He's a good Roman and he wants nothing to do with that but he needs to govern and on this holiday - it's a troublemaking holiday, right? It's the day when folks are celebrating their deliverance from Pharaoh while they're living under the boot of Rome. You can guess the kinds of resonances that flow and the kind of trouble and disturbance that the Romans are looking for on such a day. And on such a day, you can be assured that Rome was present in force.

The idea that Pilate would have come with pomp and circumstance into the city is at least a very good guess. That he would come riding on his warhorse, surrounded by his soldiers and greeted with cheers proclaiming Caesar as lord, as people laid down their coats so he could tread into the opposite gate. It's a powerful image of collision in some sense. You can almost see these two processions, proclaiming the kingdom of God and the empire of Rome, heading on a collision course.

But the kingdom of God is in every way different from the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire benefits the elites; the kingdom of God is for all. And in Jesus' day it was largely a peasant movement. The Roman Empire insists on total obedience. The kingdom of God invites freedom and allegiance that springs from the heart. And thought the Kingdom of Rome, the Empire of Roe, grows by domination, the kingdom of God grows mysteriously and organically. And while Empire concerns itself with control and acquisition, the kingdom of God is about compassion and gratitude and generosity. And thought the kingdom of God is not a political entity and can never, never be embodied in that way, nevertheless it has real and profound and powerful consequences that are threatening to the powers of Empire.

So the kingdom of God really takes root in people's lives, it changes everything. It turns everything upside down. People who know God loves them will not endure injustice, will not tolerate tyranny, will not allow their neighbors to be oppressed, will not endure any of this. When you know from the inside out the kingdom of God, then the Empire has reason to be fearful. And Jesus, this prophet of Israel, comes riding on a donkey on Passover, taking up the rod of Messiah to usher in this insane and upside-down kingdom.

One commentator says that the donkey was a mockery of the warhorse. But another one says – and I like this idea (and I'm not a historian, so I don't know) – but that the donkey was the steed of choice when the emissaries of empire were coming into town proclaiming peace. When they were coming peacefully. However way you want to read it, Jesus is taking the mantle of Messiah but the stand of peace. The humility as he rides into the city.

And then Jesus does a very weird thing and we talked about this a couple of weeks ago. According to Mark, once Jesus arrives he looks around the temple and you'd think that would be the moment when he would galvanize the crowds and initiate this new reign. What does he do? He looks around and then he goes home! He goes back to Bethany for the night. He just walks out. And can you imagine how deflating that would be? And the next day, remember, he comes back and this time he cleanses the temple. This is when he casts out the moneychangers. This is when he seals his fate and he makes it absolutely clear that he is no one's lackey, that he is not representing the violent overthrow of Rome nor is he supporting any nationalistic vision. He's calling for a transformation of the human heart - nothing less. And those who would follow him in his kingdom must be prepared for that radical transformation. And so he makes everybody mad.

The Romans are long gone, but the spirit of empire still thrives. Wherever the interests of the elite overshadow the needs of the poor, where power is secured by force and violence, where the principles of acquisition trump those of compassion and stewardship, Empire thrives. No human system is completely free from the impulse to control and acquire. It just seems to come with who we are.

This weekend I saw Hotel Rwanda again. I'd seen it a number of years ago but they showed it on PBS Friday and I watched it again. And I don't know if you've seen, but it's an amazing movie and very much worth renting. I guess it's one of the most highly rented Netflix movies (somebody said that).

It's the story of a Hutu man named Paul (and it's a true story). He was the manager of the Hôtel des Mille Collines in Kigali, Rwanda. And as such, he was a man of a fair amount of status. He was not one of the elite, but he served the elite and he was a retainer, if you will, of the elite. And he was known for being a man of great style and class and accomplishment. You see him enjoying good Cuban cigars and entertaining the generals and the various Europeans that come through the hotel with fine brandy and whiskey and single malt scotch and... he's the guy that can get it done and everybody relies on him. He has this incredible grace and hospitality and dignity as he serves the elite and the empire, both African and Western expressions of it.

And to a certain degree, he is blind to what's going on around him. That the nation is beginning to fall apart and to come into the grip of a gruesome and violent, nightmarish, season of oppression when the majority of the people of the country, the Hutus, rise up and murder the minority people of the country, the Tutsis.

And before he knows it, Paul is caught up in the maelstrom. So he tries to deny the seriousness of it until he has to rescue his own child from under a hedge and he's spattered with blood, having witnessed the machete murder of their next-door neighbor.

And so Paul is thrown into the mess. And he has to make a choice as to whether he will stand with empire or whether he will be a member of the kingdom. For surely it is far safer to figure out what empire wants and do its bidding than it is to stand against it. But

the choices keep coming to him. Should he abandon his family? His wife is Tutsi. He chooses to stand by her and to call in his power to protect her – but what about her family? He stretches his hospitality out a little farther to help protect them. What about the people in the hotel? What about the people who come to the hotel?

Pretty soon, hundreds of people are flocking to the hotels and what had been a spa and a place of refuge for the elite turns into a refuge camp. People crowding in as the West flees, as the United Nations fails, as genocide is being exercised in the streets and hundreds of thousands of Tutsis are killed. A thousand lived, because this one man has the courage, the stamina, the wherewithal, the creativity and the soul to cross the line from empire to kingdom.

The story of Jesus' journey to the cross is a story of resistance to empire. And therefore, it is a story of hope. Even though it ends with Jesus saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words sound so bitter, but they are words of hope for those who endure. They resound through the killing fields of Cambodia and the camps of Dachau to the villages of Darfur today. Jesus stands with all of those people. Jesus walked for all of those people to the cross and died there in compassionate solidarity with us. This act of faithfulness and integrity, this act of absolute abandonment is itself a victory. It is a witness to the larger life that transcends brutality. The love that overcomes torture and intimidation. A death that is life itself in the midst of a culture of death.

This is a sober week. But the echoes of Easter penetrate it and draw us further through it. If we do the hard work, the good work, of observing Good Friday. If we frankly and honestly name the darkness in the world around us, if we are willing to confront empire - not only out there, but in here – the ways in which we live under the sway of empire, under which we are still held, under which we benefit. If we are willing to look fearlessly and compassionately upon the suffering of our friends and neighbors in this place and all over the world. We will name that darkness of suffering and grief. We will also open our hearts to the light and the joy and the power of the resurrection. Because it's one movement. You can't separate them. You cannot have the resurrection without the death. But death when it is embraced by love results in life.

Amen.