

“A Mockery of a Parade”

Matthew 21: 1-21

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A quick confession – I enjoy parody and satire, especially political parody and political satire. There’s something about a Jon Stewart or a George Carlin pointing out through satire or parody the foibles of elected or appointed officials which truly makes me laugh. And sometimes all they need do is report the news and there it is – satire or parody as provided by the official him or herself.

Jon Kyle is a Senator from Arizona and this past week he stated on the floor of the Senate that 90% of what Planned Parenthood did was abortions. When confronted later by a news reporter who pointed out that in fact the exact opposite was true, 90% of Planned Parenthood’s services were other medical services and only 10% abortion related, Senator Kyle’s office issued a statement that his statement on the floor of the Senate was not meant to be “factual”. Now let me try to get my mind around this. Senator Kyle was not being factual so he was being anti-factual, counter-factual. Doesn’t that mean he was lying? Parody is often provided by the pompous and the self-righteous who just can’t bear to admit that they are wrong.

I thought about that as I prepared this sermon for our reading today from Matthew is one in which parody or satire is used to confront power and oppression. If we don’t take the Bible seriously and read it carefully we might miss it but there it is. Matthew’s story about Jesus entrance into Jerusalem is parody or satire for it offers a story of power being turned upside down through a parodying of it.

Jerusalem in the first century of the Common Era represented a place of power and a symbol of Rome’s domination of the land of Israel. Rome had conquered the area and, after some years of using a coopted local ruler, had installed one of its own as “prefect”. Using political domination, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation, the Romans maintained their rule through both military might and local cooptation. In Jerusalem, the temple was run by a priesthood appointed by Rome and in return this group offered Rome its support both political as well as religious. And remember Temple theology believed or fomented the belief that God lived in the temple and thus, with the Temple being in Jerusalem, Jerusalem became not simply the political but also the religious capital of the area. Passover was the main religious celebration of the day and a time when any self-respecting Jew would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

A reminder about Passover which has a great deal of meaning for this pericope- Passover is the celebration of the release from slavery, well the escape from slavery of the Jewish people. In a sense it is a very political as well as religious celebration. And temple theology encouraged every Jewish believer who could possibly make it to Jerusalem that the need do it. Celebrating God’s liberation of the people from slavery took on special meaning when one could do that celebration in the temple in which God lived!

Now if one were the Romans and seeking to maintain one’s political and economic domination and exploitation of these people, this celebration might cause one pause. Here were gathered the

Jewish masses celebrating liberation, freedom from their enslavement, their political domination and economic exploitation by the Egyptians in a city under the domination, control of the Romans. It didn't take to deep a thinker to realize that the celebration of freedom from one group of dominators might lead to a desire and acts to throw off the current one. The Romans therefore would bring their army from the sea coast where it was stationed to Jerusalem. And just so that no one misunderstood the power and the might of this army its entrance into the city would be via a great parade with horses, chariots, and flashing metal of swords and bows. Matthew, using the words of the prophet Zechariah as found in that prophet's books ninth chapter, parodies this great entrance of the army with Jesus entrance upon a donkey who is nursing a colt. Read literally this passage would seem to have Jesus making his entrance like a circus performer on two animals at once for Zechariah has used a Hebraic construction which repeats a word or description and some think the writer of Matthew mistranslated a Greek translation of the original Hebrew. Thus the original Hebrew read something like riding on a donkey, a colt which would mean not two animals but one with the second construction merely a reinforcement or emphasis of the first descriptive word. The writer of Matthew some commentators think did not know Hebrew but read Greek and the Greek translation failed to properly translate this passage in Zechariah. And Matthew wanting to emphasize that Jesus was the new Moses who fulfilled all the prophecies about the messiah fully, thus offers this idea that the entrance was upon two animals at once.

John Dominick Crossan offers an idea which I find much more intriguing and fascinating. What Matthew really meant was that this entrance was upon the most anti-military, anti-mighty animal possible. It wasn't simply a donkey, a beast of burden but a donkey at whose side was a colt nursing and vulnerable. This was not a steed upon which a military leader would ride for its vulnerability, even its stamina would be in question for it was a new mother to whose care this colt was entrusted. The challenge to authority and military might is in the paradoxical juxtaposition of the dominating power needing and comforted by its great steeds and mighty army now confronted by this crowd led by a lowly figure on a nursing mule!

And notice Matthew also offers us a parody of understanding as those along the road but outside the city understand and join in the satire, in the parody by putting palms upon the road. Those in the city like Mark's disciples are without a clue who this could be who excites these, these fools so wildly. They, the insiders, the city dwellers whose lives are made secure by the Roman army and its mighty warriors can only ask "who is this?". They who live in the very city where their god resides don't know who this is who approaches them. It is they who have benefited from their cooptation by the Romans and they who benefit from the protection offered though it is also they who give up their autonomy and their economic security in exchange.

The Matthean story offers more detail than the other gospels and challenges the reader with this parody. Its meaning may have been to assure the hearers that God known through Jesus the Messiah, the Risen one remained with them. The assurance was that God was present even as they lived and worshiped outside the temple city and even as those who lived within its confines denied them access to the house, the temple where their God resided. It was not a story which sought to convey a historical even nor to report a parade for the local paper. It was a story meant to convey a faith founded in the belief that nothing – not the power of a conquering army nor the closed gates of a holy city nor even the execution of the one in whom they believed –

could separate them from the presence of their God. And it was a story that parodied the political and the magisterial might of an occupying force which sought to exorcise them from the world.

Lastly, it is a story which sought to assure their transformed faith though unknown and misunderstood by those inside the walls was a faith which held high the one whose power came not from an occupying force, a capital far away nor from a building but from a presence of one who challenged and parodied earthly power, who sought not high office but high acts. This is a story which emphasized that the messiah who rode a nursing donkey sought to embody the prophet's mantle and its call for peace, for justice, and for a reign of God which would enable all to live their lives in peace and with justice.

And for us today, in Madison, Wisconsin, the story challenges so much it might seem overwhelming. As we begin the final week of Lent and enter what many call Holy Week, some seek to find in this pericope a triumphant entrance of this Jesus guy gladly riding to his death – a death filled with suffering and sorrow. Matthew, I think, calls us to consider that the power of the cross and the hope of the tomb is the power of peace and the hope of justice. What challenges us this week ought be not to find how we might suffer for our faith or consider that to which we ought die. No, the challenge of this week is to embrace and confront how we might use the power of peace in a world gone mad with celebration of destruction and weaponry, of hatred, violence, and death. Consider the cost of living a life of peace in a world of terrorism, a life of peace in a world whose response to terror is a greater visitation of terror and destruction. How dare we embody, how dare we ride a nursing donkey amongst the tanks, alongside the bombers, and into the camps of those who preach destruction?

It is not poetry which will enable us to persevere but faith and that faith is not a call to accept or welcome suffering as though that were the liturgy. It is faith that God calls us to question, even to parody those who think that violence will end violence, that the power of peace is a power of domination. Our faith in God's never ending presence is a faith that we will change and the world will change when we dare to challenge violence with peace and hatred with love. It is not poetry which will enable us to persevere but faith and that faith is not a call to watch in comfort while others starve or some are homeless. It is not a faith which celebrates the quiet order of a well policed but selective system. We cannot become the insiders of the temple city and simply ask who might that be approaching. We cannot celebrate a faith in one who sought to bring his God outside the city and into the streets, the hovels and the fields while we reside in gated splendor. Justice is that which happens when all the children chosen by our God dare share the splendor, dare celebrate the presence of that God. And who is not the child of our God? AMEN.