

Jesus: The Peculiar King

April 17, 2011
Mark 11:1-11; 15-18

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Reading in the news recently that the French had taken a leading part in the U.N.'s military intervention in Libya—and the awareness that our troops are still battling against the influence of the Taliban and El Qaeda in Afghanistan reminded me of the news parody circulated on the internet attributed to the Associated Press:

“For immediate release: April, 2011 French intellectuals to be deployed in Afghanistan to convince Taliban forces of the non-existence of Allah. Dateline Kabul: the ongoing portion of the ground war heated up yesterday when the allies revealed plans to airdrop a platoon of crack French existentialist philosophers into the mountainous regions of the country which have seen the heaviest casualties in order to destroy the morale of the Taliban partisans by proving that Allah does not exist. Elements of the feared Jean-Paul Sartre Brigade, or “Black Berets,” will be parachuted into combat zones to spread doubt, despondency, and existentialist ennui among the enemy. Hardened by numerous intellectual battles fought during their long occupation of Paris’ Left Bank, their first mission will be to establish a number of sidewalk cafes at strategic points near the front lines. There they will drink coffee and talk animatedly about the absurd nature of life and humankind’s lonely isolation in a meaningless universe.”

Whatever the Press (imaginary or actual) may be telling us, our main struggle is not between the atheists and the religious believers; not between the beliefs that God exists and that God must not exist. The main question is what kind of God God is. In what kind of God do you believe?

In some sense this is the question Jesus needed to answer at the beginning of that Passover week, what we Christians call Palm Sunday, in most likely April, 30 A.D. In fact He had been pondering it, answering it, since the beginning of His public ministry three years before, and no doubt before then also. He had been attracted to the ministry of His cousin, John the Baptist, who had been calling the Jewish people to repentance for their failure to live out the will of God.

Jesus is baptized by John, but then breaks away from him. Satan wants to tempt Jesus to do miraculous deeds of power to feed the hungry, and to do miraculous feats in order to win over the support of the crowds. His enemy even offers Jesus dominion and authority over all the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus will bow down

to him. Jesus resists these temptations—but even at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus showed the resolution to behave unlike other kings. Jesus wasn’t about dazzling the crowds and winning the big election, wasn’t about feeding the hungry at all costs, wasn’t about exercising political power and glory—even for the greater good. (What tragedy would be avoided if every leader would not seek to justify anything and everything in the name of “the greater good.”) Jesus was no ordinary king.

For a while Jesus’ popularity spikes. He attracts huge crowds as He casts out demons, heals the lame, restores sight to the blind, even raises the dead. (In fact one reason so many flock to welcome Him into Jerusalem during that original Palm Sunday is that He had just raised Lazarus from the dead, in Bethany, only two miles away.) Jesus touches and heals lepers; He receives and teaches and heals women. He performs signs and wonders on the Sabbath. He dines with anybody, even tax collectors. He acts as if the love and grace of God is without limit. Not only all this, but He does not pay proper deference to the religious authorities. He is constantly in trouble with them, often having to flee beyond their reach until things could cool off.

After two years of this, however, His popularity is waning. He is getting to be “old news”; some have seen Him do wonderful things but they are not ready to get into trouble in order publicly to identify themselves as His followers. Everyone is noticing that the Romans are still very much at home in the land and lording it over them; that taxes are high, that life is hard. They are still terrorized and downtrodden and Jesus finally seemed to be someone who might have been able to do something about it.

His riding from Olivet in toward Jerusalem was an intentionally provocative, unequivocal action. He was pressing the home the point of His claim to be king, of being the Messiah. He had often told His disciples and those He had healed to be quiet, not to tell anyone. But this day everything was different. He chose the day when hundreds of thousands of pilgrims were converging on Jerusalem. (During Passover its population swelled from about 200,000 to about a million persons). His name would be in every mouth; all the city would be wondering about this Jesus. He accepted their tribute, the tribute that the Jews had long extended their military heroes and kings: “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the

name of the Lord!” There was no mistaking His action: O Jerusalem, O daughters of Zion, “Behold Your King!” He rode on the back of an unriden donkey colt, as the victorious military kings of Israel had done centuries before.

Jesus knew His power; He knew the Source of His authority. He knew who He was. He was God’s anointed; He was the son of David; He was the King. He was riding in to take the throne which was rightly His. He knew the power of the enemy, and of the religious Establishment, and He was no fool as to what would probably happen to Him. But evil would not derail Him; suffering would not turn Him back. He would either be proclaimed and crowned as king, or die in the attempt. He would not back down. He would not give up on His Mission (to proclaim and live out God’s forgiving love for every one), His calling, His followers, or His Father.

And the authorities did not miss any of this. Every voice shouting “Hosanna!”, every branch being waved in triumph to Him was a challenge to them. He was so popular they couldn’t do much in the open—but neither could they much longer ignore His challenge.

It wasn’t just the authorities who set themselves against Jesus. As you know, some of these very same people who were celebrating Jesus on Sunday were shouting “Crucify Him!” by Friday. The main reason seems to be that they disagreed with Jesus as to what kind of God God is. What kind of king Jesus was. They felt let down, betrayed.

