HOLY WEEK

Holy Week is the week from Palm Sunday (celebrating the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem) through the Saturday before Easter. It is actually the conclusion of Lent, ending at noon on Easter Eve. Easter Sunday is not part of Holy Week, but is rather the beginning of a new season – Eastertide.

The celebration of Holy Week began in a unique way. Towards the end of the 4th century A.D., a European pilgrim named Egeria visited Jerusalem. Part of her visit occurred during Holy Week. To her delight, she discovered that the church in Jerusalem had developed over the centuries a rich and complex Holy Week liturgy, based not only on the actual days of the week that the various events occurred, but on the actual places where they occurred. This could obviously only occur in just this way in Jerusalem. But the reports that Egeria brought back to the European church moved the western churches to adapt the practice to local needs. As early as the 5th century in Spain, local versions of the Holy Week re-enactment liturgy were adopted. From there, they spread across the rest of the church in Europe. Rome was the last of the western churches to adopt the practice, doing so in the 12th century.

Palm Sunday
Liturgy of the Palms: **Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; Luke 19:28-40**
Liturgy of the Passion: **Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 31:9-16; Luke 22:14-23:56; Philippians 2:5-11**

Liturgy of the Palms: Traditionally, the Sixth Sunday in Lent is a celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and thus the initiation of Holy Week that culminates in Jesus' death and burial. But it is also a Sunday for concentrating upon the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, particularly for those church traditions that do not observe either Maundy Thursday or Good Friday. Without that observance of Christ's suffering and death (normally called "the Passion"), that church would be awkwardly thrust from a celebration of Jesus' triumphal entry to an emphasis on his resurrection with no mention of his saving death. For churches with such a restricted calendar, the Sixth Sunday in Lent is also celebrated as Passion Sunday so that the actions of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are not forgotten. Consequently, on the Sixth Sunday in Lent, it has become traditional to refer to an emphasis upon the triumphal entry as "the Liturgy of the Palms" and an emphasis upon Christ's suffering and death as "the Liturgy of the Passion". Scriptures supporting both emphases have been designated for that Sunday. Consequently, we will exegete both sets of scripture. The set that immediately follows is the set for the Liturgy of the Psalms.

Luke 19:28-40 (41-44) is the story of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem as presented by Luke. It nuances the story that it holds in common with Matthew (21:1-9), Mark (11:1-10) and John (12:12-19) in ways that particularly serve the purposes of the Gospel of Luke and supports its themes of God's action against the powerful and of Jubilee liberation of God's people and the poor.

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The most important reality about the story of Jesus' triumphal entry in all four gospels is that it is clearly and unequivocally a political statement! And that is nowhere more clear than in the account appearing in the Gospel of Luke.

The story itself is, in its primary points, essentially the same in all four gospels. Jesus and his disciples, journeying to Jerusalem, arrive at the Mount of Olives. Jesus sends some of the disciples ahead to get a colt. They do so, and Jesus then rides into the city, receiving the acclamations of the people and the disciples, as they wave palm branches before Jesus and place cloaks on the ground upon which the colt can walk (19:28-38). Luke then ends the story with a conclusion that is found only in his gospel. The Pharisees plead with Jesus to stop the people cheering his arrival, and Jesus replies that if they did stop, "the stones would shout out" (19:39-40).

At first, this incident seems simply to be a parade. But it is far more than that. It is the triumphal entry of Israel's Messiah – Israel's anointed, chosen king -- into its capital city!

The political nuances in Luke's story are significant. There is, of course, the obvious. For Jesus to choose to ride a colt into Jerusalem to the acclamations of the people was an intentional fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey". And every Jew would have recognized it as such! Second, Luke is careful to tell us that the people cried out with "a loud voice", "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven" (19:38). This is clearly a paraphrase of Psalm 118, a psalm that was used in pre-exilic Israel as a hymn of royal entry into Jerusalem for any of the kings in the lineage of David!

But there are many minor and more subtle indicators, as well. These indicators would easily pass by us, because we are not a part of either Jewish or ancient Roman culture. But they would be obvious references to any Jew (or, in several instances, Gentile) living at the time of Luke.

First, it is only a mile from the Mount of Olives to the walled entrance into Jerusalem. For Jesus to require a colt on which to ride for only one mile when he had walked close to fifty in order to reach the suburbs of Jerusalem would clearly mean this is a political act, not a needed conveyance. He is clearly and intentionally fulfilling Zechariah 9:9. Second, Luke mentions that the colt was tied and had to be untied a total of *five* times. Such a minor operation (the untying of a tethered animal) would not be worthy of such emphasis unless there was meaning in it – and the meaning is an intentional reference to Genesis 49:11, which speaks of a coming ruler who would arrive on an untied colt who would then be tied up.

Third, there is an intriguing play on words in Greek (but not communicated in the English translations) in the disciples' response when the colt's owners ask why the disciples are taking the colt. Luke writes, "As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it" (19:33-34). The Greek word translated "owners" is the word "lords". Thus, what Luke is intentionally saying is, "The lords (of the colt) asked, "Why are you untying (that is, taking) the colt?" They said, "*The Lord* needs it". Jesus' claim as Lord supercedes the rights of the "lords" (the owners) to their property. They are no

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longer "lords" over their property, because their claim to it has been superceded by the claim of "the Lord" (or "king") to it (see I Sam. 8:10-18).

Fourth, the significance of Jesus' riding a colt into Jerusalem at his entrance into the city is more than a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9. All the heirs to the Davidic crown rode into Jerusalem on a colt on the day of their coronation (cf. II Sam. 18:9, 19:26; I Kings 1:32-40). Further, there was a yearly ritual of enthronement in which the king rode into the city, in order to memorialize his earlier coronation. Finally, the spreading of outer garments onto the path the colt trod was the acceptable greeting for the arriving king, both for his coronation and for the annual ritual of enthronement (see II Kings 9:13). All of these indicators demonstrate that this was a clear political action on Jesus' part, proclaiming himself as the Messiah – the chosen king of the idealized Israel that he was seeking to bring into being.

In the story of Jesus' actual entrance into Jerusalem (19:35-38), Luke states why the people gave Jesus the boisterous welcome they gave him. He writes, "The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice *for all the deeds of power* that they had seen" (vs. 35). Jesus is received and celebrated as the king of the kingdom of God because of "all the deeds of power" that he had done. Luke wants to be sure that the reader sees that Jesus is acknowledged as Lord because, throughout his ministry, he indeed "brings good new to the poor, proclaims release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, lets the oppressed go free, and proclaims the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

It is Jesus' work for the political and economic liberation, spiritual deliverance and full transformation of all the people (especially the poor and marginalized) and the systems of society that earns him both the adoration of the people and their consequent resolve to declare him king of all humans and their systems. In this way, the angel chorus at Jesus' birth is fulfilled, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth shalom among those whom he favors" (2:14), a chorus that is virtually repeated in Luke's account of the cheers of the people at that Palm Sunday parade, "Shalom in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven" (19:38b).

Luke then concludes his story of the Triumphant Entry with an account that appears in no other gospel. "Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (19:39-40).

That is what the Gospel of Luke is all about – the stones shouting out when the leaders are silent. For Christ has come for the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, the victimized of society, Luke is telling us – the little people, the "stones" of this world. And they see in Jesus their salvation and liberation. Therefore, they will cry out in praise to him even when his disciples – those who say they follow Christ – will not!

What does not immediately strike one, however, is the artful use Luke makes of this story in this context. For it is a transition statement from Jesus' triumphal entry (19:29-38) to his weeping over Jerusalem (19:41-44 – a story that is also unique to Luke). And what is significant about this transition story is that Jesus' response to the Pharisees, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" is actually a quotation from the prophet Habakkuk in Hab. 2:11. Here is Habakkuk's entire statement that contains that famed quotation. .

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"You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. The very stones will cry out from the wall, and the plaster will respond from the woodwork. Alas for you who build a town by bloodshed, and found a city on iniquity! Is it not from the Lord of hosts that people labor only to feed the flames, and nations weary themselves for nothing? But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:10-14).

The very city named for God -- Jerusalem[1] -- is a city built on bloodshed and iniquity. And the very stones of that city's walls cry out in protest and accusation against its political, economic and religious leaders who continue running it oppressively in order both to maintain control and to corner its wealth – even if that means exploiting its "little" people.

But it will not always be so. The day is coming, Habakkuk the prophet promises, that Jerusalem "will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14). And that day has now dawned, Luke is telling us, as Jesus rides in triumphal procession into the city, with his followers and the people crying out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven"!

It is at this point in the narrative that Luke has Jesus weep over Jerusalem – the only gospel writer that juxtaposes the lament over the city and Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, connecting through the Old Testament prophecy of Habakkuk. That prophecy compares the city as it has become under the dominating lust for power of its systems with the city as God calls it to be. In Luke 19:41-44, therefore, Jesus laments over the city that Jerusalem has become. This passage is not a part of the Gospel lesson for Palm Sunday, but it ought to be because it completes Luke's account of Jesus' triumphal entry.

