



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

Waving

Palm/Passion Sunday, c, March 28, 2010

Luke 19:28-40

I hope over the course of the next few days if you have not already made your pilgrimage to Bass concert Hall a few hundred yards that direction, you will find the time to take in the magnificent performance of Phantom of the Opera which our family saw on Friday evening. Andrew Lloyd Webber has had this show in continuous running for the 24 years since it premiered. It is a stunning piece of powerful theater on the aesthetic and psychological landscape of our times.

That said, those of us Christians in America might recognize that so far as the understanding of our faith goes, the Phantom of the Opera doesn't hold a candle to Webber's production with the lyricist Tim Rice 16 years earlier in 1970, when the image shattering version of the last days of Jesus is captured in story and song in the blockbuster *Jesus Christ Superstar*.¹

The main setting for the *Superstar* is the same as our scripture reading this morning, starting with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of what we now call Holy Week. You might remember that by this time in the life story of Jesus, Jerusalem was already a powder keg just waiting to blow. At the time of the Passover of the city swelled from its normal 40,000 people to 200,000 in the course of a few days.

The resources of the city were strained to the limit. The combination of the Roman occupation forces and the Jewish religious authorities were doing

everything they could to assure order. In the previous 5 years the city of Jerusalem had endured 32 riots, 6 of them were major riots,ⁱⁱ and those in charge had no stomach for another one. Roman reinforcements were coming from the west, but on the East, a rowdy crowd is already singing praises to the one they are calling their new king, a descendent of King David here to take his place on the throne in Jerusalem after nearly 100 years of Roman occupation. Rowdy crowds were the last thing that these powers that be would tolerate.

At this point of high tension Superstar's version of events has Simon the Zealot's singing "Christ you know I love you. Did you see I waved? I believe in you and God so tell me that I'm saved. Did you see I waved? I believe in you and God so tell me that I'm saved. Jesus I am with you. Touch me, touch me, Jesus. Jesus I am on your side."

And, truly Simon really did think that he was on Jesus' side and that Jesus was on his side. The zealots, the hot-headed patriot party fighting for Israeli independence from Roman rule, fully expected Jesus to step up as their warrior king and to militarily wrest their homeland back from the infidels.

Whereas, we look with amazement at the works of magician David Copperfield, or Penn & Teller, all these Palestinians understood Jesus' miracles of multiplying loaves & fishes, turning water into wine, healing the sick, raising the dead, not as interesting tricks of some magician, nor even as acts of compassion to those in need, but as indications of the power of God in the person of Jesus. Surely God wanted Israeli freedom! Surely God was about to do the most important miracle through Jesus, defeating the irresistible power of the Roman Empire! So surely, Simon and the others would have thought, Jesus was on their side.

This talk of dying, though. That didn't fit in with their plans for Jesus. You can't lead a revolution from the grave.

No, what the zealots couldn't understand, what the long oppressed peasants with palm branches waving in their hands didn't understand, was that even though he was the figurehead of their parade, Jesus wasn't neatly on their side, or any other side.

Not being much a natural sports fan, Becca will sometimes find me in front of a TV and ask, “which team are you rooting for?” Usually I can give her a quick answer, but occasionally I've stumbled onto a game where I have no natural loyalty to one side or the other and I'll tell her to give me a few minutes. 9 times of 10 I'll pick a side to root for, and, yes, Becca, sometimes it'll be for as dumb a reason as despising one teams uniforms' colors. Do you remind the silly & loud to the point of distracting green & yellow colors of the 1970s Oakland A's uniforms?

But on those rare occasions when I can't really get behind one side or the other, I turn the set off. What's the point of the game if you can't cheer for one side or the other? Where's the fun?

Jesus was on a mission from God, but unfortunately for the peasants for the zealots & fortunately for the Romans, it wasn't to win one for the Gipper. It didn't have much to do with immediately overturning the power structure of Palestine. Jesus wasn't on the obvious side that so many expected. You might note that it was because he was expected to be that warrior figure that both the religious establishment in Jerusalem and the Romans hoped to take Jesus out. It was not because Jesus said strangely new religious teachings, but because he was a perceived political threat, that he was executed as a political revolutionary.

We cannot simply say that Jesus was not political, that He didn't care who won in the constant struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed. He did care that the oppressed go free. He said as much. But it wasn't going to be in the warfare game that both sides anticipated. He taught another way for change.

In fact, the world would have to wait 1,900 years until the principles that Jesus taught would overthrow an imperial oppressor and restore a native people its own freedom. Ironically, it was the supposedly Christian British Empire that was ousted by the Hindu and Muslim citizens of India that first followed en masse Jesus' way in dealing with oppression. Don't you just love God's sense of humor?

