

Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30. One was a peasant procession; the other an imperial procession.

From the east Jesus rode a donkey down from the Mount of Olives, cheered on by his followers. From the peasant village of Nazareth some 100 miles north of Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers came from the peasant class. They journeyed from Galilee to the north to Jerusalem—a journey so fraught with significance that it occupies the full central section of Mark's Gospel.

From the west Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, entered Jerusalem. Imagine the panoply of imperial power: calvary and foot soldiers, leather, armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles and glistening in the sun. Hear the marching feet, the creaking leather, the clinking bridles, the beating drums. See the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

Every year the scene was repeated. During major Jewish festivals, the governor came up to Jerusalem, displaying his mighty power as a warning sign to any who might have ideas of causing trouble. This was especially the case during Passover, that preeminent festival celebrating the Jewish people's liberation from an earlier empire.

What we see here is not just about political power. It is about a theology legitimizing that power. The Emperor, you see, was acclaimed as more than just the ruler of Rome. Beginning with Caesar Augustus, he was also acclaimed as Son of God. Reputed to be the son of the god Apollo, Augustus is celebrated in inscriptions as "son of god," "lord," "savior," and as the one who had brought "peace on earth." After death, the story goes, he was seen ascending to heaven to take his place among the gods. Thus, the panoply of power displayed as Pilate's procession rolled into town was not just about a rival social order. It was, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan insist, about a "rival theology" [*Last Week*, 3].

Jesus' processional, Borg and Crossan go on to suggest, was an intentional, pre-arranged "counterprocession." It was a "planned political demonstration," playing out the symbolism recorded in the book of the prophet Zechariah: a king coming to Zion (Jerusalem), "humble, and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (9:9). Zechariah details the sort of ruler this new king will be. He will banish war and command "peace to the nations."

Pilate's procession embodied the power, glory and violence of the emperor who ruled the world. Jesus' procession embodied an alternative vision—the kingdom of God. This contrast between two kingdoms is central not only to Mark's gospel; it is central to the story of Jesus himself. Holy Week is the story of the confrontation of two alternative kingdoms and what happens when they collide.

Holy week, as we celebrate it, prepares for and focuses upon the passion of Jesus, signified in the Latin word *passio*, meaning *suffering*. We speak of Jesus' crucifixion as his passion; but it is Jesus' passion consists of more than the events of Good Friday. It is about the passion, i.e., the consuming commitment that characterized Jesus' entire life and ministry. To narrow Jesus' passion to the last 12 hours of his life—his arrest, trial, torture and crucifixion—ignores the connection between his life and death. Jesus' first passion was the kingdom of God, which was determinative of everything he said and did from beginning to end. Heralding a kingdom that was not remote but in the midst of the world, Jesus painted a picture of what life lived under the rule of the covenantal God of Israel should look like. Such a life collided head-on with the inequities meted out by Rome. Jesus' first passion, in other words, led to his passion, his suffering and death [*Last Week*, viii]. Had he chosen another way, the way of compromise both with the religious authorities and political authorities of his day, the story could have been different. Had he avoided the way of public conflict and debate marking his ministry from its beginning, he could have saved himself.

The way of Jesus does not settle for things as they are. Jesus did come into conflict with the temple of his day. Admittedly, we have done Jesus and the church and our Jewish forebears and cousins a tragic disservice over the centuries by portraying Jesus in opposition to the faith tradition from which he came. "Jesus," Borg and Crossan insist, must be seen as "a *part* of Judaism, not *apart* from Judaism" [30]. Jesus criticized the temple *as did others* within Judaism. The Essene community, known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, rejected the legitimacy of the temple and looked toward the day when its own interim temple would be restored to a purified temple. And the Pharisees, whom we know so well, were often at issue with the Sadducees, the keepers and supporters of the temple.