Jerusalem – and Israel symbolized through Jerusalem – has refused to perceive what God is doing in their midst. If they had embraced Jesus as their Messiah, the full Jubilee to which he had called them, and in doing so had returned their order as a nation to that which God intended, they would have become a nation of shalom. But this possibility was "hidden from their eyes", for there is none so blind as those who will not see! Therefore, Israel's leaders have decreed their own fate, for their nation and their beloved city will be destroyed, eliminated, wiped out. And all "because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God".

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 is a song of victory, built around the opening and closing refrain, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (vss. 1, 29). It is, as well, the psalm (or at least portions of it) that are used in all four gospel accounts of Jesus'

[1] The word "Jerusalem" does not mean in Hebrew "city of peace" as is popularly supposed. The Egyptian Execration Texts (c. 1850 BCE) name it Urushalim ("foundation of Shalem"), with the prefix "Yah" added to it ("Yah" or "Yahweh") only after King David annexed it to Israel and made it his capital (II Sam. 5:6-12). Thus, the current name of the city – Jerusalem – means "City of Yahweh; City of Shalem" (or Ba'al – two names for the same Canaanite deity). (See Millar Burrows, "Jerusalem", John Gray, "Shahar" and W.L. Reed, "Shalem" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. 2, p. 843; V. 4, p. 303 respectively. For a full discussion of this etymology, see Linthicum, *City of God; City of Satan* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 25-28.

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triumphal procession into Jerusalem (Psalm 118:25-27 as referenced in Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:38, John 12:13) to claim his "crown".

Psalm 118 was originally intended to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles. The high priest calls the people to worship with the cry, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever". The term "steadfast love" is a translation of the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which means God's unconditional, "grace-filled" love that is totally loyal to us and which then expects of us comparable "loyal love". But whether we respond with such loyalty, God will remain committed to us because God has promised so to be toward us.

The psalm then describes a magnificent procession of king, priests and people (vss. 19-25) to the Temple. Once arriving at the temple court, the high priest then moves to the altar (vss. 26-28) to place upon it a cluster of branches (Lev. 23:40). The liturgy then ends with the entire people praising God through the words that were their call to worship and now becomes their benediction: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever".

The overarching theme in the psalm, stated in many different ways throughout that hymn, is captured best in verse 14: "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation". Therefore, "with the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me" (vs. 6)?

Portions of this psalm are among the best-known in the Psalter. They are meant to march in order with each other, with one inevitably following the other. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (vss. 22-24).

This Psalm reminds us that acting out his *chesedh* love, God takes that which is rejected or despised, "things (and people) who are not" and makes them "things (and people) who are". God takes the rejected and marginalized ones and builds an entire shalom kingdom upon them. This reality is something that engenders praise, so that each day becomes new potential where God's great reversal can once again burst forth into human society!

The Liturgy of the Passion:

Isaiah 50:4-9a is the third of the four "Servant Songs" in Isaiah (the others being 42:1-4; 49:1-6; and 52:13-53:12). In this song, the speaker fills the role of the servant, and the audience is Israel – and especially those Jews who have fallen away from God.

In this song, the servant's words reveal him as the prophet who speaks truth to the Israelites, confronting them in their lethargy and depression in the midst of Babylonian exile. He speaks the word of the Lord to them (vss. 4-5), calling them to become as a nation and as people those whom God created them to be. The servant describes himself as the one chosen by God to receive God's word and then to reveal it to the exiles, so that they might be re-energized and work to form society as God intended it to be.

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There will be those among the Israelites who will hold positions of power, and who will oppose both the words of the servant and his ministry, the prophet declares. In their hatred of him and of his proposed reform of their systems, they will attack, persecute and physically harm him. "I give my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting" (50:6).

But in spite of the direct opposition of those holding political, economic and religious power, God will sustain the servant and stand by him. That sustenance will enable him to be both single-minded and uncompromising in his commitment to God and Israel's redemption. Thus, he will be able to accept his suffering with stoicism, and that suffering will become transformative for those who see and respond lovingly to it (vss. 7-9).

One can see how this servant song, as well as the others contained in Isaiah, would have sustained and encouraged Jesus, as he faced into the inevitable consequences that would occur because of the action he and his disciples took that first Palm Sunday morning.

Psalm 31:9-16 is a portion of a psalm that prays for deliverance from one's enemies. As such, it is most appropriate for Passion Sunday, as we center on the persecution, suffering and death of Jesus.

The psalm as a whole centers not only on the persecution and suffering that the Psalmist is receiving, but in God's care and support of him in the midst of such suffering. Such passages as "You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me" (vs. 3), or "Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God" (vs. 5) or again "Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me, when I was beset as a city under siege. You heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help" (vss. 21-22). Verses such as these remind the reader of the protection and shelter of God. It is not that trust in him rescues us from all of life's trials, for such trials fall upon us all. But it is that trust in God enables us to face into those trials so that they do not destroy us. For it is God's "steadfast love" that sustains us through the struggle.

However, the Psalter lesson for today – the ninth through the sixteenth verses of Psalm 31 has precious little of such reference to God's sustenance. Instead, it presents the full fury of the persecution and suffering that the loyal servant of God must at times face as the Psalmist pleads with God for mercy.

"Be gracious to me, O Lord; for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many – terror all around! – as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life" (vss. 9-13).

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The Psalmist cannot paint a more somber picture of a man or woman thoroughly beaten down by life, not only by the circumstances and the conditions that assail him, but also the opposition of those who are his regular companions who, sensing his vulnerability, move in for the kill! All seems totally hopeless.

But then comes the slightest glimmer of hope! "But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love" (vss. 14-16).

It is important to note that God has neither intervened to correct the situation nor has acted to buoy up the Psalmist. Rather, all that you have from the Psalmist is wishful thinking. He is choosing to trust in God – primarily because there is no other alternative available to him. He prays to God to "deliver me from the hand of my enemies" and begs God to "save me in your steadfast love". But it depends upon other verses than this scripture lesson to determine that God does respond and sustains the Psalmist. These verses indicate no such action on the part of God.

That is the appropriate expectation for Passion Sunday. There is no assurance to the Psalmist that his single-minded trust in God will realize liberation for him. Nor is there any a priori indication that Jesus' dependence upon God – at least in the Gospel of Luke – will sustain him through the execution he is facing. Only the wish, the hope is there. At this stage, there is no empty tomb – only a blood-soaked cross. That is where Passion Sunday always ends!

Luke 22:13-23:56 tells the story of Jesus' final days on earth – his Last Supper with his disciples, his betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane, his trials and then his execution through crucifixion. It is, therefore, the penultimate apex of the Gospel of Luke, the elimination of this Jubilee Jesus by the Powers of Israel, Rome and of this world. But it is also preparation for what is to follow – the ultimate triumph of Jesus, Jesus' kingdom and of the people whom Jesus will form into the Church to become Jubilee to the world (the book of Acts).

The account begins with very simple words. "The followers of Jesus went and found everything as he had told them (that is, "a large room upstairs" set for the celebration of the Passover), and they prepared the Passover meal" (22:13).

Luke 22:14-23 presents the Institution of the Lord's Supper. Actually, there are three distinct elements – or even stories – within this one story. The first is Jesus' introduction to the Passover feast with his disciples, with the words "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; but I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (vss. 15-16).

Luke wants the reader to understand that this final supper that Jesus holds with his disciples is the celebration of the Passover. This meal, held both to memorialize God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian oppression and to identify those celebrating the Passover with those who were brought out of Egypt, is integral to the sacrament that Jesus is about to initiate. In the Passover, the head of the household gives a blessing over the first cup, and the family drinks that cup.

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Then, the youngest son asks, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" and the story of Israel's rescue by God from Egyptian slavery is rehearsed. In this way, those gathered for this meal are both reminded of their origins and identify themselves as a part of a people who shared in their deliverance from oppression. The head of the household then takes a loaf of unleavened bread, breaks it and serves it to the family, followed by the second cup. It is then that the feast actually begins.

It is quite clear from Luke's account how the Christian celebration of the sacrament of holy community is an adaptation of the Passover, with its perspective of liberation of the people from that which oppresses them (whether it's a political or economic system or whether it is the power of sin). The inauguration of the Passover and its connection with the coming of the Jubilee Kingdom of God (the Deuteronomic order) is then symbolized in that first cup of wine shared with all at the table!

The breaking of the bread and the drinking of the second Passover cup Jesus then transform into the actual institution of the Lord's Supper, with broken bread meant to symbolize Christ's broken body, and the second cup of wine symbolizing Christ's blood "poured out for you in the new covenant" (vss. 19-20). With this symbol, Jesus indicates a significant shift (or fulfillment) in God's society-transforming action. It is now not simply the restoration of the Deuteronomic vision of "one nation under God" built upon the sacrifices that liberated the people from Egyptian servitude and molded them into a new nation (all symbolized in the Passover Jesus and his disciples were celebrating and its sacrificed lamb).

Jesus then makes an intriguing statement. He says when he offers the cup, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (vs. 20). In calling the cup a symbol of "the new covenant" (or "agreement" or "testament" between God and humanity), Jesus signals the movement of God's liberating action from the Hebrew Temple to himself and to a new covenant community, the Church. The authentic coming of the kingdom of God will be built upon Jesus' personal sacrifice of his body and blood, which will then become the base upon which a new covenant between God and humanity will be built. And it will be that covenant that will make it possible for the kingdom of God, long dreamt by Deuteronomy and Israel, to begin to be actualized upon the earth. It will not be the good actions or intentions of humanity that will build the kingdom. It will be the actions of the Representative Human who will provide the sacrifice which will so free humanity from its lust for power, prestige and possessions that the kingdom might actually begin to be formed as God intended it to be.