Jesus rode that colt in not to the military headquarters and political center, but to the spiritual center of Jerusalem—the Temple. The next day, with no earthly authority whatsoever, He singlehandedly shut down the business of the moneychangers and merchants who, after all, had all their official papers and permits in order. This next provocation was also a deliberate challenge: either the Temple was the institution through which God was to be accessed, and was reaching human beings, or Jesus was. Jerusalem wasn’t big enough for both of them to be the way to God. What is God like? Accessible only through the powerful, the hierarchy, only available to the few? Or, through Jesus, accessible to everyone?

He claimed His throne there that entire week. He preached to the crowds that week, more often and more boldly in the temple than He ever had. But that preaching, that clarity, pressed home the differences between Jesus and His hearers. Once it became clear that this Messiah, this “king Jesus” was not going to deliver what they thought the Messiah ought to, then their affections turned quickly against Him. By Friday, those hurrahs and hosannahs

and high hopes had turned to ashes and despair.

The people’s hopes for the Kingdom of God had become secular. They hoped that the Messiah would bring them freedom from Roman occupation and economic prosperity. They envisioned a modern-day Judas Maccabeus, who had rallied Jewish troops to defeat the Greek ruler to gain for his Jewish nation a century of relative political freedom. They had been longing, for centuries, for a leader to bring them dignity and prosperity and peace. (Even Jesus’ twelve misunderstood the nature of the Kingdom He was dying to bring: James and John argued over who would get the best cabinet positions in the Kingdom when it arrived [Mt 20:20-21] and all of them wondered if He wouldn’t please restore the Kingdom to Israel even after He was raised from the dead [Acts 1:6]).

Those celebrating the beginning of Passover with Him and waving their branches did not much appreciate Jesus’ teaching that He identified the enemy not as Roman soldiers but as the devil. He said the enemy most to fear did not reside in the Antonia barracks across from the Temple in Jerusalem but within the human heart. The “strong man” Jesus needed to bind in order for His Kingdom to take root was Satan—not Caesar. Jesus told Pilate “My Kingdom is not of this world.” (He also noted that if it were not so, Jesus could call up legions of His own soldiers and surely defeat the Roman troops.) The crowds of Jews desperately wanted His Kingdom to be of this world and they wanted Rome out of their land. What good to them was a king who would not rule? They wanted a nationalistic king to defeat Rome, “out there,” rather than a spiritual and universal king to defeat evil, “in here.”

Jesus also understood He was king of a social, not merely an individual Kingdom. He saw and loved one person at a time, one sinner at a time, yet Jesus’ goal was always a redeemed community, a new non-biological family of sisters and brothers of His. Any religion which stops at individualism, at self-centered salvation is not Christ’s vision. The Kingdom of God is a social vision which is open to every sort of person—not only, as His opponents claimed, the righteous, the wealthy, the paid-up, the rule-keepers. (This difference of vision caused great friction also. Who wanted to be in the same family with all those sinners who were obviously not worthy?)

The Kingdom whose king Jesus understood Himself to be is both a local and a universal kingdom. “You, my followers, are the light of the world; the salt of the earth” [Mt 5:13]—not just of your street or neighborhood or circle of friends. His is a global vision; Jesus saw His Church not as a place of rest and sanctuary for a few to be

able to check out of a lost and hopeless world but rather as His people who would accept His challenge and fulfill His mission to save the entire world. Jesus saw Himself to be King over not just Corona del Mar or Irvine or Orange County—but over all the world. We serve a different king when we determine our own agenda and decide we will ignore His.

I don't know about you, but it's hard for me to imagine trying to put myself back into that time and place in history. How would I have behaved that day? Would I have jumped on the Jesus bandwagon? Would I have mistrusted the enthusiasm of the crowd and stuck to myself? Would I have had courage to stay with Jesus during His trial, or maybe even at the cross? (That one I doubt—if eleven of His chosen twelve failed Him, I'm not very confident I would be more heroic. Forgive me, O God—with You all things are possible.)

It's hard to imagine how we would have behaved on that day in history—but how about this day? We still struggle with the same issues of personal power and fear and trust. I do. The characters in the drama in Jerusalem were all involved in a power struggle. Isn't life about struggling to have enough money or love or position or technology or medicine or government or savings to secure what you and your family need, to not be dependent or vulnerable? In the Jesus drama we've been hearing, the crowds struggled with fear of poverty, fear of starvation, fear of ongoing Roman domination. The leaders struggled with fear of losing their privilege and prestige and position, of losing their moral capacity to make others feel guilty or ashamed.

There's nothing wrong with struggling for this sort of power in our lives—unless it becomes an idol, unless it takes over and becomes the ruling dynamic over our lives. And we still share this tendency with those crowds in 30 A.D.: trying to save our own lives. The world is still dangerous and threatening; international events and the domestic economy still threaten us, and we can find any number of causes for anxiety and fear if we try very hard. Even today we can become anxious, we can focus our lives on trying to save ourselves. How many tens of millions are dying by centimeters, day by day, of heart troubles and headaches, blood pressure and anxieties and addictions and egotisms—all of them trying to fight the fears of needing to save themselves.

