

“From Triumph to Tragedy...”

Luke 19.28–48

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 4 April 04

We love to wave palm fronds to welcome Jesus, and we shout “Hosanna!” “Save!” We like the image of throngs of people adoring Jesus and welcoming him triumphally into Jerusalem. The church celebrates it kind of like a liturgical pep rally every year.

But, we know something that the crowd in Jerusalem didn't know.

One thing the crowd knew is the prophecy of Zechariah, who in the sixth century B.C., advocated for the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and it was finished soon thereafter. His prophecy may be familiar to some of you, if for no other reason, that it's used as an aria in Händel's *Messiah*: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”¹ So, if you saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, it would trigger your response to shout to him, “Save the people!” You'd pave the way for him by throwing down your coat, you'd wave your palm branches. You'd be ecstatic that your true king had arrived, just as the prophet foretold.

But, we know something that the crowd in Jerusalem didn't know.

You'll notice the title of this sermon is “From Triumph to Tragedy ...” (*Note the ellipsis.*) Even though we have heard the story of the whole last week of Jesus' life, let's not rush toward the empty tomb and the walk to Emmaus. Let's deal with the knowledge we have about the Passion (literally the *suffering*) of Jesus – perhaps in a deeper way than Mel Gibson did. By the way, how many of you have seen his recent film?

One of the critical questions his film didn't tackle was this: Why would anyone want to kill Jesus? Why did the powers that be – the domination systems of Jesus' day – want Jesus dead? Clearly, both the Roman Empire and the Temple hierarchy in Jerusalem were domination systems. One had an empire that spanned from the Scottish border to North Africa to Asia. And the other claimed to have a monopoly on access to God's grace and forgiveness, which raised the ire of Jews in the diaspora, who in Jesus' time already outnumbered the residents of the Jewish homeland, and this eventually helped give rise to Pharisaic or rabbinic Judaism without the Temple hierarchy: the Judaism we know today. And were these two domination systems ultimately the cause of Jesus' death, or was there some sense in which God mandated that Jesus had to die for our sins?

In February, the confirmation class went to Boulder to hear John Dominic Crossan speak at the MacKenzie Lecture, and he said in his wry Irish wit, “That's not the kind of God I'd like to meet in a dark alley.” I would also point out that in Genesis, when Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, the angel of the Lord intervenes and says, “no.” If God said “no” to Abraham, why would God demand the sacrifice his own son?



“The substitutionary atonement” is a rather highfalutin way of saying that God needed a human blood sacrifice in order to be reconciled with humankind, and that God demanded Jesus as the lamb to be slaughtered, who would, through his death on the cross, take away the sins of the world. This is an integral part of the Roman Catholic Mass, and it's also deeply engrained into Protestant theology, as well. *You don't believe me, do you?*

¹ Zech. 9.9

I asked half a dozen ordained ministers who are members of this congregation if the substitutionary atonement was part of their theology, so that we could do a dialogue sermon about it. How many of them do you think believe in that doctrine? None. And most mainline scholars assert that this doctrine does not go back to Jesus himself, but to later interpreters, coming into full development about 1,100 years after Jesus' death.² So, while it may not be an integral part of your theology, it is a part of our tradition that we must deal with. Listen to these words contained in our supposedly progressive, liberal, leftist manifesto, *The New Century Hymnal*: (Now, some of you love the music of these hymns, and that's fine; what I'd like you to do is pay attention to the theology of the lyrics.)

"Rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide: my shelter be. Let the water and the blood, from your wounded side which flowed, be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power."³

"Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of the Spirit, washed in Christ's blood."⁴ First of all Jesus isn't mine: I'm Jesus! Second, we don't purchase grace from God: it's free! Thirdly, I don't want to be washed in the blood of Jesus; I'd rather be blessed by the love of Jesus.

"O sacred body, wounded side, by cruel spear opened wide, that water streaming mixed with blood might cleanse us in the precious flood."⁵ Okay, picture this: Jesus is on the cross bleeding to death, are you going to duck underneath the "precious flood" and take a shower?

