Collision course: Jesus' final week

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If, as John's Gospel suggests, Jesus went regularly to the annual festivals of his people in Jerusalem, what was so different that last time that it resulted in his execution? If, as Mark's Gospel suggests, he only went there once, why did he do it then? What, in other words, was Jesus' intention in making what proved to be his final, fatal visit to Jerusalem and its Temple that Passover of 30 CE?

One answer was given in Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*. Jesus' intention, according to that film, was to sacrifice his life as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of the world and thereby obtain vicarious forgiveness for us all. Since God was offended by human sin, and since human beings were an inadequate subject for divine punishment, only a divine victim, the Son of God, was fully appropriate to suffer in our place.

What makes Gibson's film important is that it expressed a common Christian understanding. Assiduously courted by Gibson's marketing campaign, many conservative Christians strongly supported the film because it expressed their understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. Even Pope John Paul II is reported to have said about the film, "It is as it was." In this theology, the punitive suffering deserved by all of us was laid by God upon Jesus.

But this widespread Christian understanding of Jesus' death is misleading and impoverished. As we listened to our fellow Christians discussing the film, we realized that vast numbers of them simply did not know the gospel story. They knew how Jesus' last week ended but not how it began, how it continued day by day, and why it finally went the way that it did. For Christians to recover the whole story of Holy Week is crucially important.

To say the obvious: Holy Week is at the center of the Christian life. In the Gospels, it is the climax of the story of Jesus. So also in Paul: "Christ crucified" and "Jesus is Lord" are the center of his proclamation. Liturgically, Lent and Holy Week are the

most sacred time of the Christian year, rivaled only by Advent and Christmas. Their importance relative to each other is clear: Jesus' last week, death and resurrection were commemorated centuries before Advent and Christmas were observed.

For more than one reason, the story of Holy Week—the whole week from Palm Sunday onward—is not as well known as it could and should be among Christians. One reason is a recent liturgical and lectionary change. In many churches, the story of Jesus' death has replaced Palm Sunday on the Sunday before Easter. The change was made largely because Good Friday has ceased to be a public holiday. Most of us over 50 recall a time when in many places there was no school on Good Friday. Many businesses closed. Good Friday was a day for going to church, and some of us can remember services from noon to 3 o'clock with sermons on "the seven last words."

Now the world doesn't stop on Good Friday, and fewer Christians are able to attend services that day. So the Good Friday story needs to be told on the Sunday before Easter—otherwise Christians would go from one triumph to another, from "the triumphal entry" on Palm Sunday and singing "Crown Him with Many Crowns" and "Lead on, O King Eternal" to the triumphant celebration of Easter: "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." Well, what happened in between?

But the loss of Palm Sunday and the fuller story of Holy Week has unfortunate consequences. To remember and observe Good Friday without the framework provided by Palm Sunday and the rest of Holy Week risks missing the significance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. When Jesus' death is isolated from the events leading up to it, several crucial things result:

• No answer is given to the crucial question, "Why was Jesus killed?" Jesus didn't simply die; he was executed by the authorities who ruled his world. If we hear only the Good Friday story, we hear the authorities condemning him to death for "blasphemy" but we get no idea of why they acted against him. Jesus' passion—in the sense of what he was passionate about—remains largely invisible.

• People are encouraged to believe that the primary purpose of Jesus' death was to die for the sins of the world by offering his life as a substitutionary atonement. For many Christians, this is the *real* meaning of Good Friday. For some, seeing Jesus' death as a substitutionary sacrifice is a litmus test of Christian orthodoxy. It also leads to the notion that his death had to happen, that it was part of God's plan of

salvation— indeed, required by God.

• People are encouraged to accept the widespread notion that Jesus was rejected by his own people—that “the Jews” crucified him. The authorities are seen as representatives of the Jewish people. There is little or no awareness that throughout the week “the crowd” is with Jesus, and indeed prevents the authorities from taking action. It is a different and much smaller crowd that calls for his crucifixion on Good Friday—*that* crowd is gathered in Pilate’s courtyard, and ordinary people had no access to it. Heard in isolation, the Good Friday texts have been a major factor in the long and often brutal history of Christian anti-Semitism.

All these problems are evident in Gibson’s movie. By treating only the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life, it implies that Jesus’ death is the most important thing about him. The framing of the film with a verse from Isaiah, “By his stripes we are healed,” implies that Jesus’ death was foreordained as the means of our salvation. The graphic and relentless scenes of torture imply that Jesus had to suffer so much because of how bad our sins are, as if the greater the suffering, the greater the atoning power. Implying that God required this, the movie (and the theology behind it) creates a horrendous picture of God.

It also creates a horrendous picture of Jews. Because the movie focuses only on the final night and day of Jesus’ life, Jews appear primarily in the role of accusers, tormentors and judges. Its portrayal of Jewish characters is almost completely negative, at times demonic.

Mark’s story presents a radically different theology of Jesus’ death than the one in Gibson’s film. It offers a vision of Jesus’ final week that challenges the scripts used in past and present dramatic representations.

You can see this alternative theology of participation most clearly by looking at three interchanges between Jesus and his followers in the central section of Mark concerning what will happen in Jerusalem. When Jesus first tells the disciples of his impending death and resurrection in 8:31, far from suggesting his substitution for them, he demands their participation with him—their participation and everyone else’s as well: “He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (8:34).

Later, that participation in his own death and resurrection is demanded in less lethal but no less difficult terms. In 9:35 participation involves this transformation: "'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." So also 10:43-44: "'Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'" That is also, by the way, how Paul understood dying and rising with Jesus to live as a new creation within this aging world.

