

The Symbolism of Ceremony

Luke 19:28-40

Apparently, there is a new phenomenon on cable television that I've been missing! It's a docudrama on the Bible that's been produced for the History Channel, running every Sunday night throughout the season of Lent. From what I've read (and now watched on the internet), *The Bible* has made quite the splash, pulling in at least ten million viewers an episode which, for an esoteric cable channel, is relatively equivalent to garnering a Super Bowl audience!

The producers, Mark Burnett and Roma Downey, are not Southern Baptist evangelists gone Hollywood; they are mainstream television veterans who have attempted to make the biblical stories come alive in a fresh new way, with miracles and supernatural events displayed with the latest high tech special effects and just enough blood and gore to make it all seem real, so that viewers might believe they were there when it all happened. Its successful marketing among believers and nonbelievers alike is enough to make Mel Gibson scream with envy!

That isn't to say this series has received universal acclaim. On the contrary, there are many critics, most of whom are citing the shortcomings, such as the wooden literalness in telling the old, old story, or the fact that most of the actors playing the parts are incredibly attractive *white* people, chosen more on the basis of their sex appeal than their likeness to Semitic populations in an ancient Middle Eastern world. Nor has it helped that the actor who plays Satan tempting Jesus is one of the few non-white actors, and also has an uncanny likeness to President Obama, provoking the Twitter

accounts of religious and political conservatives over this past week to hum with delight over the theological and political meaning of that revelation! Call me crazy, but I think whenever Hollywood attempts to be overtly religious, it usually has a particular market in mind. At least in that regard they have succeeded!

Not just for that reason alone, a production like this is a dubious undertaking. For one thing, rarely does the mainstream media appreciate the wide spectrum and diversity of beliefs and perspectives within each religious tradition, be it Jewish, Christian, or Muslim; thus, how stories get told, explained, interpreted, and used will differ considerably within traditions and between them.

Besides that, media types tend not to treat organized religion as anything more than a minority interest in the public square. So when it is addressed, it is usually parodied and ridiculed or else programs are created to appeal to a devotional audience—for those who read it through their hearts more than their heads, if you get what I mean. I think the latter—the devotional intent—is the purpose behind this particular series on the History Channel. As a result, people watch it, not with a skeptical eye (as they would any TV drama or reality show), but with a measure of piety, as if to say that watching this is a religious experience in its own right. That's my concern. It's one thing to enjoy the show as sheer entertainment; it's quite another to defend it as a work of religious truth.

The reason this concerns me is because a series like this assumes that merely portraying the stories is all that matters—that the value lies in making biblical stories seem as real as possible with historical characters, instead of recognizing that, for the most part,

these ancient narratives are intended to be spiritual messages wrapped in meaningful metaphors and imaginative storytelling. The visual portrayal—as stunning as it is and as compelling as it might be—actually distracts from the real power of these ancient stories, because the viewer comes away being impressed only by how the Red Sea parted, or how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego miraculously escaped from being burned in the fire, or how Jesus could supernaturally walk on water, than to delve into the meaning behind such stories where the message is intentionally preserved and contained. In other words, it suggests that if you make believable a world where supernatural events occur repeatedly and stories of unique miracle wonderworkers abound, then that is the point and purpose of religious faith. Believe in the unbelievable, for that is the measure of faith and that is the message of God for today!

But doesn't that miss the point of storytelling? Good stories are often choreographed in extraordinary ways, not to describe a particular place or moment in history, but to present a message—to portray a spiritual truth in symbolic and sensual ways. This isn't unusual, except we are more inclined to recognize that in Tolkien, or C.S. Lewis, or in other treasures of literature than in the writings of our own faith.

Or take, for instance, Mother Goose nursery rhymes. It's fine for a child to imagine Humpty-Dumpty as a huge egg falling off a wall, even though to the adult mind it is utter nonsense. Of course, you can leave it at that, as sheer nonsense. But doesn't it start to make sense when you realize there's an underlying historical context that made the story and message quite relevant at one time? The

origins of the rhyme are believed to come from an incident in 1650 when a large, impressive, and intimidating cannon the British Royalists relied upon to protect the city wall of Colchester, England, fell to the ground in pieces. It was euphemistically referred to as “Humpty-Dumpty.” Apparently, the annals of English lore recalled this incident with this whimsical rhyme. The rhyme is fine, but to miss the underlying point results in little more than nonsense.

Frankly, nursery rhymes, fables, ancient myths, and many biblical stories are often very similar and they have more in common than we might think; they are fantastical stories smothered in symbolism. They may or may not refer to an actual moment in history, but the point is not to describe the moment, but to convey messages that lie below the surface that have to be grasped before their intended meanings can be fully understood. Thus, to portray biblical stories so fantastically and then infer that that alone makes them historical seems to do a real disservice and only makes them appear more unreal and irrelevant to us today, special effects notwithstanding!

