

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]

Series: Worship Workbench

Issue: Essay 258 + March 2021

Copyright: © 2021 Paul F. Bosch.

This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of < www.worship.ca > as the source.



RE-IMAGINING HOLY WEEK

1 About a year and a half ago, I saw a program on Public Television that re-imagined Holy Week – that eight day period tracing Jesus’ last days, from Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter Sunday, that most Christian Churches celebrate as the high point of their religious year.

2 If you think of yourself as a Christian, but you don’t go to church to worship on any other days, you’re nevertheless likely to show your face there on at least one or more of these High Holy Days.

3 The TV program featured Bible scholars from a wide variety of perspectives, even Jewish and secular, and set me to thinking in an entirely new way about those last days of Jesus’ ministry.

4 I belong to a religious tradition that does not fear scholarship, but welcomes it. Poetry and myth and metaphor are part of the language of my own personal religious commitment. And of the religious tradition I represent.

5 Here’s the Bible’s traditional telling of the story, from writers / evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even John:

6 On Palm Sunday, the Bible writers tell us, Jesus enters Jerusalem to great acclaim from the crowds. He’s riding a donkey, and the population shouts “Hosanna”, Hebrew for “Save, Lord!”. They cut palm branches from trees, and scatter them in Jesus’ path, and even their own garments. Children sing the praise of this Teacher from Nazareth. He’s a celebrity in the city.

7 The next day, Monday, Jesus enters the Temple and drives out the money changers and sacrifice-sellers. He overturns their tables, declaring, “God’s house is a house of prayer for all people, and you have turned it into a Den of Thieves...”

8 On Tuesday and Wednesday, Jesus teaches in the Temple. And on Thursday evening he gathers his disciples and shares with them a ritual meal, predicting his own death, and anticipating his abandonment by even his faithful friends. Peter, a leader of Jesus’ band of followers, boasts he will never deny Jesus. Jesus rebukes Peter, and foretells even Peter’s desertion.

9 On Friday, Jesus is arrested and tried before religious and civil authorities, In Jesus' trial, Peter hides his allegiance to Jesus, and does indeed deny his friend, not once but three times. Jesus is sentenced to death by crucifixion, nailed to a cross of wood, a notably cruel and painful execution. Three women are the only followers of Jesus who mourn at Jesus' cross. Jesus is buried without proper Jewish ceremony in a borrowed tomb, because the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday, has already begun.

10 And on Easter Sunday, the Bible writers tell us, Jesus rises to new life, the empty tomb witnessed first by three women, then Jesus in person by Mary Magdalene, then Peter and John, then by all the disciples, and subsequently by other followers.

11 That's the Biblical account. Now here's a re-imagining of those days.

12 It seems unlikely, to some scholars, that the population of Jerusalem should so quickly turn against Jesus. Five days from "Hosanna!" to "Crucify him!"? That's psychologically and narratively unlikely. The Bible writers, penning their accounts a full generation after the events themselves, were exercising a story-teller's prerogatives, and condensing the story as it actually might have happened.

13 Suppose, instead, contemporary scholars speculate, that the events we remember as Palm Sunday occurred, not six days before Jesus' crucifixion, but six months prior. Or even seven months. October, after all, was the season, in the Middle East, for harvesting palm fronds, to repair or to construct roof thatches and to weave into baskets and fabrics.

14 Further, that Palm Sunday procession has been sanitized over the years to remove or to obscure its radical significance. It's what we would call today a Protest March! Those palms and "Hosannas" and celebrating crowds: They're protesting "Jesus is lord!" Not the Emperor! Not any earthly authority!

15 And Jesus's Cleansing of the Temple the next day, on Monday: That's a blatant act of religious and civil disobedience!

16 And for both of those intolerable offenses, scholars speculate today, the authorities throw Jesus in prison. For six months!

17 Jesus is released from prison in the Spring of the following year, according to this re-imagining. There's simply not enough evidence to retain him.

18 But six or seven months is plenty of time for the authorities, both civil and religious, to turn the crowds against Jesus. To poison his reputation with the people. Then – as now! – those in power have the tools and the instruments – and the psychopants! – to do that, to any too-popular truth-teller!

19 So in late March or April, Jesus resumes his teaching. But he's still stirring up trouble for those in authority. Judas, a companion and disciple of Jesus, conspires with religious leaders to betray Jesus. Jesus meets on Thursday night with his friends for a ritual meal at Passover. And early in the morning on Friday he's arrested, convicted in a kind of kangaroo court, and crucified. The Emperor's representatives and the crowds consenting! Enthusiastically!

20 That scenario, that sequence of events, makes a great deal of sense to me. It explains the false and fickle behaviour of the population, from “Hosanna!” in October to “Crucify!” in April.

21 All of this, of course, is scholarly speculation. And I for one would never argue to change our church traditions, on the basis of this re-imagining, and seek to celebrate Palm Sunday in October! I’m happy with the condensation of the narrative that the Bible accounts provide.

22 But this imaginative re-imagining does two things for me. It explains or makes more plausible the responses of the crowd. Yes, we are, all of us, always, false and fickle followers of Truth and Justice, wherever we encounter them!

23 And second, this re-imagining restores and re-enforces the original offense of Jesus’ mission and message. From now on, I will regard every church procession as a Protest March. Even the procession every Sunday that gets the worship leaders and the choir to their places up front “Jesus is lord!” I am professing. Not The Emperor!

+ + +