What, according to Mark, was Jesus' intention for that week in Jerusalem which would turn out to be his last one on earth? *Jesus went to the capital city of his people to confront Roman imperial power and religious collaboration with it*. He did so from out of the heart of Judaism and in the name of the kingdom of God as God's passion for this earth.

We begin with Palm Sunday. Two processions entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week of Passover, a tinderbox time in the city, with the Jewish people celebrating divine deliverance from the past Egyptian Empire while under the present Roman Empire. Two very large and very lethal riots took place precisely at Passover in the generations before and after 30 CE. And so, at each Passover, the Roman governor—Pilate in the time of Jesus—rode up to Jerusalem from the imperial capital Caesarea on the coast at the head of a cohort of imperial cavalry and troops to reinforce the Roman garrison in Jerusalem as a deterrent against and preparation for any possible trouble. Pilate's procession, arriving from the west, symbolized and actualized Roman imperial power.

Jesus entered the city from the east in another procession, a counterprocession. Whereas Pilate rode into the city on a war horse, Jesus entered on a donkey. Mark makes it clear that Jesus planned it in advance: he tells the disciples to go into a village to get a donkey and says, "If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" Implicitly in Mark 11:1-11 and explicitly in Matthew 21:4-5, the symbolism makes use of Zechariah 9:9-10, which speaks of a king of peace on a donkey who will banish the war horse and battle bow from the land.

The contrast is clear: Jesus versus Pilate, the nonviolence of the kingdom of God versus the violence of empire. Two arrivals, two entrances, two processions—and our Christian Lent is about repentance for being in the wrong one and preparation to abandon it for its alternative.

On Monday, Jesus' demonstration against Roman imperial power and violence is matched by one against the temple authorities' role in the imperial domination system. Since 6 CE, they had collaborated with Rome as the rulers of Judea, a collusion that submitted God's temple to Roman control. Once again the demonstration is very deliberate. Sunday evening he had "entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve" (11:11). You do not conduct public demonstrations late in the evening when few people are present—to see you or protect you. He waited until the next day to overturn the tables.

This demonstration, like the first one, echoes the Jewish prophets. Jeremiah had warned that worshiping God as a substitute for enacting God's justice had turned God's temple into a "den of robbers," a "cave of violent ones" (Jer. 7:11). Note that a "den of robbers" is not where robbers rob but their safe house where they dwell after having robbed somewhere else. In Mark, Jesus quotes these words as he overturns the tables of the money changers: the temple authorities and their employees have turned the temple into a den of violent ones.

On Tuesday, the longest day of the week in Mark's account, Jesus is engaged in a series of conflict stories with the temple authorities and their representatives, ending with "the little apocalypse" in Mark 13, in which Jesus warns of the coming destruction of the temple. Throughout this day, as on Sunday and Monday, the authorities want to arrest Jesus and have him executed for what he is doing, but he is safely protected by having the crowd on his side. This was already clear from the enthusiastic support of "many people" on Palm Sunday in Mark 11:8-10. It continues on Monday after the temple incident: "When the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching" (11:18). And lest hearers or readers forget, the protective support of "the crowd" against their high-priestly rulers is reiterated three times on Tuesday: "They were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet" (11:32); "when they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him and went away" (12:12); and "the large crowd was listening to him with delight" (12:37).

On Wednesday, in Mark's story, the authorities give up: "It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, 'Not

during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people'" (14:1-2). After the festival, of course, Jesus would presumably return to Galilee. The protective pro-Jesus crowd works as he intended, and the risk of a riot among them is too dangerous for the anti-Jesus authorities to arrest him publicly. That is, within the narrative logic of Mark's story, why Judas is so necessary in 14:10-11. He goes to the authorities and offers to locate Jesus at night and apart from the crowd so that he can be captured quietly and dispatched speedily.

On Thursday, Jesus shares a final meal with his followers. Judas leaves in the middle of it. Afterward they go to the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas the traitor leads the temple police to the garden, and there, in the dark, Jesus is arrested; then he is brought before the authorities for a speedy hearing and condemned to death.

On Friday morning, as Jesus stands before Pilate, a second crowd appears in Mark's narrative. It is already quite clear in Mark that "all the people" (Matt. 27:25) or "the Jews" (John) are not against Jesus. But what about the crowd on Friday in Mark 15:6-9? This is a crowd gathered in Pilate's courtyard, to which ordinary people (the crowd of the previous days) would not have had access. It would have been a small crowd of supporters of the authorities—perhaps a few dozen people. This is the crowd that calls for Jesus' crucifixion—not the crowds who had heard Jesus gladly earlier in the week.

How does Mark's story end? Jesus is put to death by imperial power. Jesus is raised from death by divine power. The authorities said no to Jesus and his passion for the kingdom of God and killed him. But death was not the end. God vindicated Jesus, and thus said no to the powers that killed him. God, therefore, is on a collision course with empire—as always and ever throughout the biblical tradition.

We ponder all of this very deeply this Lent when liberals sadly and conservatives gladly proclaim our America not only as an empire but as the new Roman Empire. And we also meditate about this. The Jewish historian Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* summarizes the execution of Jesus by saying, "Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified" (18:63-64). But Mark adds something else. In his account, it took a Roman governor named Pilate, an aristocratic high-priest named Caiaphas and a Christian traitor named Judas to effect Jesus' execution.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan wrote The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week *(HarperSanFrancisco). The paperback version of the book,*

released earlier this year, contains a discussion guide for group study.