

“Clash of Kingdoms ”

As I get older some mysteries are resolved for me. I now fully understand that family holiday celebrations don't just happen by themselves; somebody works like crazy to help them happen. Parental decisions don't get made magically; they are the result sometimes of prolonged and patient conversation beyond the earshot of children. A worship service, in order to seem seamless and flow effortlessly, requires extensive collaboration.

I used to wonder whether the events of Palm Sunday as they are recorded in the Bible represented the spontaneous outburst of joy on the part of people who just happened to be standing around, or whether they were the fruit of a tightly planned and very deliberate demonstration on the part of the Jesus movement. I no longer wonder about this. All that spontaneity could only have come from careful premeditation. This is not a street party; it is a demonstration.

As Mark describes it, Palm Sunday was a masterpiece of planning. The animal on which Jesus rode was carefully chosen not to be the war horse of a conquering king, but the humble beast of one who comes in peace, as distinctly prophesied in Zechariah 9:9. The cries of the crowd were not random shouts of praise, but a quotation from Psalm 118, one of the coronation psalms. Surely a close knit group of trained volunteers took up the cry at first; then, no doubt, others standing nearby joined in.

There was no mass communication: no p.a. system, no handbills or posters or text messages. There was only the language of symbolism and song, the imagery of Israel's past to convey the meaning of the moment. The crowd—particularly *this* crowd of the most observant Jews from all over the world gathered in the Holy City for the Passover—knew their psalms and their sacred writings. The message was clear: “Look! Here comes the king, the Messiah of David's line! But he comes in peace, not to provoke an armed conflict but to inspire a religious awakening.”

Jesus appears as a Messiah must, cresting the Mount of Olives that stands over against the city of Jerusalem. Slowly his entourage winds its way down the hillside, past the cemeteries of the faithful awaiting the coming Messiah, across the Kidron Valley with its ancient olive trees and Garden of Gethsemane, and on up the hill on the other side and at last through the city wall via the Golden Gate, the cries of the crowd reverberating back and forth between the two hills.

This was no accident. It was organizational genius. And at once it became clear that the city of Jerusalem was witness to a clash of kingdoms: the mighty Roman Empire with its legions and fortresses and weapons and allies in the religious establishment, the kingdom of steel; and the ragtag surrounding the peasant preacher from Galilee, waving their branches and throwing down their cloaks like a kingdom made of straw.

Once inside the city, the Jesus entourage proceeds to the Temple. Jesus looks around. But as it is late, Jesus and his closest followers leave the city and retreat to

nearby Bethany, where he will lodge all week. He withdraws probably because it is too late in the day for the maximum impact of what he has planned next.¹ When he returns to Jerusalem the next day he shocks and alarms both the religious authorities and the Roman guards when he upends the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple—a very forceful demonstration and a challenge to authority that will be impossible to ignore.

The Temple action touches off a series of heated disputes between Jesus and the religious authorities. Seeing Jesus walking in the Temple, they seek to reign him in and cut him down to size. For three days they will argue back and forth in public disputation. The Pharisees and Sadducees try to trap Jesus with questions about paying taxes and honoring the religious law. But his brilliant answers, pointed parables and stinging rebukes make it increasingly clear that they must take action against him. He will not back down. He will not go away. He will not submit to their authority when he believes them to be wrong. They will have to get rid of him.

And what is the teaching that they find so difficult, so challenging? The kingdom Jesus proclaims is a movement without traditional boundaries of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable. He has with him women and Samaritans and tax collectors and the rabble whom he has healed. He teaches that one becomes wise by becoming like a child; that the last shall be first and the first, last; that the coming Kingdom of God is in fact in their midst, growing among them in secret like the Jesus movement itself. He teaches that we find life by letting go of the life we know; that it is hard for the rich to know the kingdom of God because they can't let go of the privilege that tells them who they are.

The authorities—say what you will about them—rise to the occasion to do with brilliance exactly what they are established to do. First the religious authorities have to figure out a way to get Jesus away from his mob of supporters. They infiltrate his following and get one of the disciples to hand him over in secret. Then they have to get Jesus condemned legally: the council of religious elders, the Sanhedrin, is summoned to meet before dawn.

And what of the Romans? Their goal is to assert Roman authority, but not to incite a riot. Their governor, Pontius Pilate, manages to stage an election of sorts and in an act of pseudo benevolence releases to the crowd a known insurrectionary, Barabbas, while he crucifies Jesus; and the crowd, on the whole, cheers. Not a bad day.

On Sunday things looked very volatile: surging crowds proclaiming the kingdom of straw and clamoring for a new religious leadership; potential for riots and bloodshed that could get out of hand. By the end of the week, one man is dead and his followers too terrified even to linger and weep. The institutions designed to keep order and maintain the status quo have done their job with admirable efficiency, a case study. So much for the clash of kingdoms.

And as for the Jesus movement, the kingdom of straw? Well, all along that was too good to be true... wasn't it?

¹ Or perhaps, as Matt suggested in our staff Bible study, Jesus loses his nerve, sensing that his next move marks a point of no return.

As I get older, some mysteries are resolved for me, but other mysteries only deepen: when will we ever learn? Why doesn't God just give up on us? Yet not even this can separate us from the love of God.

Amen

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