

Church of the Crossroads
Palm/Passion Sunday
April 1, 2007
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MISUNDERSTANDING JESUS

Luke 19:28-40

It is helpful to remember that the Passion Narratives found in each of the Gospels were written in retrospect. That is, they were written following the life and death of Jesus in an attempt to make sense of what had happened. A just and righteous human being had been put to death by the Roman government at the urging of religious authorities and a temple elite. Why?

The Jewish people had hoped for a messiah/king who would liberate them from their Roman oppressors. In Jesus, they saw such a Messiah. But it did not turn out the way the people wanted. Jesus ended up on a cross. The gospel writers who were compelled to tell the story of Jesus had to find some meaning in it all.

So it was that they began to search the Hebrew scriptures for clues. They recalled the servant songs found in the book of the Prophet Isaiah.

*He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*
- Isaiah 53:3

They also remembered the words of the 22nd Psalm:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.*
- Psalm 22:1,2

The gospel writers then perhaps said to themselves, “See, his followers should have understood. They should have known that it would not go well for Jesus. Knowing what he taught and how he embraced the poor and the oppressed, they should have expected him not to be a victorious, triumphant Messiah, but a suffering servant Messiah.”

The gospel writers then began to create their narratives. Jesus, they knew, died in Jerusalem, and so they would first need to get him into the city. Perhaps there had been some kind of procession into the great city of Jerusalem that day long ago, but the Gospel writers cast the procession in a particular way. They wanted to describe the ambiguity of the moment and they did so by utilizing an ancient text, this one from the 9th chapter of the prophet Zechariah:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you,
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

- Zechariah 9:9

This passage in itself created the kind of ambiguity the Gospel writers needed. On the one hand, we have the triumphant and victorious king, the very messiah/king that the crowds wanted and believed that Jesus would turn out to be. On the other hand, we have a humble and servant messiah/king, riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Jesus embodies the spirit of the humble servant messiah/king, and yet the crowd wants the triumphant and victorious king. The hopes of the crowd on that day must have been high. As the story is told, the procession took place just before the Passover, the great festival when the Jewish people recall the time when they were set free from their bondage in Egypt. Would there be another liberating event in store for them? I have come to appreciate the way Shusako Endo describes the scene in his book *A Life of Jesus*:

The *Pesach* (Passover) was at hand. The people preparing for the festival were looking back on their long history, rueful over the anguished adversity of their ancient wandering

migrations, and they prayed with fervor that God would come again to restore prosperity to his land now trampled underfoot by the Gentiles. Jesus, of course, knew the spirit of the feast. On this particular day, shortly before the festival itself began, with full knowledge he dared to plunge into that whirlpool of popular misunderstanding. Descending from the Mount of Olives and through the cheers from the crowd, he certainly knew that he was soon going to disappoint these people, and that the people in their frustration would turn against him. . . . Religious pictures tend to portray the figure of Jesus on this occasion as a triumphant hero. The fact is that Jesus, coming down the mountain and entering the city, wore a painful smile, which came with pondering his own isolation.

- A Life of Jesus, pp. 107, 108

Jesus, riding on the back of the colt, the foal of a donkey, is the servant messiah/king. He rides into Jerusalem not upon a great horse as would Alexander the Great, proud and ready for war, but in humility and in peace.

The crowds misunderstand Jesus. They deem him to be one kind of messiah/king, but he actually represents another. And so we discover a truth for this day. Jesus, humble and saddle sore, is re-defining the meaning of kingship. He is reshaping what it means to be Lord, *dominus*. He is transforming the meaning of dominion.

We who know how the story ended can no longer define dominion as domination. We can no longer abide by an American empire that wants to dominate the world. We can no longer tolerate the domination and misuse of the earth. For we follow One who refused to lord it over others. We follow One who rejected the way of violence. We follow the suffering servant/king, the One who journeyed towards a cross.

Jesus was misunderstood back then, and he has been misunderstood ever since, not by everyone, mind you, for there have been those faithful human beings throughout the centuries who have understood him well. At the same time, whenever Jesus has been used in the service of a Christendom enamored by power, or by an empire bent upon domination, he has not only been misunderstood, but misused.

He continues to be both misunderstood and misused in our present day context. When the name of Jesus is invoked to support of American imperial designs in the world, or to support of Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands, as he is by the Christian right, then a false Christianity is being promulgated. It is a Christianity that misunderstands Jesus.

I recently read a letter to the editor that said it would be good for the children of our schools to study the Bible so that they might understand their nation's Christian roots, and also the Koran, so that they would be able to distinguish between a true Islam and a false Islam. The writer of the letter failed to acknowledge that there is also a false Christianity, a Christianity that continues to misunderstand who Jesus really was and is, and I'm afraid that if the Bible were taught in our schools this would be the kind of Christianity that would be taught.

Of course, we must always hold our own understandings of Jesus with humility. We too may be wrong, but at the same time, we need to proclaim the Jesus we have come to know him to be. For religion is a dangerous thing. Religion, including the Christian religion, has been used in the service of much evil in the world, and we need always to witness to a Jesus and a faith that is true to the spirit of the Gospels.

The Jesus we witness in the Passion Narratives has yet another importance for us as human beings. In going to the cross, Jesus is not only re-defining what power and dominion is about, but he is also shaping a new understanding of the human person. We human beings are created not to be masters but stewards of all that is, not to be in control but to be open to the leading of God's spirit, not to be possessive but to be self-giving, not to be self-serving but to be compassionate, to rejoice with all who rejoice and suffer with all who suffer. These are to be the attributes of our new humanity. In Jesus the Christ, we discover the human beings we were created to be. And so it is that by the grace of God we may be faithful followers of the one who rode into the city of Jerusalem in peace and in humility, riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey, the One who gave up all pretensions to power and mastery, and journeyed instead to a cross. May God so help us so to be. Amen.