The third portion of this Institution brings the entire reflection back to Jesus' present and to the realities of the moment. "But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of God is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed" (vss. 21-22).

Jesus' sacrificial death will not occur simply because he is tried, judged guilty, and killed but because one of his own followers will betray him! The pernicious nature of sin will slip even into Jesus' camp, among Jesus' own followers, and into Jesus' kingdom. Sin is in the kingdom as well as throughout the enemy camp. And that sin will result in the betrayal of Christ. Yet

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God will take advantage of that betrayal, because it will be through it that the consequent initiation of God's intentions for transforming the world will occur.

But that God makes lemonade out of these lemons does not justify the lemons! It is an indication of how God makes good come out of evil. But it does not dismiss the evil Judas had done. Betrayal is betrayal. And for that betrayal, the betrayer must be held accountable (Luke 22:28). For evil has even entered the camp of Jesus' most devoted followers!

Luke 22:24-35, 54-62. What then occurs in Luke's narrative of Jesus' final days on earth is astounding. Using the event of the Passover, Jesus has just shared with his disciples that God's social order will come, not through Israel's or even the disciples' practice of the Deuteronomic code, but by his own sacrificial death. Jesus will have to die – and that death will become redemptive for all humanity, thus forming the foundation for the creation of God's kingdom on God's grace-filled act. What is more tragic, Jesus shares, is that his death will occur, not simply because of the systems' commitment to remove what they perceive as a major threat to their exercise of power. The tragedy will be that one of his own followers will betray Jesus to the systems, and make Jesus' capture – and his consequent trial and execution – possible!

It is in the light of all that has just transpired that the next action of the disciples is astounding. Luke tells us, "A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (22:24)!

Faced with their Lord's death, and the apparent collapse of his kingdom effort, the disciples fall to arguing about which of them will be the greatest! Talk about being out of touch! It is as if they have not heard a word Jesus has just said. They have been so caught up in themselves and in their personal agendas that they cannot recognize either the danger their movement is in or the deep distress of their leader – much less, perceive the hand of God. Although as the events of this night occur, it will become clear that one of the disciples will betray Jesus and another disown him, in reality all of them have betrayed him by betraying his kingdom – for even now they are more concerned about their personal status than they are to the transformation that Jesus' kingdom can bring to the world.

Jesus' answer to them, therefore, is brutal. "Stop thinking like this", he in essence says, "and start thinking with God's standards!"

"The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (22:26-27)!

Peter is the first disciple to respond to Jesus' rebuke. And he responds exactly as we would expect him to do. "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (22:33)! Jesus replies, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day until you have denied three times that you know me" (22:34).

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This passage reminds us that Jesus knows us even better than we know ourselves. It has been said that we judge others by their actions but ourselves by our intentions. This is the case with Peter. In comparison with Peter's naiveté, Jesus understands how easily we get seduced or co-opted by the systems, and therefore is much more realistic about our limitations than are we.

This is essentially a passage about the profound power of the systems to control, shape or even seduce us. There is no disciple closer to Jesus, neither more strategic to the kingdom nor more devoted to Jesus than is Simon Peter. Yet it is precisely that one whom the systems will seek to bend to their will and agenda – and do so, not with direct confrontation but with subtle nuance and innuendo designed to seduce!

In this case, it is fear and intimidation that the systems will use. Peter is convinced that he will stand by Jesus, no matter what persecution he faces from the system – for Peter is willing to join Jesus even in prison or in death. But the systems are too sophisticated and knowing to do that; they will not undertake a frontal assault, for Peter means from the very soul of his being to defend Jesus. The systems will be much more insidious than that!

The attack against Peter comes from a little servant girl. She accuses Peter, "This man also was with him" (22:56). Then another, and still another person made the same identification. And Peter's natural inclination is to deny the accusation. "Woman, I do not know him" (vs. 57) -- three times. Thus, the trap is sprung!

Jesus knows what subtle power the systems actually exercise over even one as committed and single-minded as Peter. For Peter accepts the lie of the ultimate power of the system. And so when he is actually faced with the possibility of exposure and its consequent trial and execution by the systems, Peter denies his allegiance to Jesus and to the Kingdom he came to build (22:54-62).

The difference between Peter's expectations of his commitment and Jesus' more realistic assessment of his chief disciple's capacity to resist seduction is that Jesus understands the powerful spiritual dimensions of the systems and Peter does not. Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail" (22:31-32a). Jesus understands that the power behind the systems is Satanic, and that those systems and their leadership are "filled" with the spirituality of evil which drives the systems, those who sit in the seats of authority of those systems, and even the servant girls who serve those systems. And it is the same Satan who will use those systems "to sift (Peter) like wheat" – i.e., to press Peter into permanently rupturing his relationship with Jesus and the kingdom Jesus came to build. And Satan will do this by directing the systems to attack Peter through their emissaries precisely at that place of his greatest weakness and vulnerability. In his case, it is Peter's fear of what the systems can do to him that makes him lie about knowing Jesus in order to avoid association. For as long as he fears what the systems can do to him, he is helpless to stand against them – for it is that fear they will use to defeat him.

I have always liked Winston Churchill's statement, "Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is courage that counts!"

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Peter's failure would not be final, even though the systems would want him to think it is so. Jesus says to him, "But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, *when once you have turned back,* strengthen your brothers" (22:32)!

There is a future for Peter, Jesus says. The systems, trading on his fear, will seduce him and will have their way with him. But this will, in reality, be the most transforming spiritual experience through which Peter will ever go. The result of his failure will be a new appreciation of the power of the systems and their evil, a clearer understanding of his own vulnerability, the recognition that it will only be by trusting in Jesus that he will be freed from the tyranny of the systems and of the fear they engender in him, and, consequently his transformation into a more mature, strong, committed and wise follower of the Christ and leader of Christ's people!

Luke 22:36-38. The next story in Luke 22 is Jesus' question to his disciples, "When I sent you out without a purse, did you lack anything?" They reply in the negative. Jesus then tells them, "Now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you, this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was counted among the lawless'; and indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled" (vv. 36-37).

In other words, what Jesus is telling them is not so much to get a sword or to hang onto their purse. What he is saying is that he is about to undergo severe persecution and even death. And that is a fulfillment of the Old Testament call to the Messiah, as well as the inevitable result of anyone who seeks to reform the systems to the extent that Jesus has. The disciples must be aware of what is happening – i.e., "to have eyes that see" – and must be internally prepared for what is about to happen. Only as they are open to perceive what both God and the systems are doing will they understand the inevitable direction in which Jesus is moving and how God will use even that apparent direction to set a new direction for the world. For God knows what God is about!

The disciples totally miss the point. They take what Jesus is saying literally rather than symbolically. "Lord", they naively reply, "look, here are two swords!" Jesus, realizing he hasn't communicated to them because their minds and spirits are so thoroughly controlled by their commitments and perspectives, simply replies, "It is enough" (vs. 38). No use discussing it further, he in essence is saying. Let's just get on with what we have to do. And maybe the truth will break through to the disciples in due time.

Luke 22:39-46. The next portion of Luke 22 is Jesus' prayer at the Mount of Olives, as he awaits the arrival of Judas, the chief priests and the temple police. Luke tells us that twice Jesus instructs his disciples to "pray that you may not come into the time of trial" (vss. 40, 46) or, in other words, temptation. That is, Jesus is instructing the disciples to fortify themselves in prayer so that they will be able to deal with the trial and crucifixion that he must endure. That is so because, when they witness what he must go through, they will be devastated and will consequently be ripe for responding to that horrible reality with a spirit of retreat, of fear, of anger at God or even with rejecting God or Jesus or the kingdom. Thus, their very souls are in

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jeopardy. So Jesus calls on them to prepare themselves through prayer for what is about to happen.

This passage also captures Jesus' personal turmoil and travail in prayer which is symbolized by his sweating "great drops of blood". Jesus' prayer particularly captures the deep distress he is feeling.

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (22:42).

Jesus is going to do what God brought him to this hour to do. There is no intimation in this prayer of any compromise or waffling of resolve on Jesus' part. He is going to do what must be done. But there is a strong sense of the distress he is feeling. If there was a way out acceptable to God, Jesus suggests he would take it. But since there is not, he will do what God called him to do and what must be done.

But this prayer does capture the turmoil Jesus is going through. He did not approach his death with equanimity. He was certainly no Socrates, ready to calmly drink his cup of hemlock. He knew that he would experience physical pain beyond all endurance. But he would further experience all that Israel's and Rome's "powers" (and even "Powers") could do in intimidating and in crushing any breeching of their authority and rule. This is particularly captured in Jesus' statement to his disciples, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial" (vs. 40), because the term "time of trial" is a much more powerful expression in Greek and in the Hebrew culture than it would be to us. "The time of trial" is a time of cosmic struggle (cf. Luke 4:13, 8:12-13). To Luke (and to Jesus) the political, economic and religious systems of Israel and of Rome are impregnated and possessed by cosmic forces of evil. And this time of Jesus' betrayal, trial and crucifixion is the time of such corporate and cosmic evil having its way!

