

“WHEN LOVE COMES TO TOWN”
MARK 15: 1-39

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2009
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

When I was a kid in the waning days of Saturday afternoon westerns and action serials, pre-adolescents would gather in front of the Saenger Theatre in Vicksburg, Mississippi, as early as ten o'clock in the morning so they could get the front-row seats to watch Johnny Mack Brown, Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, et al. As we entered the theatre, we would speculate about the ending of the previous week's fifteen-minute serial and how our hero would emerge from the terrible predicament in which he had been left last Saturday. If you can remember those serials, then, you, like me, take special interest in the current debate about Social Security.

All this is recapped in Stephen King's thriller *Misery* for which the redoubtable William Goldman wrote the screenplay. Do you remember the antiheroine, Annie Wilkes, who hobbles her favorite novelist so he stays put in her lair and there tells him about the moviegoing primal scene she had while viewing “chapter plays” (her name for those cliff-hanging serials) as a child? She says her trauma came after she saw Rocket Man in a “no-brakes chapter” that showed him welded shut in a car and sent off a cliff:

“The next week you better believe I was first in line and they always start with the end of the last week and there was Rocket Man trying to get out, and here came the cliff, and JUST BEFORE the car went off he jumped free and all the kids cheered--but I didn't cheer, I stood right up and started shouting, >This isn't what happened last week--have you all go amnesia? -- THEY JUST CHEATED US -- THIS WASN'T FAIR -- HE DIDN'T GET OUT OF THE COCADOODIE CAR!”

As one of the pivotal days of the Christian year, Palm Sunday is a good time for us to look at our amnesia, the spiritual kind. Like those people who gathered near the Golden Gate in Jerusalem on that day when Our Lord entered the Holy City as they cried, “Hosanna_ Hosanna_ Hail to the Son of David_“, we so easily forget from one day to the next. Isn't it possible that many of those same people stood outside the Praetorium four days later and shouted, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”? Because they suffer from the same kind of spiritual amnesia as you and I.

The title of today's sermon comes from the rock band U2's album *Rattle and Hum*. One of the pieces features the great blues guitarist B.B. King as he sings a wonderful gospel song filled with both regret and hope. He lists the shortcomings of his life. He enumerates the damage done in relationships Beach time adding a refrain about his new life, in which he sings:

“When love comes to town I want to jump that train,
When love comes to town I wanna catch that flame,
Maybe I was wrong to ever let you down
But I did what I did before love came to town.”

If ever a modern song could depict the drama of this day, it is that one. Palm Sunday is the supreme day in history when love comes to town. It's a day filled with symbolism and drama, with emotion and hope, with the beginning of schemes of good people gone awry and the beginnings of the end of the greatest life ever lived.

We know the story. We know it too well. We grew up singing “Tell Me The Stories of Jesus” while we imagined that we were among the children shouting “Hosanna!” and throwing palm branches at the Golden Gate. But like a lot of things we were told in Sunday School in those days, nobody told us that there aren't any palm trees in Jerusalem and that Matthew even gets mixed up about the donkey on which Our Lord rode that day (he misinterprets Zechariah 9:9 and has Jesus riding on *both* a colt and a donkey).

Alistair Cooke said of the late Edward VIII, the Duke of Windsor who abdicated the throne of England to marry Wallis Warfield Simpson, “He was at his best when the going was good.” That little parodic statement typifies many of us. We are confident, we love God, we have abundant faith--when the going is good. But when things get rough, when our little worlds built on high-tech stocks and the approval of others and vocational success and no illness begin to collapse, we are the first to shout, “Oh, God_ How could you do this to me? Look at me_ I've been a good person, I've tried to do what is right (well, most of the timeY) and you have treat me like this?”

Or conversely, we have attained more than we ever thought we could. We have enough money and security so that we can travel, eat at fine restaurants, enjoy the good life. And this little voice whispers continually in our ear: “You deserve this. You work hard, you are smart, you are capable, you are charming. Don't let anybody take any of this away from you. A rainy day is coming and you had better be ready. Hold your money. Don't let that preacher convince you to give any of it to the poor or needy. They haven't worked hard enough, they're lazy and incompetent.” And we forget about blessings, about grace, about what we would get if God really gave us what we deserve.

Spiritual amnesia is a common affliction, but never more does it plague us than when we think we can get to heaven on our merits, our good works.

In her book, *The Battle for God*, Karen Armstrong writes of this spiritual amnesia. “Without prayer and ritual, myths and doctrines have no meaningYIt is only in a liturgical context that any religious belief [becomes] meaningful. This hasYhappened to many

modern people who no longer meditate, perform rituals, or take part in any ceremonial liturgy, and then find that the myths of religion mean nothing to them.”

That notion is a reversal of the usual understanding of religious boredom and indifference. Dr. Armstrong maintains that it is when people forget or drift away from the liturgical and ritualistic context of their faith that they subsequently lose the intellectual understanding of the faith. That’s why Pilate’s accusing question is addressed to the crowds: “Why? What evil has this man done?”

The crowd suffers from spiritual amnesia. They have four days earlier cried, “Hosanna_ Blessed is the One who comes in God’s Name_” “ But now they cry not once, but twice, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

Our whole nation suffers from amnesia. When the 1963 March on Washington concluded with all kinds of doxologies of triumph, Martin King turned to Bayard Rustin and declared, “Don’t forget. We are still a ten-day nation.” That is, within ten days after any event, we forget its meanings, its effects.

