

Sermon Preached 13th April 2014
Year A, Palm Sunday
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
Oh Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

For those of you who remember my Christmas Eve sermon, I pointed out that Jesus was born during a specific point in history. In other words, he wasn't simply a cute baby in a stable, but a child entering a particular political and social context which influence his story. And just as Mary and Joseph were sent to Bethlehem because Caesar wanted a census for tax purposes, so too the end of Jesus' life was shaped by its social and political situation.

Much has been made over the years about contrasting Jesus' glorious entry into Jerusalem, with being crucified as a criminal only a few days later. How did this transformation happen? What historical reasons brought about his death? There are four.

The first reason was that manner of that glorious entry. By entering the city on a donkey Jesus was clearly reenacting the way King Solomon, the son of King David, rode a royal mule as a sign of his Kingship. Jesus was alluding to the fact that, like Solomon, he is a son of David, the one foretold to be King and savior. By shouting out "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" the people themselves were quoting Psalm 118, where God's representative, a son of David, is welcomed into the city to save the people. In short, by entering Jerusalem on a

donkey, Jesus is claiming himself a King and the people are recognizing him as such. The problem is, the Roman Empire is an occupying military force in Judea at this time, and the Roman rulers recognize no other King but Caesar. So from the moment of his arrival into the city, a few days before his death, Jesus is challenging the political authorities.

The Second Reason for Jesus' death is what he does after he enters Jerusalem. His very first action is to go to the Temple and drive out all who were selling and buying there, overturning the tables of the money changers. He then quotes two texts. The first quote "My house shall be called a house of prayer," is from Isaiah 56, a text which says that people from the world over, Gentile and Jew, will be welcomed for prayer in the Temple of Jerusalem. But Jesus points out that instead, it has become a 'cave of robbers,' an allusion to Jeremiah 7:11 where God scolds those who think they can steal, murder, and more, but escape judgment by simply standing in God's house. God says that on the contrary, the Temple will fall and those who have done evil will be punished. With these two quotes Jesus is saying not only have the Temple authorities prevented the Temple from being a welcoming house of prayer, but that they are guilty of evil which will cause the collapse of the Temple and their own punishment. Jesus is challenging the religious authorities.

His second day in the city Jesus does some teaching including telling the parable of the vineyard. This is the third reason for his death. In the parable a man plants a vineyard, leases it to tenants, and goes away. The tenants refuse to give the produce of the land and ultimately kill the landowner's son. In response, the landowner kills the tenants and leases the land to those who will give him the produce of the land. The story is also an allusion to a well-known vineyard

parable in Isaiah 5 which warns of judgment against Israel's religious leadership because of social injustices. Jesus is speaking to the chief priests and Pharisees as he is telling this parable and explicitly says to them, "The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the Kingdom." By telling this parable, Jesus is challenging the Temple establishment. With these first three actions, he is intentionally being very provocative!

The fourth reason Jesus is put to death is because of his anointing by the woman at dinner. He was sitting at a table when "a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head" [MT 26:7]. While using oil on the skin is a normal part of life in the ancient near East, anointing someone with costly perfume is reserved for special, symbolic purposes – for high priests, prophets, and kings. A king is often referred to as "the Lord's anointed." The word "Christ" means "anointed." The anointing of Jesus is not simply an act of devotion towards a man, but the anointing of a King and Messiah. Jesus' anointing as King and Messiah threatens both the religious and political leadership.

I will read you a quote from the scholar Craig Evans, "In the end, the Jewish authorities sought to kill Jesus not because he was a good man, but because Jesus was perceived as a very serious political threat. His message of God's rule threatened the status quo, which the ruling priests did not want overturned. Jesus entered Jerusalem as the anointed son of David, he assumed authority in the temple precincts as though possessed of messianic authority, he appealed to the purpose of the temple in a way that ... implied him to be king, and he was in fact anointed by at least one follower, an anointing that in all probability was interpreted as having messianic significance. It is hardly surprising that an angry high priest would directly ask Jesus,

‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?’ and that the Roman governor would place near the cross a placard that read, ‘This is Jesus, king of the Jews.’”¹

At the same time, we are all culpable for his death. We all yell “crucify him!” I’ve heard people over the years say they hate saying that part of the passion story, and will even be silent for those words. But the truth is, we all condemn Jesus by our fear of losing power or ego to others. For all that we desire a messiah, we ourselves resist changing the status quo. We resist sharing power, even with God. We like to be the center of our universe. We like to be in control. We all have our “inner Pharisees.”

This can appear in both small and big ways. Do our children challenge us and our authority? Do they have that right? Maybe not if they are a toddler challenging the rule not to play on the street... but maybe they do if they are a teenager and want to date someone of whom we don’t approve, or pick a major for which we don’t care. Challenging the status quo of our control within the family can be hard to take.

Most of us dislike change, and change which threatens what we have is that which we resist the most. Another example would be the role of immigrants, young people, those of other socio-economic backgrounds, the poor, and the uneducated – it’s fine to help them, helping others can inflate our egos and sense of control – but we may find it hard to share with them. For instance, many people are happy to send money to the poor in other countries, but will resist having them immigrate to our country to work and start a new life, voting, perhaps entering public office and making political decisions that may not be in our best interests. Challenging the

¹ Evans, Craig, “The Shout of Death,” Jesus the Final Days, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. P. 9.

status quo, calling into question the powers that be, attacking egos, engaging in these conflicts will get you into trouble regardless of the century. Jesus stepped onto landmines.

Sharing power hurts our egos, we resist that, even if it is of God. The political and religious leadership found Jesus' challenge to their power and egos so threatening that they had him killed. Challenging the status quo isn't always good, but it isn't always wrong either. Sometimes sharing our power is what God is calling us to do. As we ponder the courage of Jesus in the face of power, status quo, and ego, we might ask ourselves in what ways do we not like to have our power and authority questioned?

Amen.