Consequently, Jesus' death will not simply be a horrible death inflicted upon him by the systems of Israel and Rome. He would even more experience the weight of the accumulated sin and pain of the world on the spiritual plane, as he would die for the redemption of all humanity. So he expresses to his Father the distress and anguish through which he is going as he commences to do what must be done for the sake of all humanity. This is therefore a most powerful passage that lets us see into the very soul and heart of Jesus – and, therefore, into us, as well!

Luke 22:47-62. The next passage of Luke is the betrayal and arrest of Jesus (22:47-53), which also takes place at the Mount of Olives. While Jesus is speaking to the disciples, the Temple guard arrives with Judas to arrest Jesus. Judas signals which person is Jesus, according to Luke, by an action that Luke alone records. Judas approaches Jesus and greets him with a kiss (vs. 47-48)! Jesus' response to Judas' kiss is classic: "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?"

Defending Jesus, one of the disciples unsheathes his sword and swings at a soldier, slicing off his right ear. Jesus commands, "No more of this!" He then heals the man's ear. Then, Jesus stops the violence by upbraiding the police, so that talk replaces physical action. "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? When I was with you day after day in the Temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is now your hour and the power of darkness" (vss. 52-53).

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By stating that this is now their hour "and the power of darkness", Jesus makes it clear that he is well aware of their subterfuge in their arresting of him. He knows that they know how popular he is, so that arresting him by "day in the Temple" would incite an incident and perhaps even a riot. Arresting him late at night, on the most important religious holiday, would be observed by no one and could be an accomplished fact before any of the people were the wiser. Thus, Jesus exposes to them that he knows they are not only acting in a furtive and deceptive way, but they are acting demonically, for they are being used by "the power of darkness" and are themselves a part of that darkness.

Perhaps the part of the story that has the greatest poignancy about it is Jesus' response to Judas' use of a kiss to betray the Master. It is one thing to be betrayed by one of your supposedly ardent and committed followers. It is quite another thing for the symbol that disciple uses to betray you is the kiss of love, loyalty and allegiance. It adds insult to injury – for it symbolizes one thing (a commitment to Jesus) while actually doing another (destroying Jesus). How both the act and the symbol must have hurt Jesus. But what can you expect from mass evil but insult as well as injury, no mercy as well as the shrouding of duplicity in the system's legality? All of humanity is betrayed by the kiss of its political, economic and religious systems, masquerading as protectors of the people's welfare while betraying the prophets by seducing the prophet's followers, and eliminating all those who would call the systems to something higher than their own self-service! Thus it is that this is not only the hour of the political/economic/religious "powers" of Israel, but it is also "the power of darkness" for one who apparently followed Jesus loyally for his entire ministry.

Jesus' pain in being betrayed by one disciple is increased in the next story by being abandoned by another. Of all the people who should understand Jesus and be committed to him, one would have expected such from Simon Peter. But it is precisely this disciple who denies even knowing Jesus at the moment of the Master's greatest peril (22:54-62).

First, Judas betrays Jesus to the authorities by using the most intimate sign of commitment and trust – a kiss. Then Peter denies knowing or being associated with Jesus. He publicly denies any allegiance to Jesus, or even any connection at all. How abandoned Jesus must have felt – betrayed, deserted and denied by some of his most pivotal disciples. How the systems had intimidated Jesus' followers – for in the moment of his *and their* greatest trial, they could do nothing but to avoid all confrontation with the authorities and instead take the most convenient way out!

So Jesus must now stand alone in confronting the principalities and powers.

Luke 22:63-71. The last two stories of Luke 22 demonstrate some of the strategies that the systems use to defeat and demoralize those who would dare to oppose or question them. In one story (vss. 63-65), those "holding Jesus" (presumably the arresting police) mocked and beat him, "heaping many other insults on him". They ridiculed Jesus and made light of him. They minimized him in order to make him to de-value himself and to convince others to minimize him, as well. In other words, the objective is to convince people to acquiesce to the systems by convincing the people that they are nothing next to the power and authority of the systems and

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that, consequently, any resistance or any commitment to bring about change is fool-hardy. Make people doubt themselves and each other and thus increase your hold over those people.

In the second story (22:66-71), Jesus is placed on trial before "the assembly of the elders, both chief priests and scribes" – that is, the religious and economic systems of Jesus' day. Their objective is to get Jesus to condemn himself. Jewish law required a person to be judged as the result of the testimony of others. But this assembly (or "Sanhedrin") didn't have consistent witnesses against Jesus. Therefore, their only recourse was to trick Jesus into condemning himself through his own testimony. The way they would do this would be to manipulate the legal system (which, if they hadn't created, they at least used to maintain themselves in power) to destroy one who exposes the system's efforts to disempower the people. They seek to do this by getting Jesus to publicly condemn himself.

So these are two primary ways the systems control. They convince people that they have all the power and thus minimize the efforts of the people. And they shape the way the systems organize and adjudicate power to keep themselves in power. And they will do whatever is necessary to maintain themselves in power – even to the extent of killing off the people's greatest prophet.

What is intriguing in this passage, however, is how Jesus refuses to allow that to happen. The systems are seeking to control the trial through the use of the laws that exist which they interpret in a way designed to maintain their power. But Luke tells us that Jesus completely redefines the issue and thus confounds them. He is not about to go cooperatively!

Seeking to undermine Jesus, the chief priests asks, "If you are the Messiah, tell us". If Jesus says he is the Messiah, they can deliver him to the Romans as a revolutionary seeking to overthrow Roman rule, and thus as a significant threat to the state. This, in turn, would lead to his inevitable execution as a rebel. If, on the other hand, Jesus says he is not the Messiah, this will have destroyed his status and his effectiveness with the people, and he could likely be let go, defanged, declawed and discredited before the people.

Jesus, however, refuses to play their silly game. He redefines the issue and therefore changes the argument. He replies, "If I tell you, you will not believe. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (vss. 68-69).

The systems called Jesus "Messiah". He calls himself the "Son of Man". And in doing so, Jesus has redefined the debate. By calling him "Messiah", the system's leaders were tapping into an entire political, economic and religious perspective of and by Israel. "Messiah" was to be a political conqueror, one who would build a new Jewish empire while defeating Israel's political and economic enemies. For Jesus to have acknowledged that he was Messiah would have played into the system's design to eliminate him as a political threat to Rome.

But, instead, Jesus calls himself the "Son of Man" – an image introduced by the prophet Ezekiel into Israelite thought. Ezekiel's "Son of Man" is God's transforming emissary on earth – the one sent by God to work for the liberation and transformation of humanity and their systems. And the Son of Man, a transformer rather than a revolutionary, is no enemy of Rome.

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Thus outmaneuvered by Jesus, what would Jesus' captors do? They, themselves, shift the argument one more time. They ask, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" And this time, Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of this question, and, in essence responds "yes". In this way, Jesus makes it clear that it is he and not the systems that will define the issues and set the parameters of the debate. Even in such an event as this that appears to give all the power to the systems, it is clear that it is Jesus who sets the agenda for his trial, his ministry and even for the liberation of the world!

Luke 23:1-12. Luke 23:1-5 deals with Jesus' trial before Pilate and verses 6-12, his hearing before Herod Antipas. Luke actually gives precious little space in his story for the trials before these two men. Certainly the stories of Jesus' trial before Pilate that is found in both the Gospels of Matthew and John are far more detailed (Matt. 27:1-26; John 18:28-19:16). And in no other gospel account does Pilate seek to "pass off" the decision to Herod Antipas. The Gospel of Mark is about the same in length as is Luke, but doesn't include the Herod story.

First, let's look at Luke's description of what happened. The accusation that the Jewish establishment has brought against Jesus (essentially, heresy) is not considered a crime worthy of execution under Roman law. Therefore, the Jewish powers have to change the charge against Jesus to one that would be considered a crime worthy of death by Rome. They say to Pilate, "We find this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king" (23:2). Thus, they have reinterpreted Jesus' crime so that the accusation against Jesus presented to Pilate was a political crime; he was accused of treason and rebellion.

Pilate then cross-examines Jesus and can't find sufficient evidence that would support this accusation made against him. Rather, he sees the issue as being essentially a religious issue. So he seeks to set Jesus free. But the Jewish religious and political leadership is so insistent that Pilate decides to try to "pass the buck" by referring Jesus for judgment to Herod Antipas, the Jewish puppet king ruling Galilee under the authority of Rome.

Jesus appears before Herod, and Herod also questions Jesus as "the chief priests and scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him" (vs. 10). The text gives us no indication what Herod actually thought of the accusation brought against Jesus, but it does tell us that he "treated (Jesus) with contempt, and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate" (vs. 11). So Pilate still had to bring judgment on Jesus and could not ignore the accusation brought against him. This story then ends with a very peculiar commentary by Luke: "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies" (vs. 12).

