

The Powers That Be

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Palm Sunday (Year A [Matthew 27:11-54])

St. Andrew's Westridge

It was not all that long ago that we were outside with our palm branches, with our shouts of “Hosanna!”, and with the words “All glory, laud and honor, to the Redeemer king” leaping forth from our lips. And yet now we just read the story of Jesus’ terrible suffering and brutal death. In twenty minutes or so of liturgical time, we have processed from triumphant entry to triumphant execution. The first triumph was our Lord’s. The second belonged to his enemies.

It is usual, and absolutely correct, to survey the scene set before us — the trial before Pilate, the crowd’s betrayal and rejection, the scourging by the soldiers, the journey to the cross, the reviling of the bystanders (and even the others so condemned), and the final excruciating cry — and to say something like, “Look how much he loves you, that he would suffer all this to save you.”

This is true. Not only does Jesus love us enough to suffer death for us, he loves us enough that he suffered dying for us. Because it’s not like Jesus died peacefully in his sleep for us. Jesus didn’t just die. He suffered a most dreadful dying. And surely, this is because he loves you.

But there is a sort of saccharine sentimentality that we must be wary of. Yes, Jesus loves us an awful lot, but the cross is not a yardstick of affection. The point of the cross is not just to show how much Jesus loves us, but also how much Jesus scorns the world and the powers that run it. The Lord is really, fully committed to a reversal of the ways of the world.

Just in this little passage, every form of earthly power and authority takes a shot at Jesus. There is the autocratic, imperial authority of Pilate, the governor, who presides at Jesus’ trial and ultimately determines his fate; the religious authority of the chief priests and elders; the democratic authority of the people gathered as a crowd, the physical, military authority of the soldiers; and even the impersonal authority of physics — ropes and nails and gravity ripping apart the body of the one who had created physics to begin with.

But set aside those physical forces for a moment, and just think about those people: * Pilate - representative of emperors, kings, dictators and demagogues * The priests and elders - religious rulers, claiming the power of God as backing for their own * The crowd - democratic, in the sense of majority rules, and definitely

lacking the wisdom often attributed to it * The soldiers - armies, generals, and military juntas

In other words, here, in this story, lies every power upon which human society has been and is organized and run. This is no accident. All human history — all our worst, but also our best, efforts at ruling ourselves past and present take their shot at the King of Glory.

And he just turns the other cheek.

Jesus never in his ministry tried to co-opt these sorts of power as his own. He spurned the symbols and acclamations of kingship; he was relentlessly at odds with the religious leaders, calling them blind, selfish, and children of hell; he was always wary of the crowds; and military force was not his way — as he told Peter in the garden, those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

In a dazzling display of miracle and message, Jesus spent his ministry trying to show that the way to God didn't involve any of this.

But still. I've known this story literally my whole life, and I still halfway expect the time to come somewhere in this story when Jesus pops his neck, cracks his knuckles, and says, "Look. Do you want to do this the easy way or the hard way?" There's still a part of me that hopes Jesus is actually going to turn into a supernatural ninja when he gets backed into the corner. (Which is to say there's still some part of my heart that hasn't yet been conformed to the gospel.)

But Jesus won't even dignify these human powers arrayed against him with resistance, verbal or physical. What is Jesus telling us in all this? Yes, surely that he loves us an awful lot. But also that he doesn't love all this: he doesn't love executive orders that smell of hairspray; he doesn't love our drones and our smart bombs and sarin gas attacks; he doesn't love our crowds (or our social media gangs) shouting into submission those with whom they disagree; and yes, he doesn't love our religious fiats and smoothed tongued preachers.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we still love that stuff. At least a little bit.

Moreover, even where we don't love them, these structures of human authority and power are important for governance, to the safety and security and rights of our people. I get that we need good politics. It was good politics that got Jesus killed.

Each of the powers in this story, in their own way, exercise the power of death. As judge, Pilate has the ultimate authority in of sentencing in his hands. The priests and elders prosecute the case. The people choose Barrabas over Jesus, and then demand Jesus' crucifixion. And the soldiers do the actual killing. Every one of these

powers manufactures death. This is because the limit of our own human power is to manufacture death; only Jesus can make life.

Were you to choose between Pilate, the priests, the people, and the soldiers — between executive authority, religion, democratic majorities, or outright force — where do your sympathies lie? What sort of power do you consider most legitimate? I, uh... I know where I go, but if you need help, most Americans would choose “the people.” We idealize democratic rule — but not for any Biblical reason. The crowd here are easily swayed and end up demanding the release of a murderer and bandit and the crucifixion of Jesus.

Figure out what sort of power you identify with in this story, and you’ll know exactly how you would have been tempted to slug Jesus across the face.

The cross demands a choice. Go with the man who died on it, or go with the people who killed him. It is not an easy choice. Many good, reasonable people trying to take care of themselves and their families and communities go with the powers that be. I fear this is especially for those of us who are generally pulling the levers of world’s machinery rather than being crushed by its presses and molds.

Still, the amount of energy, anxiety, and the amount of our heart that we spend chasing after the powers of the world is made deeply problematic by the cross. The world has thrown its knockout blows. And today, I just want us to acknowledge that maybe our knuckles are a little bloodied from throwing punches too — we weren’t there that day, but we’re still stuck exercising the various powers that manufacture death, and there’s precious little to suggest we’re much better at it than Pilate, the priests, the people and the soldiers. The Cross should make us uneasy.

By itself, apart from next week, the Cross should also make us very sad.

But remember this, even if Jesus died because of us, he also died for us. Jesus’ utter rejection of all the world’s powers means that when we fail to find our salvation in them, hope is not lost. For salvation does not come from in any of the powers of the world. Salvation comes from the man dying on the cross.

Whatever deaths you are facing, of dreams, of hopes, of relationships, or yes — even of your body — remember that the power of death belongs to this world, the world Jesus so fully rejected. Making dead is the limit of our power — in all sorts of ways, little and big, if usually indirect, we exercise that power of death.

The power of life, however, is beyond our grasp. It belongs to our God. Death is not the final word, which means we don’t get to have the final say in all this. God’s got something more to say on the matter. Thank God. Amen.