Now, here's the disclaimer: what the gospel writers intend is that this is a metaphor. (*Surprise, surprise!*) But it's a metaphor that has been bent out of shape by writers and theologians over the centuries. As Marcus Borg comments, "Jesus as the sacrifice has its metaphorical home in the temple story: his death as 'the once and for all' sacrifice for sin replaces the temple and the temple sacrifice."⁶ And as we heard in this morning's gospel reading, Jesus made some enemies among the Temple elites.



Did Jesus die for you? Was it human sinfulness that precipitated his crucifixion? In a sense, I can affirm both of these statements...though with a lot of footnotes.

Listen to these words from the gospel according to John: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.**"⁷ Jesus lays down his life for his friends. He voluntarily risks his life – and loses it – for what he believes in, the God he trusts, and the people who follow him. *Did Jesus die for you?*

Jesus' self-sacrifice reveals the absolute moral bankruptcy – and the estrangement or hubris...*or sin* – of domination systems. And let us not lose the point that Jesus is the only figure at the center of a major world religion to have been subjected to capital punishment by a legitimate government. He knew that he was risking his life by preaching a subversive theology: the kingdom of God, an alternative to both the Romans and their Herodian toadies. He saw what had happened to John the Baptizer, yet he moved forward, knowing it would probably get him killed. *Are you part of any domination*

² see Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 92.

³ NCH 596

⁴ NCH 473

⁵ NCH 221

⁶ Borg, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁷ Jn 15.12–13

system today? Does your estrangement or hubris (in other words, sin) help to perpetuate such systems? Did it – does it – precipitate the crucifixion?

Barbara Brown Taylor, a wise Episcopal priest, suggests that “A cross and nails are not always necessary. There are a thousand ways to kill him, some of them as obvious as choosing where you will stand then the showdown between the weak and the strong comes along, others of them as subtle as keeping your mouth shut when someone asks you if you know him.”⁸



So, why exactly do you think the Romans wanted Jesus dead? You heard high treason in the scripture this morning, and you probably didn't even notice it. (And you probably committed treason by saying the Lord's Prayer, acknowledging God's kingdom first and foremost – ahead of any national allegiance.) “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” If Jesus is king, Caesar and Herod are not. That's treason.

Jesus' crime against Rome is named on the placard above his head on the cross, which you've seen in countless paintings: *INRI, Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudeorum*: Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews.

What act of Jesus do you think precipitated his arrest? Why do you think the Temple authorities wanted him dead? Luke says it plainly: “the leaders...kept looking for a way to kill him.” Desecration of Temple property and disruption of the system of sacrifice (and ultimately his enmity toward the Temple authority), added to a healthy dose of blasphemy, led them to try and find a way to eliminate him, which they did in cahoots with the Romans, through their high-priest puppet Caiaphas. In his book, *Who Killed Jesus?* Crossan compares Jesus' “cleansing” of the Temple to going into a draft office during the Vietnam War and overturning drawers of draft cards. “It is a symbolic negation of all that office or Temple stands for.”⁹ “The pilgrim feasts and especially Passover were always potentially explosive; rather than speech alone, actions, even symbolic actions, against the Temple could get you killed.”¹⁰ But, let's not forget that this was a small handful of elites in power – and not Jesus' own people, the Jews – who wanted Jesus dead.

Where were the crowds to support Jesus on Thursday and Friday? The same people who waved palms on Sunday might have been those who jeered at Jesus or who, like Peter, kept their heads down and denied they even knew Jesus. We have to view the last week of Jesus' life in totality: triumph leads to tragedy, which in turn leads to triumph. This week, I'd invite you to sit with the uncomfortable feelings of Jesus' last week on earth. To remember his self-sacrifice, to ask “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”, to ask of yourself how you are complicit in domination systems in our own time and place, and to commit yourself to reconciling your relationship with God, self, and others.

One of our members was a bit disturbed by the words of institution we use during the celebration of the Lord's Supper: “this is the new covenant in my blood.” While the official Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is still on the books – that bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ – I can assure you it's not observed here at Plymouth. We must remember that our sacrament provides a tangible symbol that Jesus gave his life. As Christians *we need to take Jesus' self-sacrificial love seriously.*

⁸ in *The Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998.

⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) p. 64.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 58.

And every time we celebrate communion, we remember the last meal at which Jesus gathered with his friends, because we know – and Jesus knew – something the crowd in Jerusalem didn't know.

Amen.