What's going on here? I would suggest that Luke, in his treatment of Pilate and his introduction of Herod, is using this text to continue his pursuit of the unique theme of the Gospel of Luke. The interpretation in the Gospel of Luke is of him as the "Jubilee Jesus". Jesus, according to Luke, had come to proclaim and to initiate an authentic observance of Jubilee upon Israel (4:16-18). It was through the re-embracing of the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus and the Sabbatical Year legislation of Deuteronomy as legislation intentionally created to redistribute wealth that

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the true "Israel" would be reborn and would become in the world all that God had intended Israel to be – a light to the nations. The centering of Jesus' mission around Jubilee was for the purpose of implementing throughout the nation a legislated reversal of fortune in which society would be economically rebalanced so that wealth could no longer accumulate nor power accrue in the hands of a self-selected few (in Jesus' context, that would mean the Herodian nobility, the land-owners and Israel's clergy aristocracy – the priests, Pharisees and Sadducees). With his announcement of his mission in Luke 4:16-18 and then his implementation of that mission throughout the remainder of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was putting Israel's leadership on notice that his coming is God's action to reverse Israelite society so that wealth and power cannot be built up in their hands while all the rest of the people are thrust ever deeper into poverty. Messiah is here to bring in the Jubilee!

Consequently, Jesus' issue was not so much with Rome as it was with Israel's leadership. Although Rome was the ultimate ruler of both Judea and Galilee, they were a distant ruler who was, in reality, being used by Herod Antipas and by Israel's clergy aristocracy to maintain themselves in power and to further their control both of the nation and of its wealth. Therefore, the true trials of Jesus, Luke would suggest, were those before the Sanhedrin and before Herod Antipas. It was simply that both needed to get Pilate to "sign-off" on the execution order to enable it to happen. Pilate sought to avoid that responsibility, but Herod would not let him get away with it and returned Jesus to the procurator for final sentencing. So Pilate ended up doing what was expected of him and both the ruling clergy aristocracy in Judea and the political aristocracy in Galilee got their way! That is what is so significant about Luke's comment that "that same day Herod and Pilate became friends" (vs. 12a). That is, Pilate understood the role expected of him, he played it, and now rather than being at odds with Herod and the clergy aristocracy, Pilate was now in league with them in a common effort to use their power to center all authority, power and wealth in themselves!

Luke 23:13-25 is the story of Jesus being sentenced to death by Pilate. What is significant about this story, however, is Pilate's unwillingness to set such a sentence upon Jesus, and his many efforts to avoid such an adjudication. This emphasis is in counter-distinction to other gospel telling of this story that place responsibility and accountability squarely upon the Roman Empire and particularly upon Pilate (the Gospel of John in particular, but also Mark). In Luke's account, the chief priests are absolutely relentless in manipulating a clearly reluctant Pilate into the position of decreeing Jesus' death. They refuse to give up their pursuit of the death sentence until they have it! And Pilate is a pawn in their hands to get it!

Why Pilate was such a pawn and why the religious leaders were so determined to thwart justice in order to bring about his execution is presented in the section on Luke 23:1-11. The thesis of Luke's Gospel is that it is these leaders of Israel who are to be finally held accountable for the crucifixion of Jesus because it is they who have been most exposed by Jesus as the unfaithful leaders that they are, using their God-given position to amass for themselves power, prestige and possessions. They are the chief antithesis to a Jubilee society.

Most commentators, in dealing with this passage, stress the weak personality of Pilate – his unwillingness to do the just thing in order to do the expedient. And, of course, that element is

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there. But to perceive this struggle simply as an indication of the weakness of Pilate's personality is to miss the point Luke is seeking to make. In recording the opposition of Israel's political, economic and religious leadership to Jesus and his effort to bring about the Jubilee kingdom of God, Luke is making a remarkable analysis of "the world as it is" – the world of systemic power and how it uses each situation to build even greater power while exploiting the poor, powerless and marginalized. This story in Luke is meant as a demonstration of the supreme power of the religious system over the political or economic systems and how its leaders use their cultic power to manipulate the world to their liking and benefit.

There was no power to equal the political and military power of Rome in Jesus' day. There was no force on earth either stronger or capable of resisting it over the long term. And yet in this story is demonstrated the wavering of that political system in the face of the relentless pursuit by the supposedly much-weaker religious system of the Jews. Thus is demonstrated the capacity of the religious system to mold public opinion and to set the priorities and actions of even the most powerful of political systems.

Our immediate reaction, as 21st century Americans, is to insist, "But our religious system doesn't have that kind of power that can have such influence upon our political and economic way of life". Oh, really? How would you otherwise explain the phenomenon of the religious right and its influencing of both the political agenda and its history of getting candidates for office elected (from the presidency on down)? Why is it that those who champion a particular cause (whether it is the religious right working to rid school systems of the teaching of evolution, or whether it is the religious left pressuring for the ordination of practicing homosexuals) will seek endorsement and enthusiastic support from those religious movements that might tend to support their cause? It is important not to dismiss the capacity of the religious system both to advocate for and to organize against selected social issues (and even specific political candidates), and thus to influence the evolution of a culture.

But the issue goes wider than even the above. The Latin word from which the English word "religion" is derived simply means "that which fences about". One's religion is that which draws boundaries or limitations; it doesn't have to have anything to do with God or the gods! In other words, religion is simply that system of belief and thought which sets and maintains the values by which a society will function. When we think of religion this way, then its influence upon society greatly expands. With this definition, the educational system is a "religion", because it is incorporating into the young the values by which a given society functions. The social systems that structure the life of a society and provide much of its people-care, whether it is the health-care system or the courts or the social services are all built around a fairly consistent value system which each seeks to maintain in its execution of its responsibility. The entertainment industry, from motion pictures to TV to magazines to the Internet, all teach values. So does the communication systems, such as newspapers, TV news, the Internet and other means of communication. Intriguingly, all of these institutions – education, health care, social services, the court system, entertainment and communications – were all a function of the church in medieval Christendom and all cultures before the Middle Ages. And when one thinks of "religion" in this way, then we can acknowledge the capacity of "religious" institutions (whether it's the church or the university or the media) to shape the values of a nation and therefore set the agenda of that nation is profound. When we look at religion this way, then one does not have a

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hard time acknowledging that the religious systems of a society are its most powerful and influential, shaping and also justifying the agendas of both that society's political and economic orders.

Pilate as governor of the Roman province of Judea is symbolic of the political system. The high priests are symbolic of the religious system. Because there is no substantive evidence that Jesus was the political insurrectionist that the high priests claimed he was, Roman law sought to set him free. But the Jewish religious system was determined to have him killed, and thus eliminate his threat to the power and influence of their hegemony. So they relentlessly pursued the symbol of the political and military power of the day, countering each of his arguments until finally he was trapped. So Luke tells us,

"But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted, and he handed Jesus over as they wished" (23:23-25).

The religious system has very little apparent power. In fact, it is in the interest of the religious system to keep its power masked. It has precisely been those periods of history when it has paraded its power that it has received the most opposition and has resulted in the breaking of its power both by the other systems and the people (e.g., the medieval Catholic Church, and the pre-Reformation and Reformation efforts to reform the Church – the Reformation efforts succeeded when Wycliffe, Hus and the Waldensians failed because Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Knox were able to bring the political systems behind their reforming efforts). But the power of the religious system is immense, because it is the power to mold and shape public opinion! It both creates and sustains the values by which a society and its political and economic systems function, and it molds and changes those values. As long as the "religious" institutions shape and maintain a society's standards (whether it is the church, the schools or the media), they will be in control of that society and of its political and economic systems, and they will therefore set that society's actions, agenda and values. *That* is what is demonstrated to the reader in Luke's telling of the story of Pilate's struggle to save Jesus and its inevitable outcome in his action to condemn Jesus to death!

Luke then follows his stories about the last supper, betrayal and trials of Jesus with the account of his execution. Luke's account of the crucifixion of Jesus generally follows the pattern presented in Matthew, Mark and John. Each tells of the Via Dolorosa, Jesus' crucifixion between two thieves, Jesus' words from the cross, his suffering, the mocking of onlookers and those crucified with him, Jesus' death, the response of the Roman centurion, his body being claimed and buried by Joseph of Arimathea, and the vigil of the women both at the cross and at the tomb.

Most importantly, the crucifixion is the central story of all four gospel accounts – along with its accompanying resurrection event. The intent of each gospel writer is to tell the story of Jesus' death rather than to theologize upon it. Therefore, little is given in the accounts which deal with the purpose or significance of the cross, but rather with its reality. For such theological

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reflection, one must turn to the epistles of the apostles. And the apostolic writer who deals most with the purpose behind the cross is Paul the Apostle (for example, Rom. 8:12-21).

The meaning of Jesus' death, as portrayed in the four gospel accounts, is not found in the sacrifice of a good man or the martyrdom of a political or religious revolutionary. Much more is occurring behind Jesus' death than that. The purpose of the crucifixion narratives is to make alive to us, in story form, the reality that in Jesus' death a life-transforming transaction was taking place. Jesus is dying so that humanity can be freed from the enslavement of both its corporate and individual sin. As Paul so richly puts it, "where sin abounds, grace does much more abound" (Rom. 5:20)!

