April 4, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

After leaving the Beatles, Paul McCartney had a successful career with his band Wings. One of their smash hits was a song entitled *Band on the Run,* the lyrics of which seem to pretty well describe the feelings of many of us at this point:

*Stuck inside these four walls,*

*Sent inside forever,*

*Never seeing no one,*

*Nice again like you…*

*If I ever get out of here,*

*Thought of giving it all away*

*To a registered charity.*

*All I need is a pint a day,*

*If I ever get outta here;*

*If we ever get outta here.*

It sounds like whatever confinement these lyrics refer to prompted a reordering and simplification of priorities.

As I write this, we are in our third week of social distancing, with no end in sight. Even after the infection rate peaks, this pandemic will hardly be over, and we should not delude ourselves into thinking that there will be a rapid return to “normal”. This is particularly dismaying as the spread of the novel coronavirus, and the disease it causes (COVID 19), deprives us of the opportunity to engage in the gatherings and rituals that have so typified our observances in previous years. Yet, even so, I believe that God wastes nothing and excels in drawing good from even the most difficult circumstances.

As I write this, it is Palm Sunday, when we remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. [[1]](#footnote-1) The scene presented in all four gospel accounts is filled with symbolic pageantry reminiscent of a conquering Davidic king’s entry into his capital. Perhaps the crowd is consciously comparing Jesus’ entry with another parade across town; where their Roman overlord Pontius Pilate is entering Jerusalem at the head of his troops. This is, of course, very much what the adoring crowds shouting *“Hosanna, Hosanna,”* yearn for Jesus to be; their warrior king who will restore the fortunes of Israel.

Marching directly from the packed parade route and into the Temple, Jesus asserts his prophetic authority by creating a ruckus among the money changers. [[2]](#footnote-2) The crowds may be thrilled, but the religious authorities freak out, realizing that Jesus is a potent threat to their theory of how God works. They decide that Jesus must die. [[3]](#footnote-3) However, like the witch trying to get the Ruby Slippers off of Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, they realize that the situation is delicate, and requires some finesse so as to not antagonize the crowds - and even some in their own ranks - who seem to like what Jesus is saying.

In a series of questions designed as clever traps, the authorities try to get Jesus to condemn himself, however inadvertently. Unfortunately for them, Jesus eludes their traps so decisively that they dare not say anything further publicly. [[4]](#footnote-4) Having failed in a frontal assault, the authorities then concoct a deadly conspiracy involving the betrayal of Jesus by one of his own disciples, Judas.

Judas would do anything to attain wealth, power, and recognition – including betraying his greatest friend and teacher. It’s no coincidence that Judas desires the very things that Jesus successfully resisted when tempted in the Wilderness by Satan. Ultimately, the tragedy is that Judas’ crime was to put his own desires and plans above those of God. One way to look at it is that Jesus and Judas are like yin and yang; Jesus is the Light of the World, and Judas is the world’s dark shadow.

Under cover of darkness, Jesus is arrested and tried in a religious kangaroo court, after which he is remanded to Pontius Pilate. [[5]](#footnote-5) Pilate may be seen as the epitome of political power and its reliance upon coercive power. Even though he knows how flimsy the case against Jesus is, he caves to the demands of the lobbyists stirred up by the religious leaders. Then, with a stunning display of his lack of character, Pilate refuses to take responsibility for his own actions, and washes his hands of any alternatives to self-interest and political expediency. [[6]](#footnote-6)

If any of this sounds like today, then it’s meant to. Although it is always tempting to leave the stories of the Bible stuck in the past, the problem with that is, that unless we see ourselves and our present circumstances in them, they remain mere abstractions that cannot reach us at the core of our being. I am struck by how recent events parallel the gospel accounts and hold a mirror up to us and our society.

Two short months ago we were focused on the usual distinctions of wealth, celebrity, and political power. How fragile and empty all those preoccupations now seem in the face of a pandemic that respects none of our boundaries. In many ways, many aspects of our society are revealed to be like that Emperor who paraded around in the altogether in the popular Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, *The Emperor’s New Clothes.*

Just as it took the innocence of a child to reveal the truth in the fairy tale, so it takes the innocence of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life to reveal our own nakedness. Crises have a way of re-ordering our priorities and offering us “teachable moments” that are transformative. The stripping away of our familiar and comfortable routines compels us to look deeper and offers us an unprecedented opportunity to re-appropriate the story of the final week of Jesus’ ministry anew by asking ourselves if we are in the right parade.

Jesus teaches his followers not to look for God in the palaces of power, the splendid attire of wealth, or the cult of celebrity, but rather in the lowest and most humble of things. [[7]](#footnote-7) And even if the vain, proud emperor of this world is revealed to have no clothes, the good news is that we need never be under-dressed, because the glorious garment of Christ’s righteousness covers our nakedness.

Yours in Christ,

Dr. Bob

1. Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The “cleansing of the Temple” in Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 16:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 22:22:23-33, 41-46; Mark 12:18-27, 35-37a; Luke 20:27-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Matthew 27:20-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Cf.:* Matthew 25:40, 1 Corinthians 1:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)