That is what George W. Bush and the Republicans counted on for eight years. They counted on our apathy as well as our amnesia. How is it that there were no major protests about Guantanamo, about our phones being tapped by the CIA and the FBI, about the federal judiciary being loaded with right-wing hacks? Here is the important point: budgets are moral documents. That is true on a personal level but manifestly true on a national level.

The Republican budget exploded the deficit Badding more than three trillion dollars to our national debt when you include the extra money requested for the Iraq war. According to the bipartisan Congressional Budget Office, the deficit is due mostly to the gigantic tax cut legislation which gave rich Americans even more money while robbing the middle-class and low-income Americans.

A major resource to learn more about this is John Perkins’s book, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. It’s a searing true story written by an economist who was hired by the National Security Agency to join the international consulting firm of Charles T. Main, a Boston-based company of 2000 employees that kept a very low profile. As Chief Economist and Director of Regional Planning, Perkins’s primary job was to convince Less Developed Countries around the world to accept multibillion dollar loans for infrastructure projects and to see to it that most of the money ended up at Main, Bechtel, Halliburton, Brown and Root and other U.S. engineering/construction companies.

The moral Bor rather, the immoral Bimpact comes when you consider that:

Twenty-four thousand people die every day from lack of nutrition. Thirty thousand children die every single day from diseases for which we have cures, for which we have medicines. That's 50,000 people dying terrible, painful, needless, awful deaths. Three thousand deaths at the World Trade Center was atrocious, horrible; 200,000 from the tsunami was equally horrible. They make the news. But those 50,000 who die every day don't make the news. Our policies and especially many corporate policies, foster the kinds of conditions that create situations where those people are dying for lack of nutrition and lack of medicines.

(Interview with Mr. Perkins on PBS)

William Faulkner wrote, "The basis of all things is to be afraid." Pilate is a man racked by fear: fear of the Jews whom he does not understand, fear of Caesar, fear of the priests, fear of the zealots, fear of Jesus and his followers. He lasted twelve more years after the crucifixion of Jesus, then he disappeared into the mists of history. But he was always in trouble with the Caesars whom he served; he was corrupt, inept, vicious and he consistently misunderstood the Jews. So he poses these accusing questions in order to get himself off the proverbial hook as Jesus stands before him and the priests stir up the crowd in his praetorium.

We know what it's like to be motivated by fear. We're afraid of our consciences, accused by our past, afraid of the future, afraid that we won't measure up, afraid of those who can do us harm. And we like Pilate are often those whom others "invent" or "create" as we are willing to live by their expectations rather than our own or God's.

It is this God the stranger, as Edmund Steimle has called him, this Jesus, who comes to us in awe-ful holiness in Holy Week, who draws near to us in the tension of God's nearness. God waits in the shadows of mystery, brooding there at the Golden Gate, mingling among the crowds in the Temple as His Son talks and tells stories and makes jokes and puns, standing just outside the circle of light emanating from the fire in Caiaphas's courtyard as Peter denies his Lord, holding back in horror and anger and ultimate sadness on Good Friday as His Son is tortured and spat upon and crucified and vilified. This God who is both near and far off waits in the mystery of the week.

That incredibly hard-working and confusing Christian doctor who transformed so many lives in Vietnam, Tom Dooley was once asked how he overcame disappointments and setbacks caused by uncaring people. "I simply remind myself of who is really keeping score," he replied.

There is One who is Truth, who calls us to live by life's ultimate values and not by the momentary, partial truths and self-defining values of the world.

Catherine Marshall once said that God has no grandchildren. That is, you cannot pass the faith onto the next generation just by telling them about it. There is no substitute for experiencing the faith for ourselves, for living a life of trust and commitment. That's what it means to be born anew, to see the light.

We want a God like that of the little boy who was sketching a picture in Sunday School and was asked by his teacher, "What are you drawing?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," he replied. "Oh, Marvin," said the teacher, "nobody has ever seen God_" "Well, stick around. You will in a minute"

The kind of training wheels religion of Pontius Pilate and the priests won't do the job any longer--the kind that wants to rest in one place without falling. Pilate knows failure, but like all of us wants to live by the myth of success, and he doesn't want to have the burden of making a choice--either right or wrong--on his hands. So, like us he neatly washes his hands of the whole situation.

Tom Boomershine is one of my favorite, most creative people. He tells of being at a Benedictine retreat center near Cincinnati one weekend and going down to the Little Miami River, which runs through the grounds of the center. He sat down by the river to pray and meditate, then decided to make his way back up to the main building not by taking the traditional path but by crawling, climbing up the cliff through the rocks and vines and almost impenetrable side of the precipice. But he thought, "If I fall and hurt myself or die, nobody will find me for hours, even days. My legs may fail me." (He had been badly hurt in an automobile accident thirteen years previously and his legs were not at their strongest.)

He looked at the cliff and thought long and hard, then asked, prayed really, "Oh God, what are you trying to teach me?" So he began to climb until he reached the top, until he could learn what God was trying to get him to understand.

Pilate's questions, accusing queries, did not motivate the crowd to change its mind. But God confronts us with questions all the time--that's what we've been talking about during the Lenten season--that can teach us new ways and lead us toward God's will.