The temple was celebrated as "the navel of the earth." Mediating God's presence and forgiveness, its significance can hardly be overstated. Yet in keeping with the prophets who went before him, Jesus both

celebrated and condemned the temple and the city of Jerusalem where it thrived. Israel's prophets had criticized the domination of wealth and royalty that flowed forth from the reign of Solomon, abusing and impoverishing the masses. Stepping into the first century, Jesus confronted a temple whose leadership had in 6 CE become collaborators with Rome. Not only was the high priest, contrary to tradition, selected by Rome and frequently replaced by Rome. The temple oversaw not only the collection of its own tithes, it also oversaw the collection of taxes for Rome. As more and more of the land, contrary to Torah, was confiscated from its ancestral owners, high priestly families, also contrary to Torah, along with the city's elite, became owners of the land, cutting people in that pre-industrial agricultural society off from the subsistence farms where they had eked out the barest of a livelihood. Accordingly, the temple was the repository for records of debt-indebtedness, which often accounted for people losing their land and livelihood (yes, again, contrary to Torah).

If we have any doubt about whether Jesus was unique in his criticisms, we should take into account the fact that Jewish revolutionaries, successful in taking Jerusalem in the 66 CE revolt, took immediate steps concerning the temple. They replaced the high priest with a priest chosen by lot from the peasant class and burned the records of debt housed in the temple. The object of their revolt was as much those who collaborated with and enabled Roman rule as it was Rome itself. Be sure, then, that Jesus' cleansing the temple had enormous repercussions. The resulting charge of blasphemy against God and God's house morphed as it moved into the Roman arena into insurrection. Jesus and the disturbance that surrounded him posed a threat to the way things were—a threat that had to be silenced before it got out of hand.

The way of Jesus is the way of service, not self-protection and self-aggrandizement. It was nothing short of a tragic irony that the one hailed king as he processed into Jerusalem at the beginning of the week became the crucified “king of the Jews” nailed to a Roman cross before the week came to its end. Jesus identified with the most vulnerable and dispossessed among the Jewish people, and in the process came head-long into confrontation with the powers that were. And now some 2000 years later, those who would be his loyal followers must confront the question: What does *then* have to do with *now*? As Borg and Crossan put it, what specifically does what happened *then* impact *this* now, *our* now? What we are talking about here is something more than our handily pulling out a simplistic intonation of church doctrine. What specifically does Jesus' passion ask of us?

Frankly, we are not left without some very good hints, most significantly those seeming to originate with Jesus himself. Three times Mark depicts Jesus predicting his coming death, and three times Jesus moves directly from his prediction into teaching about what, then, his followers should do. Three times he counsels a life like unto his own—a life of service, a life consumed with, passionate about the kingdom of God and its implications for those who suffer. We may be most familiar with his counsel that “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (8:34). And we have his words on two occasions to his clamoring disciples that, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (9:35; 10:43, 45). Writing a couple of decades later, Paul would say it, too,

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a CROSS (Philippians 2:5-8).

The way of Jesus is the way of service, not self-protection and self-aggrandizement. The way of Jesus does not ride above the struggles, the inequities, the cruelties of the day. It walks right onto them, resisting and challenging and seeking to depose them as it goes. To be sure, it isn't the way we would particularly choose. Jesus died on Friday not as a victim, but as a protagonist filled with passion for God and God's kingdom, God's way of justice for all God loved. Jesus chose to step forward in Jerusalem in the middle of Passover with a word of deliverance for all of those suffering from the injustice that swirled around him. Choosing to identify with those who suffered, he emptied himself in love on their behalf. If we would be his followers, we are called not only to contemplate the wonder of this mystery, we are called to emulate it in our own individual lives and in our corporate life as a congregation as well.

Holy week, you see, is not a spectator sport. It is about the choices we make and the way those choices transform our lives, our priorities, our *passion*. “Two processions,” Borg and Crossan conclude, “entered Jerusalem on that day” so long ago. “The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold” [*Last Week*, 30].