

He Is Dangerous!
Luke 19:28-40
Palm/Passion Sunday
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We in the church have worked very hard, over the last 2000 years or so, to tame Jesus' radically revolutionary gospel message. We have scrubbed it clean and prettied it up; we have sanitized it of all the most upsetting elements.

We have scoured the stable until it no longer stinks of animals and manure and poverty. We have developed very convenient amnesia when it comes to that uncomfortable stuff Jesus said about loving your enemies and selling all you have and giving it to the poor. We have twisted Jesus' words about liberation of the oppressed until they have become words that promise comfortable prosperity in this life and beautiful mansions in the life to come. We have prettied up the cross till it is no longer an instrument of torture and degradation and death, but something lovely and bejeweled that we can wear around our necks.

We have rewritten history until Palm Sunday is nothing more than a fun parade of sweet little children welcoming Jesus, instead of what it truly

was—a highly political act that was a direct challenge to the ruling power of Rome, a revolutionary proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God. And we have made Jesus into nothing more than a pal that we can tell our troubles to, someone who will never ask troubling questions or require us to do something difficult. We have re-created Jesus as a buddy who will never expect us to change in any substantial way. Someone who, if we hang around with him enough, will give us a “Get out of trouble free” card in this life and a “Get out of hell free” card for the next.

But none of this is the Jesus of the gospels. And Jesus’ enemies saw the truth of he was far more clearly than his followers then or now. He was not a pal or a buddy. He was not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. He was a very, very dangerous man.

In this clip from the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, as the cries of the crowd welcoming Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem echo in the background, High Priest Caiaphas and the other religious leaders ponder what to do about this dangerous new superstar.

PRIEST ONE

Good Caiaphas, the council waits for you.
The Pharisees and priests are here for you.

CAIAPHAS

Ah gentlemen, you know why we are here.

We've not much time, and quite a problem here

MOB (outside)
Hosanna! Superstar!
Hosanna! Superstar!
Hosanna! Superstar!
Hosanna! Superstar!

ANNAS

Listen to that howling mob of blockheads in the street!
A trick or two with lepers, and the whole town's on its feet.

ALL (inside)
He is dangerous!

MOB (outside)
Jesus Christ Superstar!

ALL (inside)
He is dangerous!

MOB (outside)
Tell us that you're who they say you are.

PRIEST TWO

The man is in town right now to whip up some support.

PRIEST THREE

A rabble rousing mission that I think we must abort.

ALL (inside)
He is dangerous!

MOB (outside)
Jesus Christ Superstar!

ALL (inside)
He is dangerous!

PRIEST TWO

Look Caiaphas, they're right outside our yard.

PRIEST THREE

Quick Caiaphas, go call the Roman guard.

CAIAPHAS

No, wait!

We need a more permanent solution to our problem.

Jesus must be stopped—permanently. Jesus' enemies see the threat he poses to the status quo very clearly. He is indeed dangerous! Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

Plenty of us think of Jesus as an innocent victim, but I am not so sure about that. The charges against him were blasphemy and treason. Blasphemy was the church's charge because he would not deny being a child of God. Treason was the state's case against him, because he allowed his followers to call him their king. Both church and state feared him because he was stirring up the people. They accused him of subverting religion and undermining the nation, and as far as I can tell they were right on both counts...He [was crucified] because he was a threat to both church and state. He upset the balance between them and within them. He got in the way of people who were just trying to do their jobs and their solution was to eliminate him. (Home by Another Way, pp. 87, 89)

Throughout history, it is has been Jesus' opponents who have often understood most clearly that he is dangerous. That is why totalitarian regimes undermine the spread of Christianity. They know that the gospel

of Jesus Christ is a gospel of freedom and liberation. That is why racists bombed black churches. They knew that the inspiration for the struggle for equal rights was rooted in Christ's gospel of God's love for all, regardless of the color of their skin. That is why those who support the economic status quo warn against joining churches that preach the gospel message of social justice. They know that a Savior who has come to "fill the poor with good things" and "scatter the rich" will turn social structures on their head.

These people know that Jesus Christ is dangerous. He is a subversive.

But what about us? Do we truly accept that following Jesus—seriously following him, not just playing at it—is dangerous to *our* status quo? That he will subvert our comfortable lives and make us do stuff that we have no desire to do.

We don't like a religion that asks us to do hard stuff. We don't like following a dangerous savior. We like a happy, clappy feel-good faith. Several years ago we went from celebrating this day as Palm Sunday to Palm/Passion Sunday. We made the change in part because most church members were going from the joy of the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday to the joy of the resurrection on Easter morning. Relatively few participate in the prayer vigil, or come to the Holy Week services of Maundy Thursday

and Good Friday, those worship services, which remind us of Jesus' suffering and death. We want Easter without the cross and resurrection without having to die first.

We want to skip over the hard work of the faith, the hard work that Holy Week challenges us to undertake. To break bread with him in the Upper Room under the gathering shadows of denial and desertion and death. To keep vigil with Jesus in the Garden. To stay with him while he dies on the cross. It's all just a little too...intense for us. Thanks, but no thanks. We'll just have Easter with little girls in frilly dresses and little boys in bowties, and eggs and sunshine and flowers.

But if we aren't going to be serious about our faith during Holy Week, then when are we going to be serious about it? What are we going to do when our faith asks us to do something truly difficult.

Stuff like forgiving people who have hurt us. I was struggling with a difficult relationship a few years ago. I had been wounded, and I had been spending my spare time enumerating all the other person's faults and how the ways they had hurt me. I had preached and taught about forgiveness for years—but those were words for other people. Then, in my daily devotional reading, I saw this, "In case you have not noticed, Christianity is

a religion in which sinners have all the advantages. They can step on your feet fifty times and you are supposed to keep smiling. They can talk bad about you every time you leave the room and it is your job to excuse them with no thought of getting even. The burden is on you, because you have been forgiven yourself, and God expects you to do unto others as God has done unto you." (*Gospel Medicine*, p. 9) I banged my head on my desk and wailed "NO!" I didn't want to do this. It was too hard.

But this is what Jesus asks those who love him to do. Forgive extravagantly, even those who have harmed us. Love unconditionally, even those who don't deserve it. Care for the poor, even if it costs us money or comfort or security. Give generously, even if it means personal sacrifice. Struggle for justice, even if it means giving up our positions of privilege.

Jesus had no illusions that following him was easy or comfortable. That is why he warned; Any of you who would come after me must deny yourself and take up your own cross.

Those of us who say we love Jesus, those of us who bear the name of Christian, need to understand what his opponents have always known: This Christ is dangerous!