In the Gospel of Luke, the apostle particularly traces both the power and the captivity by its own internal forces of power, greed and control of Israel's political, economic and religious systems. Luke repeatedly presents Jesus' commitment to the victims and exploited of these systems – the poor, the powerless, the marginalized and the ostracized. Luke develops how Jesus called upon the systems to repent and to return to their Deuteronomic origins by creating a shalom kingdom of obedience to God, justice and economic equality. Most of all, Luke weaves throughout his narrative, Jesus' call to establish a new political, economic and religious order – the kingdom of God (actually, a reclaiming of the old Deuteronomic order of the shalom community). Jesus sought to anchor that kingdom in the formation of the discipleship band as both model and metaphor of that kingdom.

Now, in Luke, the narrative reaches its climax in the stories of the death and resurrection of Jesus. For the death of Jesus is not simply that of a well-meaning prophet or a political revolutionary. It is the death of the One who, in that death, brings the new order – the kingdom of God – into being. To Luke, the death of Jesus recorded in chapter 23 of his gospel, is a death which is the act upon which God's kingdom is established – the Deuteronomic kingdom writ large for all humanity (Gentile as well as Jew) and for all classes and conditions of people (the poor and marginalized as well as the powerful and influential). In Luke, Jesus' death recreates the world, returning it to God's intentions for humanity, and doing so by creating through God's redemptive grace what humanity has demonstrated it cannot do by its own initiative – creating and living into God's new social order, the shalom community!

Thus, the Gospel of Luke is consistent with the crucifixion story as told in Matthew, Mark and John, recording many of the same events and in essentially the same order. But there are some notable elements that are reported exclusively in Luke. Only Luke tells us, "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies" (23:12). Only Luke records Jesus' actual words to the women grieving for him on the Via Dolorosa (23:28-31). Only Luke tells us that the two criminals crucified with Jesus had profoundly different responses to Jesus' crucifixion which resulted in the salvation of one but not the other (vss. 39-43). Only Luke tells us that Jesus said from the cross, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (vs. 46) as his final dying words. Only Luke reports that the Roman centurion declares, "Certainly this man is innocent" (vs. 47). Only Luke informs us that Joseph of Arimathea claimed and buried the body of Jesus because, "though a member of the Sanhedrin, he had not agreed to their plan and action" (vss. 50-51). It is these differences to which we will now pay particular attention in the following reflections.

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Luke 23:12. The first difference is Luke's statement, "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies" (23:12). We briefly wrote of this intriguing statement earlier in this commentary, but we would now like to take a more careful look at the dynamic occurring here.

Why did Luke, of all the gospel writers, choose to share this piece of information which seems so trivial and not consequential to the primary story? Well, keep in mind who was Herod and who was Pilate. Pilate was the governor of Judea, the symbol of Rome's political and military dominance both of Israel and of the entire Mediterranean and eastern worlds (all of "civilized society" of that time). Herod was the regent of Galilee, a Jewish monarch ruling northern Israel under the authority and protection of Rome; he was therefore symbolic of Jewish political power, subservient to Roman power and existing only by Rome's permission.

That the two men would be enemies would make sense, because each was a threat to the authority and power of the other. Pilate constantly symbolized to Herod the irritating reality that Herod's was a secondary role, that he was a king in name only and only ruled as long as he kept the Roman political system happy with his rule. Herod, on the other hand, constantly symbolized to Pilate that his rule as governor was an incomplete rule territorially, that the domain for which he was ultimately responsible to Rome was not in its entirety under his direct supervision and control, and that Herod symbolized the continuing Jewish aspiration of independence from Roman authority. Thus, each man – by his very existence – posed a threat to the other and was constantly "in the face" of the other.

But their mutual opposition to and yet fascination with Jesus made them friends! Jesus posed for both of them an equal threat, because his very existence questioned the authority of either of their systems. Jesus, by his very presence, advocated a kingdom which robbed the kingdoms of Herod and Pilate of any authority or power or even the right to exist except as <u>under</u> the kingdom of God! The mutual threat of Jesus and the kingdom he had come to build drew these two men together into a mutual cause. They became co-conspirators, and as co-conspirators eventually became friends. They – and the two political systems they managed – needed each other if they were to successfully oppose the revolutionary transformation of all the structures they ruled by the gospel this Jesus preached. Jesus and his kingdom was a bigger mutual threat to both Rome and to Jewish rule then the competition and mutual suspicion that would otherwise keep the two rulers apart! And so Jesus, by the very reality of who he was and what he represented, made two political enemies into friends! This is a most intriguing insight from the most "politically-aware" gospel writer of them all!

Luke 23:26-31. The second portion of the crucifixion story that is peculiar to Luke is Jesus' statement to the women weeping over his imminent crucifixion as Jesus is being dragged in the procession going to the cross. Only Luke records these words of Jesus.

"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that

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never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us', and to the hills, 'Cover us'. For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (23:28b-31)

The rejection of Jesus and His Kingdom by the systems of Israel is a great tragedy, Jesus is saying, both to them and to the people of God. It is a terrible tragedy for the political, economic and religious systems and their leaders because they are rejecting – finally and irrevocably – the Deuteronomic vision for their nation and people given to them by God over 1200 years earlier. They are rejecting the rule of God over their national, economic and spiritual life as a people. And in that rejection, they are rejecting God!

And the tragedy of this, Jesus is suggesting, is that they don't even perceive the horrible mistake they are making nor its consequences. They are so caught up with their need to be in control and to shape their people's destiny out of their own lights, they are so dedicated to contending for the truth as they perceive it, and they are so committed to maintaining the life style and privileges and prestige and the luxuries with which they surround themselves, that they cannot perceive either the tragedy they are bringing upon Israel nor the inevitable destruction that will follow.

The rejection of Jesus and God's Kingdom is, secondly, a great tragedy for the people. Those who will truly suffer because of the greed and lust for power and prestige of the systems will not simply be the leaders of those systems themselves. It will be the common people who live under these systems who will suffer the most. It will be the people – the ones whom Jesus most loved and to whom he reached out to in compassion and ministry who will become the real victims. They wanted God's kingdom for their nation and themselves. And, instead, what they will get will be such death and destruction that they will cry "Blessed be the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed", because they brought no children into the world to experience such pain and evil!

"For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" In this poignant statement, Jesus is both summarizing the evil which will be generated by such systemic greed and power, and its inevitable and horrible consequences. The systems are now acting to execute the only One who can truly enable Israel to become the people of God in its corporate life, and this they do when all of life seems so peaceful ("the wood is green"). What evil will thus befall the nation, its systems, its leaders and its people when the systems are abandoned by God (which will inevitably happen as a result of their action – and symbolized by the splitting of the temple curtain) and God removes his "shekinah glory" (Ezek. 10:1-22) from the nation ("the wood is dry")? One cannot even imagine the horror, the travail and the suffering that will come upon the people because of the self-serving and kingdom-building lusts of their rulers. This is what will happen to this people and nation, Jesus is saying to the women.

So the real tragedy of Good Friday, Jesus in essence says to them, is not his death. The real tragedy is the death of humanity and the death of God's dream for humanity that is occurring that day in the death of the man, Jesus of Nazareth!

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Luke 23:32-43. The next crucifixion story unique to Luke is the story of Jesus' interchange with the criminals executed with him. The other gospel accounts simply tell us that these criminals joined with the crowds in deriding Jesus. But Luke's account gives us a far more perceptive account of their engagement with the Messiah.

In Luke's story, only one criminal derides Jesus. The other defends him, saying to the mocking criminal, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong" (vss. 40-41). Then, most remarkably, he turns to Jesus and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise!" (vss. 42-43)

One criminal is vicious, unforgiving, full of invective and hate – just as the other gospel accounts portray. But in Luke, we discover that the other criminal is honest, repentant and full of hope. He clearly perceives and fearlessly exposes the injustice occurring that day in the crucifixion of Jesus. He recognizes the travesty of justice and how the systems have conspired to eliminate their enemy, even if it must be done on trumped-up and unproven charges. And the man says so, unequivocally and with no fear.

This also reveals the deep honesty that underlies his analysis of the situation. He is not going to allow himself to strike out with invective as does the other criminal, angry at his own fate. Nor will be say what the systems might want him to say in order to gain favor with them and perhaps either a more merciful death or even a reprieve. Rather he is going to state openly and honestly the truth of what was happening that day, no matter the personal consequences to himself.

Third, the man is repentant – that is, he is sorry for the direction and priorities he chose for his life and decides to move in a profoundly new direction – even at the moment of his own death. He says "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" This is a most remarkable statement. Here he is hanging on a cross, his life-force ebbing out of him. And there, across from him, Jesus is also hanging helplessly on his cross, slowly and inevitably dying. And yet the man says, "remember me when you come into your kingdom"! He believes that the new political, spiritual, and economic shalom order to which Jesus called Israel and which he had inaugurated, was still going to happen! How it could happen, with Jesus dying on a cross, the man could give no explanation. But that it would happen – even with all the evidence to the contrary – this man firmly believed. And so he could say "remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

What faith! What trust! And what a determination to reorder his life, its focus and priorities. Even facing death, this man still wanted to be a part of the revolution. With all the apparent indicators that the systems had won and Jesus had lost, this man still wanted to be on Jesus' side! He *knew* that Jesus' kingdom would come. And he wanted to center what remained of his life on that vision!

