

Tom James
March 16, 2008
Palm Sunday
Matthew 21.1-11
“Salvation Cacophony”

I’m a little embarrassed to be standing here this morning, I have to admit. It hasn’t been a good week for preachers. “Incendiary” comments of ministers associated with presidential candidates on both sides of the political landscape have been painfully parsed and scrutinized in the media. From the “greatest hits” of Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s caustic critiques of American foreign policy, including his claim that 9/11 was a case of “America’s chickens coming home to roost” to Rod Parsley’s bizarre claim that the United States was founded with the expressed intent of defeating Islam, to Pastor John Hagee’s confident assertion that Hurricane Katrina was God’s response to the sin of New Orleans.

We all tire very easily of ministers whose titles and whose adoring following make them think they know things the rest of us don’t. It is embarrassing to me as a member of the guild to have to watch the you-tube clips over and over again, and much worse it discredits the message of the gospel. For God’s sake, I think, why won’t ministers stay out of politics?

But the answer to that is complicated. What compels preachers to venture into the land of policies and prescriptions, aside from their desire to be important, perhaps, is in fact a very long tradition. The Hebrew prophets, whose incendiary writings are enshrined in Scripture, were often not popular at court—mainly because they didn’t let the state do its thing and keep quiet. Fathers and mothers of the ancient church were both lionized and villainized for resisting Roman totalitarianism. Colonial preachers who read John Locke as well as the Bible and who thought imperial tyranny was worse than revolution were patriots and meddlers. Pulpit abolitionists and critics of the alcohol industry and proponents of the Social Gospel and civil rights were praised and blamed. In this controversial tradition of blending religion with social issues we find a montage of personalities: courageous visionaries and intellectual luminaries, along with no shortage of cranks and quacks and misfits.

And here’s the thing: Jesus fits in this mix somewhere. Don’t kid yourself: the crowds which greeted what tradition calls his “triumphal entry” weren’t beside themselves because of a new doctrine or because of a new interpretation of Scripture. When are they ever? They were roused because Jesus had been all over the countryside “speaking truth to power,” as we might now say it, and now he was entering the city gates. He was confronting corruption and hypocrisy; he was crossing social boundaries and critiquing prejudices. Even his healings were not politically innocent—they were directed at the outcast and the powerless to whom society had attributed “sin” in order to justify its cold-hearted neglect and abuse. Along with most every healing would always come a sermon that made people squirm.

Let’s make no mistake: the cacophony of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was not simply a cacophony of praise: there were blessings and damnations. There was a firestorm of controversy that was stoked by his arrival. ABC would have covered the event with a split screen showing the welcoming mob on one side and the “greatest hits” of Jesus’ contemptuous rebukes of the synagogue and the state on the other. Pundits would have had a heyday. Leaders who had long since privately admired Jesus’ insightfulness would have been preparing to distance themselves from him when things got too hot.

Why is it always that way? What’s up with this meddling tradition, anyway? It may look like its all about politics, and maybe sometimes it is. But the truth is that there is something deeply theological at stake here. The question that lurks in these situations is this: what, exactly, does the gospel mean? In the biblical traditions, the good news about salvation is not about an escape to the hereafter. It would be nice in a way if it were. It would be easier for religious people to keep church and state comfortably apart. But the religion of the

Bible doesn't work that way. In the Bible, in opposition to much of the Greek culture in which much of it was written, the good news includes the here and now. Salvation is for bodies as well as souls. Redemption is for institutions as well as for hearts, for societies as well as for individuals. The good news of Jesus' preaching was that God's kingdom is in our midst, on earth as it is in heaven.

But isn't this precisely a recipe for crankdom and quackery? Mixing God and the world is hard, to be sure. It's not clear how it should work. All kinds of silliness can result. But one thing seems clear to me as I try and pay attention to the career of Jesus. And that is that it shouldn't seem easy to us when we hear it—in fact that's my best guide as to whether someone is politicizing religion or really trying to apply gospel wisdom to real life. It shouldn't pronounce a blessing on our prejudices or our preconceptions or our business-as-usual practices. It shouldn't reassure us simply that we are on God's side and those who are not like us are categorically "evil." That is why I can't help saying that Parsely's and Hagee's comments seem particularly egregious and theologically irresponsible to me. Joining the good news to our social and political lives shouldn't do what Hagee and Parsely have done for the simple reason that locating evil at a safe distance does nothing to save us. It leaves us where we are, confirming us in whatever shortsightedness, small-mindedness, and fear in which we find ourselves.

I hope you won't hear partisanship when I say that we might better listen to at least some of the words of Senator Obama's minister, Jeremiah Wright, words that the Senator is distancing himself from almost as quickly as a rooster can crow. I say that because, whatever their merit or their faults, at least his admittedly rather strident and often unbalanced critiques of American culture are directed to us and not to our enemies. At least they challenge us and ask us to change rather than celebrating our superiority over others. Politically, that's an impossible message. Hence the firestorm. Hence the distancing, and the embarrassment. But theologically, that's the only kind of sermon that makes sense, because only a message that confronts our own sin in ways that are least comfortable to us can open us to the kind of grace that we need.

The biblical tradition doesn't make good politics, at least in the conventional sense. The gospel of Jesus begins not with a series of flatteries and blessings, like a glad-handing political campaign that seeks to gather support on the strength of good feeling, but with a difficult call to costly repentance. Judgment begins, as the Bible says, "at the house of God," because God's judgment is never an end in itself—it is always a tool of salvation.

In this respect, the events of holy week which we commemorate this week are what theologian Douglas Ottati calls the "right nightmare." They constitute a shocking word of judgment, a rebuke, which awakens us in the night and vividly shows us the results of our own sin as we continue to crucify the innocent in our own ways.

When Jesus entered the city on Palm Sunday, he entered with the same incendiary message with which he began his ministry: the kingdom of God is at hand. Power doesn't rule the world, so don't feel secure just because you have power: only God rules the world.

We all know where that message took him. In just a few days we will gather in this place and remember the Last Supper, and we will sit in silence and darkness as we hear the 33 tolls of the bell marking the years of Jesus' short life. The salvation cacophony will lead to silence and bewilderment as the power of an unredeemed world is brutally wielded on the innocent. It is in those moments that we need to know that the silence is for us, because in one way or another we are complicit in the brutality of the world. Perhaps we have kept our mouths shut in the face of bigotries and inequalities we benefit from. Perhaps we have abandoned a friend when he or she most badly needed us but when he or she was the least comfortable to be around. Maybe we have favored profits over people, comforting ourselves with the woolly myth that there is an equality of opportunity in this country or in any other. People are being crucified every day. *We are* guilty, all of us, even as we wave our branches, of the same sin that killed Jesus. But the good news is that God graciously offers the dark interval of holy week as the right nightmare, preparing us to awaken with hearts turned again toward God's kingdom, so that we may experience Easter for what it is: the joy of new life. Amen.