

THE WEEK THAT WAS
Luke 19:28-48
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Palm Sunday, March 24, 2013

Today's passage from Luke's Gospel is the story of the first day of the last week of Jesus' life.

When I was a Catholic youngster I remember standing every week during Mass for the Gospel reading, but on Palm Sunday standing longer than usual as the priest read the entire story of Holy Week, from Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem to Jesus' burial in the borrowed tomb. Being borderline ADHD, I got restless and distracted standing so long, but since Sister Mary Thomasine was right behind me watching my every move I stood reasonably still.

I was tempted to read the long, assigned Gospel reading for this morning which followed the traditional Catholic practice of reviewing the Holy Week in its entirety. But then I thought maybe I'd stick to focusing primarily on the first half and then leave the rest of the story telling for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

I encourage you to make the commitment to come back on these Holy Days if only because we need to be together in Christian community when we enter into the Passion of the Christ and stay with him in the Upper Room, the Garden of Gethsemane, the High Priest's star chamber and finally Pilate's Imperial Palace before he shouldered his cross and trudged off to Golgotha to die for the sins of the world.

Palm Sunday starts Holy Week off with a premature bang. Jesus' rode into Jerusalem with his growing reputation and popularity preceding him. The crowds of pilgrims came for the Passover, celebrating both their liberation from bondage in Egypt and equally important the restoration of their identity as the Chosen People of God. But their celebration was always muted by the realization they were still in bondage only with different masters.

But something was different this year. The air was charged with anticipation as the pilgrims pinned their hopes on the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth came to Jerusalem to inaugurate the promised Messianic Age with the restoration of the United Kingdom and the House of David.

Jesus did nothing to lower their expectations. Though it seemed like a spontaneous demonstration it was in reality meticulously planned from its timing, just before the Passover, even his ride of choice, a donkey, the House of David's traditional animal to ride in great processions. Everything was

carefully staged to evoke the latent longings of the people but also to challenge the religious establishment just enough to fulfill the prophecy of his arrest, trial and execution.

When the parade was finally over, Jesus was just getting started. He further angered the religious leaders by trespassing on their private turf, the Temple. Going into the Court of the Gentiles, the only place on the Temple complex that allowed non Jews, he saw what he was looking for, the money changers who made handsome profits exchanging Roman coins for Temple coins, for purchasing the lambs and doves needed for the people's sacrifices. Infuriated by their crass materialism and exploitation, acting like an Old Testament Prophet, Jesus overturned their tables and drove the money changers out saying

*My house shall be a house of
prayer
But you have made it a den
of thieves.*

The chief priests, the scribes and the other religious officials got even more apoplectic when Jesus set up shop in the Temple, (their temple!) to teach the people the same lessons about God's Kingdom, the forgiveness of sins and righteous living he taught out in the countryside

As Jesus anticipated the priests didn't take these intrusions lying down. Already brainstorming how to kill him, they started a smear campaign to publicly discredit him. Erroneously believing they could easily outwit the bumpkin from Nazareth they selected their shrewdest debaters and sent them out to battle by asking Jesus trick questions designed to trip up and embarrass him in front of his followers.

Their opening salvo was meant to catch Jesus off guard when they suddenly swooped down and interrupted his teaching. Being the accredited religious leaders of their day, they questioned his credentials by demanding "...by what authority are you doing these things? Who...gave you this authority?"

Jesus seamlessly turned the tables on them with his own question, asking if John the Baptist's authority came from heaven or not. Instead of giving a straight answer they panicked and went into a huddle, desperately picking each other's brain for a suitable answer. They quickly realized they hoisted themselves on their own petard because if they answered "from heaven" Jesus would chide them for opposing a prophet of God, on the other hand if they said what they really believed, that John was a false prophet, the people, who admired the Baptist, would turn on them. So after conferring with each other they came up with the lame answer, "We don't know,"

giving Jesus the opportunity to humiliate them by saying, “Then I won’t tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Not yet admitting they were outmatched, and not wanting to be accused of bullying Jesus again, they then sent in undercover agents pretending to be sympathetic, asking another clever, trick question, “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar?”

Again Jesus outwitted them asking the questioner for a coin from his own pocket, which happened to be a Roman coin with the image of Caesar. The fact that one of them had a Roman coin in the temple confines automatically defused their question, but Jesus pressed his advantage saying, “Give to Caesar what’s Caesar’s, give to God what’s God’s.” Once again Jerusalem’s brightest and best looked mediocre.

Undaunted, next the Sadducees, the aristocratic priests, stepped up to the plate. Being Ivory Tower, inside the Beltway type intellectuals who prided themselves on their complicated theological systems, they posed a question that questioned the validity of the resurrection of the body to eternal life, a teaching they scorned and rejected.

Their trick question: “If six brothers in succession marry the oldest brother’s widow, in the resurrection in the hereafter who will be her husband?” Jesus had to be as amused as I am when one of my middle schoolers asks a similar hypothetical question, “What would Jesus do if he was attacked by a polar bear? Would he ‘zap’ him?”

Instead of laughing out loud, Jesus took the question seriously, quoting from the Sadducees’ own scripture, saying “...the fact that the dead are raised, Moses himself showed in the story about the (burning) bush where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham...Isaac and...Jacob (Not I was, but I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). He is the God of the living, not the dead...all of them are still alive.”

This is a good time to remember the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over expecting to get different results. The religious establishment’s obsessive desire to smear and discredit Jesus exposed the dark, empty place they put themselves in. Instead of being the guardians of the covenant between God and Israel, they became brutish thugs masquerading as holy men and servants of God.

How did this happen? Were they always like that or did they simply lose their way? When they first entered the priesthood as young men, did they start out with pure motives and the desire to serve the Lord, only to become spiritually lazy and cynical in their beliefs and practices?

Another question: How can a group of men living and serving in God's house year after year be so blind, while so many others, even the most irreligious came to know and trust God by just being with Jesus?

One more question: When the religious leaders were making fools of themselves trying to outwit Jesus, how could they not recognize the presence and authority of God, and instead of being confrontational and condescending humble themselves and get to know Jesus?

These are good questions to ask particularly during Holy Week. A helpful spiritual exercise is to pick up your Bibles and read the story of Holy Week from Psalm Sunday through to Good Friday and then look long and hard to find comparisons between yourself and the disciples, especially Peter and Judas, as well as seeing yourself in Jesus' adversaries who just happened to be the pillars of the organized religion of their day. All of them are mirror reflections of us at our best and at our worst. Learn from their flaws and then wonder why Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

It's good to know Jesus prayed for their forgiveness because he prays for ours as well, but don't let that keep you from unmasking the dark spaces in your soul and asking God to refill them with light.

Holy Week is just beginning. Stay with Jesus, keep close to him especially on Maundy Thursday to be with Jesus at his last supper and on Good Friday to die with Jesus on his cross, with the promise through his resurrection, you'll be raised to new life..