Finally, exhibited in this man was profound hope. Jesus replied, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise" (vs. 43)! This promise is the assurance that this man's repentance and his commitment to a new life as a kingdom person, was accepted and received by God. Jesus gives him hope that

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both he and this man will share the kingdom even after both of their deaths. For not even death can stop God's new order from coming. Nor are any who believe in that order lost to it or to God. "Today, you will be with me in Paradise"!

Why would Luke have included this story uniquely in his crucifixion account? Several reasons occur to me. First, it once again demonstrates Luke's commitment to the poor, the marginalized and the powerless. Even all the systems arrayed against Jesus cannot stop his transforming work with the victims of the systems. Second, it stresses that God's kingdom will be built upon such as these – children of complete trust who commit singlehandedly to God's kingdom irrespective of the apparent hopelessness of their situation. Third, it demonstrates the compassion of the gospel. And fourth, it establishes hope that nothing – not even the complete opposition of the systems, not the persecution of the "little ones" of the kingdom, not even the death of the kingdom's founder, will stop God's transforming action once it has begun. No force of humanity can successfully oppose the force of God. And Jesus' kingdom *is* the force of God. It will come! It will come in its entirety! God's new order upon the earth *will come*! In the words of Habakkuk, the prophet:

"Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (Hab. 2:2b-3).

Luke 23:44-49. The story of Jesus' crucifixion now moves to the moment of his death. Luke, in concert with the other three gospel writers, records the last three hours of Jesus' life, the darkening of the sky with a storm as he died, and the curtain of the temple being torn in two (which Luke reports in 23:45 along with Matthew [Mt. 27:51] and Mark [Mk. 15:38]). Then, just as Jesus dies, he utters his last words. And then, "having said this, he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46b).

It is intriguing to note what Luke records as Jesus' final words – words that are unique to Luke – and to contrast them with the final words recorded in the other gospels.

In Luke, Jesus' final words are these: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46).

In Matthew, they are "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mt. 27:46)?

In Mark, they are the same as Matthew's words (Mk. 15:34).

In John, they are "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30).

Each last word is appropriate to that gospel account. Matthew and Mark were concerned with demonstrating that Jesus was the redeemer of both the Jews and the Gentiles, respectively. To the knowledgeable Jew reading Matthew, the statement, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" would not be a cry of distress. It would be the fulfillment of prophecy! Those words are the opening words of Psalm 22 (vs. 1), a psalm that was almost universally acknowledged by the Jewish community at that time as a messianic psalm which taught that a

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sacrificial, redemptive messiah would give his life for his people. Thus, Jesus' death is here portrayed by Matthew as the final proof that he was indeed God's messiah dying for the sins of the Jewish people.

Likewise, Mark would be communicating the same insight to both his Gentile readers and to Jews being challenged to take the gospel to the pagan world. Gentiles would not have the nuanced appreciation of the words being a fulfillment of Psalm 22, but they would understand a dying redeemer feeling totally abandoned at the moment of his sacrifice. In fact, if he did not feel so abandoned, one would have to question the efficacy of such a sacrifice, because it would turn Jesus' death into play-acting. So the pathos of abandonment had to be present in the death of Jesus for that death to be perceived as authentically redemptive.

John's recording of Jesus' final words, "It is finished" would be consistent with the thrust of this gospel account, as well. Jesus is presented in John as the "Word" – the "Logos" of God who has emanated from God to the world in order to be God's transforming communication to the "cosmos", and creating God's counter-cultural community. In John, the birth, life and death of God – unlike Mark – is a play! With Shakespeare, John would have declared, "The play's the thing!" It was everything – the illuminating, redemptive and transforming drama of God acted before humanity which led to humanity's return to God and embrace of God's community. Therefore, the play is now finished, the drama is complete, and God's work of redemption through his fleshed-out emanation from God has taken place. It is, indeed, finished!

But Luke's reading of Jesus' final words is profoundly different. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). Thank God Luke preserves these, the final words of our Lord and savior!

The death of Luke's Jesus is not the death of one who, through that death, is intentionally proving himself the messianic fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Nor is it the death of one who had to be abandoned in order to be redemptive. Nor is Jesus' death the death of one who is acting out the drama of redemption, playing the final scene of the next-to-last act of the play. To Luke, the death of Jesus is the death of a very authentic, very real, very believable, very identifiable (that is, one with whom we can identify) human being! It is the death of one who, even in his death, can die as all of us would want to die – caring about weeping women, forgiving enemies, sharing God's promise with another dying man, and approaching his death with calm and peace. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!"

It has always surprised me that, in the several times I have had to face surgery, I have found myself in the last minutes before receiving the tranquilizer and entering surgery that I approached such surgery with amazing calm. The days immediately before the surgery, even the hours approaching it, I might be anxious. But when the moment arrives – in the last half-hour or so before going into the operating room, I have always been amazed at the peace I have felt (even before receiving any tranquilizer). And others have recorded the same phenomenon.

That is what I identify with Jesus here. He who was the One chosen and blessed by God and given for the liberation and transfiguration of humanity is now willing to be bread broken. The time of brokenness has come, for only through bread being broken can it be given away for the

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nourishment of human-kind. The pain is now reaching its end, the life-force is virtually ebbed out, and in complete trust and peace, Jesus can now say, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Thus, he who is our model of authentic humanity in life, in work, in fellowship and in worship, is our model in death as well, as he teaches us how to die.

"And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to be set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled" (Luke 9:16-17a).

"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit".

In the midst of this story of Jesus' final moments and death appears another story – the story of the centurion assigned the responsibility of commanding the troops executing Jesus. The next significant difference between Luke's description of the crucifixion and the other gospel accounts is found in Luke 23:47. The Roman centurion handling the execution of Jesus and the two thieves watches Jesus die. Luke then records,

"When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man is innocent'!" (vs. 47)

The response of the centurion is markedly different in the other accounts. In Matthew and in Mark, the centurion's response is "Surely this man was God's Son" (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39)! The incident is not mentioned in John's account.

The response of the centurion to Jesus' death reported by Matthew and Mark is a markedly different response than is reported in Luke's gospel. In Matthew and Mark, the centurion's response is a confession of faith—witnessing that Jesus is God's Son, and thus redeemer of the Jews (Matthew) and of the Gentiles (Mark). This confession is consistent with the intent of these two gospel writers – to demonstrate Jesus as the redeemer of both groups of people.

In Luke, however, the centurion speaks the much more modest words, "Certainly this man is innocent!" Such a statement does not imply a conversion experience at the foot of the cross. Rather, his statement simply presents the sense on the part of his executioner that a major miscarriage of justice has taken place. The centurion's concern is with justice, and watching Jesus' death, he is convinced that this man died innocent of the charges of treason and sedition brought against him. So the centurion cries out with his sense of outrage against the injustice that has just transpired before his eyes – and in which he had just (unintentionally) participated!

With these final declarations of both Jesus and the centurion, the story of Jesus' crucifixion draws to its close. "And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things" (23:48-49).

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Luke 23:50-56. The final significant difference between Luke's account and the other gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus is in Luke's identification of Joseph of Arimathea. All the other accounts record him as a hidden disciple of Jesus. But Luke's description is different in some significant ways. He writes,

"Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God" (23:50-51).

There are three things about Joseph of Arimathea that are uniquely reported by Luke. First, he was "a good and righteous man". That is, he was a person, not only committed to the keeping of the Law (a "good" man), but was also one committed to seeing justice done throughout Israel (a "righteous"[2] man). The Hebrew word for "righteous" (*tsedeq*) has to do with the ethical use of power in order to guarantee that people (and particularly those who are vulnerable and/or poor) are treated with equality, clemency and justice. Therefore, for Luke to call Joseph of Arimathea "a good and righteous man" is to say that Joseph was a man committed to and working for public justice for Israel's poor and marginalized, using his position as a political and religious leader toward that end. There was at least one man in power who had not been seduced!

Second, Luke also states that Joseph was "a member of the council" – the "council" being the highest judicatory of Israel, the Sanhedrin, but that he "had not agreed to their plan and action". If Joseph was indeed a member of the Sanhedrin, that meant that Joseph was either of a priestly family or was of the Pharisee or Sadducee parties. He was, therefore, a person of position and authority. Other accounts call him "rich". By whatever standard used, Joseph was not simply an ordinary peasant nor even a successful businessman within Israel. He was among the aristocracy – politically, religiously or both. Therefore, he was an integral part of the Jewish political, economic and religious systems that had conspired to eliminate Jesus and the threat he posed to their power.