Jesus called for the oppressor to stop oppressing and to voluntarily treat all others with the respect and dignity that they would want to be offered themselves - “ In everything **do to others** as you would have them do to you [Matt. 7:12].

Jesus called for those oppressed to recognize their own significant power in relation to their oppressors and – counter to their instincts and all they'd previously thought- to voluntarily treat all others – especially including those who unrighteously oppress them- with respect and love.... and for that sake of that love, to lovingly, even sacrificially, to actively resist the continuing injustice done to them. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” And then in that same 5th Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus describes precisely how to non-violently resist evil, providing the blue print for India's struggle for independence and later for the Civil Rights struggle here in the U.S. Central among these precepts is to never forget that your enemy is also a child of God, of great worth, and that you resolve the injustice, not by obliterating your enemy, but by helping your enemy turn and become your partner in a mutual upbuilding. This is a hard course, one rarely attempted. But in the last century we have seen it work in history.

So, is Jesus on the side of the peasants, or on the side of the religious establishment, or on the side of the Romans? Ultimately, the answer is a simple

“yes.” Salvation comes thoroughly only when justice is done for all sides.... hear me, all sides...at the same time.

But what of the sacrifice at the heart of this week we call Holy? Why is it that we are to understand that Jesus needed to die...in order to inaugurate a new message of salvation? Faithful Christians have at least 2 major and very different answers to that.

1.) The first way some Christians understand the necessity of the suffering of Jesus is the substitutionary view, that actually hearkens back to the early Hebrew understanding of sacrifice to God for forgiveness of our sin. Before the centralizing of worship in the Jerusalem temple, a congregation in a village would ceremonially place their sins on the head of a goat, and then send that scapegoat off in the desert to die as offering to God to forgive them of their sin. Later this line of thinking was replaced by ceremonial sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem of animals or food produce. The basic notion is that sin requires sacrifice to be allowed back in good graces with God. This substitutionary view says, that God is holy and demands holiness of people; that in order to pay the price of our sinfulness, Jesus voluntarily went to the cross and because he was God's special son, in that singular moment of history, once and for all He paid the price of sin for all those who claim Him as Lord and follow Him.

Before I go on, let me say that clearly the huge majority of Christians believe this way and there is plenty of Biblical support and other theological support for this view. Even so, many in our world today, many in this Sanctuary this morning, most of whom grew up believing this first understanding, now claim a different understanding, one that is as old as the first and is also well attested to in Scripture.

2.) In this second understanding which I will call the Pioneer model, Jesus did not have to die in Holy Week or at any other time. This understanding says that Jesus had to be willing to die... that he had to trust God so much that he could put everything on the line... that he had to forget worrying about what was best for himself and ask what God wanted to happen,the ego driven self-centeredness of each who wants to be faithful has to die, but only some of the faithful will also lose their earthly lives in striving for God's justice for all.

45 years ago a bold American said,
"Even if they try to kill you, you develop the inner conviction that there are some things so precious, some things so eternally true that they are worth dying for. And if a person has not found something to die for, that person isn't fit to live!" Those are the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was ready to die...and who did die... as he faithfully led his people towards freedom.

This second version of Jesus' death teaches that there is nothing good about someone being nailed to a cross. Period, full stop. God doesn't require death- especially the death of an innocent, especially the death of God's only son- to forgive us for our sin. God doesn't require any other creature's sacrifice. What God wants is not sacrifice, but our repentant hearts, our turning back to God, our enlisting with Jesus to live like Jesus in bringing in God's kingdom. [Read Micah 6:6-8]

Of these two visions, which version best describes how you see Jesus and his death? As different as they seem, both versions agree that singing and waving Palms on the sidelines, "Christ you know I love you. Did you see I waved? I believe in you and God so tell me that I'm saved," won't cut it. Both versions inspire us to intently focus this week, especially on those parts of the unfolding

story that are ugly, difficult, painful, to continue to follow Him all the way to that Cross... and all the way through it.

i In the year 1960 Nicholas Kazantzakis had written his powerful novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which laid bare what a truly human Jesus would have experienced as the people pushed him towards kingship but as he would have harbored a sense of his own inability and question his own destiny. But Kazantzakis book was not popular. The revolutionary ideas within it weren't on a public stage. No, it took Jesus Christ Superstar to do that.

ii This information about the riots from Ed Markquart's sermon "Hey Sanna Ho Sanna". Found on the textweek.org website on the page with information on Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010. His sermon also set me to thinking about Superstar which figures in this sermon, too.