The use of symbolism shouldn't really surprise us. Most of us recognize that life is constantly brimming with colorful language and symbolism. When we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, for instance, it's obvious the pledge for patriotic loyalty is to the country itself and not just the flag. Or a wedding ceremony symbolizes the ongoing commitment two people are making to each other; time doesn't stand still on that moment alone as if to say the wedding is the sole description of the marriage. Similarly, receiving a degree at a graduation exercise isn't the entire goal of an education, but it does

symbolically convey the underlying purpose and accomplishment of one's hard work and investment. And when we celebrate communion, the ritual of eating bread or drinking the cup isn't what we hold dear as sacred; it's what the act of communion means to us in our relationship to God and to our faith. The ceremony merely reflects and symbolically expresses the underlying meaning.

The same thing applies when we try to understand that story of Palm Sunday. When we read our text from Luke's Gospel, it's clear that Jesus choreographed his entrance mainly for its symbolic value, for what it evoked in his followers and in those who witnessed it, which was his intention and purpose. In a manner of speaking, what we have is "street theatre"—Jesus' prophetic choreography intended to act out a sequence of provocative events in order to deliver a message to his own people at their most celebrative and patriotic time of year, i.e., Pesach, or Passover.

What was Jesus orchestrating? Ched Myers puts it this way:

[T]he image of a march on the city amid Davidic acclaim would have connoted...the military procession of a triumphal nationalist hero. Indeed,...[this becomes clear with] the origin of the march "near the Mount of Olives," a place associated in early apocalyptic tradition with the final battle against the enemies of Israel in defense of Jerusalem...The procession itself...recalls the military entry of the triumphant rebel leader Simon Maccabaeus into Jerusalem "with praise and palm branches...and with hymns and songs" (I Mc 13:51).¹

Myers then goes on to account for similarities with other rebel leaders who also rode valiantly into Jerusalem to fight the Romans, even up to a few years prior to Jesus' Passover entrance.

Yet, for all these militant, indeed military, symbolics, other aspects of the narrative point in the opposite direction. ...On the one hand, Jesus procures what he needs for his campaign...On the other hand, what he

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis Books, 1988, pg. 294.

procures is a lowly ass...part of the Zechariah tradition: the Messiah who comes to Zion “Meek, riding upon an ass” (Zec. 9:9f.).

Although this text also belongs to the liberation-of-Jerusalem tradition, it is expressively antimilitary in its tone. Jesus does not intend to fight for the temple state...This parable, then, is filled with conflicting signals, as if it intends to be a satire on military liberators. ²

So from the choice of a colt, to the singing of liturgical chants of “Hosanna,” to the image of a messianic entrance of a liberator into Jerusalem, Jesus alluded to, and made satire of, the conventional militancy of Israel’s freedom fighters, doing so with an alternative, humble, nonviolent image calling for social and political transformation. Instead of a steed and sword in hand, he rode on a colt armed only with a powerful message. And you and I reaffirm this approach and symbolize it every time we wave our palms and sing songs to celebrate Palm Sunday.

Now that might cause some to pause, because our conventional Christian notions of Palm Sunday are much more triumphal and pretentious than were Jesus’. In churches all over, priests, pastors, bishops, and congregations will parade around with palms, declaring Jesus as Lord and King of everyone. That triumphal premise has often been translated into a political and religious militancy down through the ages that actually defies what Jesus was proclaiming. If you miss the symbolism and the satire—if you merely convey the triumphal parade alone—you miss the real intended meaning of the moment! That’s because the message was imbedded, not just in the story itself, but in the symbolism it conveyed—the symbolism of ceremony on Palm Sunday. That’s where the prophetic and true message of the day belongs.

² Ibid., pg. 295.

Every year we come to this day, it presents us with the proverbial choice: will we continue to follow this non-violent, non-militant transformer of the world? Will we choose his ways, over the more common and conventional approaches to human problems and injustice? Do we invest ourselves in acts of remarkable compassion and service, genuine humility, courageous love, selfless sacrifice, and persistent justice for the poor in body and poor in spirit? Those are life choices and aspirations, not merely religious beliefs—choices that so many, like Judas, could not and cannot embrace.

Perhaps that is why it takes a baptism of the heart—a public act of purification—to demonstrate that we are making this choice to follow Jesus' ways, and not merely resigning ourselves to the attitudes and mannerisms and conventional thinking of a hard-hearted world. A baptism has no real value, of course, except for what it symbolizes—a ceremony that symbolizes a person's choice to take seriously the teachings of Jesus with the commitment and dedication it requires to live up to these often counter-intuitive acts of radical wisdom and love. No soul is saved just because a person has decided to immerse their body; the soul is saved when the Spirit of God penetrates and guides each person's life to lead them in the ways of authentic righteousness and right living. It's evident in the choices one makes and in the manner in which one lives. It's the symbolism, more than the ceremony, that affects us so profoundly.

There is always something provocative about symbolism, for one can always find new shades of meaning that stir the heart and mind to deeper levels of understanding. This holds true with the stories of the Bible as well as the ceremonies of our life and faith.

Nothing remains on the surface; nothing is left elementary or irrelevant to life. This is the beauty of everything God leads us to that gives expression to our faith. When we take the time to notice and reflect, when we seek the truth that lies below the surface, we'll realize there is much more of great spiritual value for us to find.

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