

## What Do the Events of “Holy Week” Signify?

Historically, the week leading up to, and including, Easter has been the most important in the Christian calendar. First comes Palm Sunday, when Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is celebrated; then Maundy Thursday, when the Last Supper is commemorated; then Good Friday, recalling the crucifixion of Jesus; then Holy Saturday, when Jesus lay in the grave or, in some traditions, descended into hell; and finally Easter, the first day of the new week, the Day of Resurrection.

It’s hard to imagine what impact observance of these events might once have had, when societies were less secularized and Christians were less captive of their culture. Nowadays, I suspect that “March Madness” and spring cleaning are more important rituals for most people than whatever happens during “holy week.”

Any loss of meaning or importance regarding “holy week” is surely one indication of the more general failure of Christian churches to make their story relevant and compelling in today’s world. As I see it, that story is extraordinarily relevant, but has been poorly told – so poorly told that major segments of Christianity in the U.S. today are reconciled to, if not actually supportive of, a government administration that is perhaps the most vile, venal, and vindictive in all our nation’s history.

Have Christians forgotten that the heart of Jesus’ message was the proclamation of a “kingdom of God” that posed a clear counter to, and required a major transformation of, the kingdoms of this world? It was not an imaginary kingdom, nor a supernatural kingdom, nor a kingdom of the “sweet by-and-by.” It was a kingdom that was “already, but not yet,” beginnings of which were evident in the transformation of lives encountered by Jesus. Full realization awaited the conversion of the hearts and minds of the people oppressed by Roman occupation and the ultimate displacement of imperial power by the power of God’s justice, peace, and love.

The “Palm Sunday” parade that celebrated Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, the capital city, was probably a modest event, yet the religious authorities, who served at Rome’s pleasure, worried about a possible disturbance of the peace. They didn’t want the Romans to come down on them for any sort of rabble-rousing. Religious freedom stopped where challenge to imperial authority began. Last Saturday’s “March for Our Lives” captured much of the spirit of Palm Sunday.

The crucifixion, following a disturbance by Jesus in the temple that seems to have angered and embarrassed the Jewish authorities enough to disown Jesus and his brand of justice-seeking, was carried out by Roman officials. It was torture, made public, commonly practiced as a means of political repression and social control (as torture usually is). Many Christians think Jesus had to die because God requires payback for sin. That is monstrous theology, in my view. Jesus was killed because human beings and society are sinful, so sinful that they willingly protect their power, authority, and status by letting others die, even by torturing and killing innocents as well as guilty. They scapegoat the weak but also the morally exemplary who, by their superior justice and love, would shame them and expose their perfidies if allowed to live. Jesus was too morally and spiritually authentic to let live!

Easter itself is less about what happened to Jesus than what can happen to us – how we, like Jesus’ disciples, can be brought back from the depths of despair and death, despite our fears, betrayals, denials, and derelictions, by the disclosure of God’s forgiveness and grace, as manifest in Jesus, whose spirit lives on in ways that confound, restore, and empower us anew.

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