Third, Luke further tells us that Joseph was also one who was "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God". That is, despite being a member of the elite, Joseph had truly given himself over to the dream of the shalom community that moves through the warp-and-woof of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), and its requirements that shalom was to be achieved through the exercise of political justice for all, economic equity through the sharing with all Jews the material resources of the nation in order to eliminate poverty, and the building of a relational culture through responding to God's love. Thus, at one and the same time, Joseph was both a

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[2] The word "righteous" did not mean in first century Israel and throughout the Old Testament what the word means today. In today's English, "righteous" means "morally right" or "acting in accord with moral law"; it deals with private moral behavior. The Hebrew word *tsedeq* (translated "righteousness"), has a far different meaning to it. There are two Hebrew words for the concept of "justice" – *mishpat* and *tsedeq*. *Mishpat* is always translated "justice" and *tsedeq* is translated either "righteousness" or "justice" (usually according to the whim of the translator). Both words mean acting with compensatory equality, clemency and justice, and have to do with public life. *Mishpat* has to do with the obedience of the justice portions of the Mosaic Law, while *tsedeq* has an ethical sense about it, primarily dealing with compassionate acts toward the poor and the victims of the misuse of power. Intriguingly, the one usage of the English word that comes closest to the biblical meaning of "righteous" is the African-American usage of it ("he's a righteous dude"), which means "loyal"," right-thinking" and "acting justly toward the gang or community").

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member of the establishment and a revolutionary, committed to Jesus' vision and action to bring about the kingdom of God in Israel. That is likely why he did not concur with the Sanhedrin's "plan and action".

Luke does not state that Joseph was one of Jesus' disciples. Rather, he was one who was drawn to Jesus because Jesus articulated and clearly worked for the coming of the kingdom of God and Joseph "waited expectantly for the kingdom of God". Whether he was a follower of Jesus or not, Luke paints Joseph as one committed to the same essential objective as was he.

Thus, by telling us these convictions of Joseph, Luke is doing two things. First, he is keeping the reader from being too categorical in one's thinking, describing Jesus' disciples as all good and Israel's aristocracy as being all evil; rather, he has earlier told us that disciples betrayed and denied Jesus (so there's a wee bit of cowardice and even betrayal in them, as well). And now he tells us that one of Israel's most distinguished political and religious leaders was committed to the same ideals as Jesus and was using his position to work for them (so there's some good in even the worst of systems).

Second, Luke tells us that Joseph was willing to take public action that would "out" him, that would make clear that his convictions bore startling similarity to Jesus' convictions – and that he was willing to act upon them. He might be a ruler of Israel, but his true commitment was for the kingdom of God. He was therefore, in essence, a revolutionary figure, one willing to sacrifice a comfortable life-style and accrued power to work for the establishment of God's intentions for humanity.

What does Joseph do that makes it clear to all that he is a fellow-traveler with Jesus, even if he is not a disciple? Luke tells us:

"Joseph went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation (the day before the Passover Sabbath day), and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how the body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments" (23:53-56a).

Where were the disciples? Where were the followers of Jesus? Where were those who had urged him on in his confrontation of Israel's leadership and his calling of them to accountability to justly apply Israel's shalom legislation? It was this man Joseph who went to Pilate. By asking for the body of Jesus, Joseph was making clear to Pilate, the Jewish aristocracy and to the people that he was committed to the same cause as was Jesus. By taking the dead body down and wrapping it in a linen cloth, he was making himself unclean according to Jewish law (and he could only receive again his cleanliness by making sacrifice in the Temple and asking for Israel's priestly aristocracy to declare him clean – and you think they would do that?). By placing Jesus in the tomb he had earlier purchased and prepared for himself (cf. Mt. 27:60)[3], he was sacrificing

[3] Whether Joseph pre-owned this tomb (the assumption of Matthew) or bought it for the occasion (the assumption of Mark, Luke and John) is not important. The importance of this action is that Joseph couldn't have commandeered a tomb; in order to lay Jesus in a tomb, he had to purchase it first and contribute it for that purpose. Thus, this is a significant commitment of Joseph to Jesus (both symbolically and economically) and all for which Jesus stood!

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his sacred space and bringing honor to a criminal while surrendering his own honor. The commitment of Joseph of Arimathea both to Jesus and to justice that he insisted be practiced is outstanding. He may not have had sufficient power to stop the Sanhedrin's and high priest's "plan and action", but he could make his protest before all of Israel and Rome by rescuing Jesus' body and giving him an honorable burial!

The story of Jesus' final days ends by returning to the one group of followers who stayed with the Master in these darkest days – the women. They followed the cortege to the tomb that Joseph had selected, noted its location, and then did what Jewish women have done since time immemorial. They began the ritual for the dead, preparing to wash and cleanse the body of the trauma it had sustained, to clothe the body that had hung naked upon the cross (and, people, there would have been no loincloth!) in the finest garments and to fill those garments with herbs and spices to help perfume and preserve the body. They did what they could do! They couldn't bring Jesus back to life as he had healed and raised others from the dead. They could not arrest the ignominy of his trial and execution. But they could be grateful to Joseph for his generosity and willingness to make such a clear statement of his convictions. And they could give Jesus a decent burial.

So Luke's crucifixion story ends in the most simple way. "On the Sabbath day they rested according to the commandment" (vs. 56b). On the Sabbath, they remained silent and in mourning, awaiting the day after the Sabbath when they could attend to Jesus' body. It was Friday! But little did they know that Easter was coming!!!

Philippians 2:5-11. This passage, along with I Corinthians 13 and Psalm 23, is among the most famous and beloved poems in the scripture. Whether it was written by Paul the Apostle or simply "borrowed" by him as an already well-known poem about Christ, we do not know. But we do know that it is one of the most powerful statements in the scripture of what God chose to do both for us and for all humanity.

The poem divides into two relatively equal parts: verses 6-8 proclaiming Christ's humiliation, and verses 9-11 celebrating his exaltation. It begins "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus", and then launches into the poem. The poem's larger context (vss. 1-5) is on the importance of Christians being of the same mind with one another, and the author's recognition that one cannot have unity without humility. That is, that which enables people to be united with each other and committed to the common good is their willingness not to be first nor to be always right. He then, in essence, says, "That's the way Jesus was. And if humility was good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for us!" To demonstrate the depth of humility that lay in Jesus, Paul then presents this poem.

"Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (vss. 6-8).

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Before the incarnation, Christ had both a "form" and a status equal to God. The word "form" doesn't mean that he is "like God" in appearance, but that he was divine – what centuries later the church fathers would call "God of Very God". But, though he was fully and totally God, Christ did not see that relationship as "something to be exploited" (or, in other translations, "grasped"). Jesus was not trying to become God; he already was God. But his love for humanity was so profound that he did not cling to his privilege of being God, "but emptied himself".

Jesus relinquished his heavenly status, Paul is telling us, in order to return our world and humanity itself into society as God intended it to be. He "emptied" himself or "made himself nothing", and he did so in three ways.

? "Being born in human likeness" -- Christ becomes a human being, so that he is not just "similar to" other human beings, but is himself uniquely human *as God created humanity to be* (that is, before the Fall);
? "taking the form of a slave" – Christ not only deprived himself of his exalted status to become a human being, but assumed the lowest possible human status – that of a slave;
? "becoming obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross". Not only was Christ, in becoming human, willing to face the reality of death that being human requires. Christ was willing to submit to the Father's will by both living a life of obedience, but carrying out that obedience in the death prescribed for disobedient and rebellious slaves – crucifixion!

"Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (vss. 9-11).

God's grateful response to Christ's commitment to and acting out of total obedience to him and love for humanity is that God exalts Christ. He is restored to the glory he voluntarily relinquished so that humanity might be returned to society as God created humanity to be. Humiliation is replaced with exaltation; obedience is replaced with glory; servanthood is replaced with power. Christ's very act of "emptying" himself becomes the means that makes humanity's salvation possible and the world transformable. Now, all humanity will bow the knee in homage to the servant-king. All the systems and powers of the world and even of heaven and the underworld – political, economic or religious – will confess Jesus as Lord. God will be glorified because Christ chose to "empty himself" and to take upon himself "the form of a slave"!

Philippians 2:5-11 is a magnificent poem of the depth of the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made for the world. And it is consequently the most powerful of examples in motivating each of us to act humbly as we seek to build the Body of Christ with our brother and sister Christians. But why would this scripture be used as the epistle lesson in the lectionary for Palm Sunday? Would it not be more appropriate to use it for Good Friday or even Maundy Thursday?

Not really! It is most important to use it on the day we celebrate the Triumphal Entry of our Lord into Jerusalem. And the reason why it is so important is to remind us that this entry was

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not for the purpose of bringing acclaim to Jesus or initiating the overthrow of Rome and of the Jewish clerical aristocracy. If that were its purpose, then it had already miserably failed.

But that was not the purpose for the Triumphal Entry. The purpose of that entry was to declare that Messiah had come – the Messiah who was not to be a conquering warlord but a humble monarch seeking to build a kingdom of shalom. The purpose of that entry was to proclaim that it was the One for whom the stones cry out who was now entering Jerusalem -- the One who had come to stand with and for the poor and who was standing over against the systems, calling them to accountability and acting as their judge. The purpose of that entry was to announce the coming of the Suffering Servant – the One who would suffer and be persecuted, be tortured and die both for the people and systems of Israel – and therefore the people and systems of the entire world.

The purpose of that entry was to initiate the final week of Jesus' life, as he moved relentlessly toward that humiliation when God-in-the-flesh would "become obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross". For the law of God is that the way up is down, the way to victory is the way of defeat and the death of the Almighty One becomes the means for the liberation of each person and system whom God would call!

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