The irony in all this is that Jesus is the One who was not stuck in this fear, and who could have saved Himself. All around Him were people scrambling and scheming to stay alive. He could have pulled it off—He could have stayed

alive. He could have headed, that Sunday, backward to Galilee instead of forward to the Temple and the cross. Gone into private practice and died a natural death. But He got onto that colt; He declared Himself King. He rode right into the danger, into the tumult and torture of Good Friday.

He loved Jerusalem and all its people, all His people. (In Luke's account, Jesus breaks down and weeps over what will become of them. It's not every king who breaks down to weep for love of his people as he's trying to seize power.) He wanted to show them to trust in God as He was doing; in that trust comes the courage and freedom to live beyond the influence of fear. He loved them enough to show them a different way to live. He was showing them everything wasn't about His personal security. In fact, if they didn't learn to trust in God, if they persisted in trying to control their destiny by trusting in politics and political rebellion and the same old usual fearful ways of dealing with Rome, they would surely be destroyed. (Jesus foresaw this and it's exactly what happened, 40 years later). Fearful of letting go, of trusting in God, of embracing their true King, this peculiar king, they lost everything. It still works this way: what we want to hang onto and control in fear we will lose; what we entrust to God we may gain).

Jesus lived in frightening times; these ways Jesus taught others about living in His Kingdom were surely demanding. But I still have to struggle with this, to think about letting go and not worrying—every day. Do you? There are a lot of things I simply cannot control. (As some of you know, I could not apparently even control landing my left foot safely onto the concrete in front of our front door last week).

Here's another way to describe how Jesus, this peculiar king, is telling us about living in His Kingdom. Fear keeps us outside. One of the hardest things about growing up is learning that mom or dad cannot always keep us safe. (That's one of the hardest things about being mom or dad, too—learning that we cannot always keep our kids safe). So we grow up a bit, and at least hope maybe God will keep us safe. We find out otherwise. (Reinhold Neibuhr wrote "It is easy to be tempted to believe that the child of God will be afforded special protection from the capricious forces of the natural world, or special immunity from the vindictive passions of angry men. But any such faith is bound to suffer disillusionment.")

Jesus was demonstrating that He did not expect any special protection from God. He understood what we all learn in growing up: that our parents cannot protect us from every problem, ease for us every burden. Our growth comes from facing these problems, accepting necessary burdens

with courage and faithfulness. We keep growing as we grow past the expectation that someone else will solve our problems, someone will rescue us, someone will meet our needs for us. (This syndrome is particularly true of adolescence—when many teens typically grow ingenious at trying to maintain the privileges of childhood while simultaneously demanding the rights of adulthood and avoiding the responsibilities of adulthood. Many adults never grow beyond emotional adolescence—and I wonder if the political logjams in Washington and Sacramento aren't caused by the same immature behavior. We voters want someone to solve our problems and to provide security for us, but at little or no inconvenience. Please don't misunderstand: God has ordained government to serve the people and we Americans have historically been most fortunate in what we have generally gotten. Thank God for our faithful public servants).

It's a peculiar king who is willing to tell the people he cannot and will not solve their economic, social, and political problems—not for any price. Jesus would not, anyway. But then He got into trouble for failing to provide the kind of services, the kind of kingdom, people seemed to want.

He came to tell us that He expected no protection and received no protection and offered no protection against difficulties and ugly surprises and vulnerabilities. What He wanted is for us to face every hardship, every frustration, every challenge, with courage and trust in God.

The fact is that sooner or later every one of us is going to face troubles we cannot fix; challenges we can only accept with courage and hope and trust in God. The people wanted a king who would rescue them out of their difficulties.

Maybe you read about the troop ship *Dorchester* which was sunk by a U-boat torpedo during World War II in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. There were four chaplains on board, and when it was discovered there were not enough life vests to go around, each of them chose to give up theirs so that the boys might be saved. Those four chaplains all went down with the ship. Dr. Dan Poling, the father of one of them, wrote a short volume after the war (*Faith is Power*) in which he told of his own son's final wishes. Just before he left for the sea, he told his father, the author, "Dad, I don't want you to pray for my return...That would not be fair. I have no premonitions, but just don't pray for my return...Just pray that I shall never be a coward; Dad, pray that I shall be adequate." Dr Poling wrote after the death of his son, "The only prayer he wanted was answered: he was adequate."

King Jesus taught and lived this different way of trusting to the end. He promised to be present with His people in the midst of our difficulties. He showed you and me, His beloved sisters and brothers, how to live beyond our prior expectations and into a new quality of life in which we keep learning to trust in the One God who is our refuge and our strength in life and in death.

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When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and He sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Then He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when He had looked around at everything, as it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve...

Then they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill Him; for they were afraid of Him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by His teaching.