

**Joking in Jerusalem**  
Palm Sunday, Yr. B  
(Mk 11:1-11)

Every since the election of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, I've felt the long, dark shadows of Empire growing blacker and more menacing. Most likely many of you have as well. The tension between Empire and the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is pervasive in human cultures and institutions. But for a very long time now the citizens of North America and many other First World nations have been somewhat protected from Empire's most virulent forms. And by Empire, I mean all those forces, all those values and beliefs that stand in stark contrast to and even actively oppose the values of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom that Jesus of proclaimed and incarnated.

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In this political and social climate, I've come to a new appreciation of the value and power of comedy, all kinds of comedy, but especially that of satire. To my short list of favs, people like Rick Mercer and Jim Carrey, I've added John Oliver, Trevor Noah and Stephen Colbert. I've watched bits and pieces of Saturday Night Live and laughed and laughed till my sides have hurt. Their biting satires and comedic mockeries of the current abysmal state of affairs have brought me entertainment and relief, hope, and a kind of short-hand way of unveiling and disempowering the sinister forces at work in our world.

I often find the wordless forms of satire to be the most potent expressions of critique and defiance – and also the funniest. And so the evening I came across Melissa McCarthy impersonating Sean Spicer, the former White House Press Secretary, I was transported to a very happy place by the ironic and biting humour of it all. Like many of you I had been watching for months in quiet and not so quiet desperation as Spicer mangled the facts and proposed alternative facts, all in an attempt to have us believe in a truth that was anything but. Then I saw this little You Tube video of McCarthy in her role as Spicey, riding a facsimile of the Podium of the White House Briefing Room down the busy streets of midtown Manhattan.

For those of you who didn't see it, Spicey is standing at the podium as he would at a regular briefing, but it's on wheels and it's not in the White House but on 58<sup>th</sup> street outside the CNN headquarters. It's a mini parade, as Spicey rides along immersed in regular traffic and stared at by fascinated and I think approving onlookers. It's hilarious to see an august symbol of The White House and all that Washington stands for to be suddenly untethered from its proper moorings, kind of small and insignificant as it motors along an ordinary city street. In the midst of my great belly laugh, which went on for I don't know how many seconds, I felt like we had all spit in the face of the lies and gaslighting that had been torturing us. On the one hand it was just a ridiculous little procession on 58<sup>th</sup> street, a little bit of

street theatre brought to us by Saturday Night Live. But, on the other hand, it was a serious and profound act of protest.

And so, my friends, was the procession into Jerusalem more than 2,000 year ago, when the itinerant and controversial rabbi rode into that metropolis seated on a donkey.

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I have to say that my understanding of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a piece of street theatre, as a comedic protest against the power and values of Empire is something that has grated a little on my childhood memories and juvenile understandings of this wonderful Sunday. For many decades I felt quite buoyant and joyful on Palm Sunday, waving my Palm Branches or little palm cross, singing All Glory, Laud and Honour, and feeling that finally, **finally** Our Lord is getting his due. After years of obscurity, ridicule and opposition, finally Jesus is enjoying the outpouring of praise and adoration that he so richly deserves. If some preacher 25 years ago had told me that this Triumphal Procession was a deliberate joke on Jesus' part, I would either have been offended or simply disbelieving.

But I have come to a new understanding of this pivotal moment in Jesus' journey through the scholarship of Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. They have demonstrated that the triumphal procession that day was not a spontaneous

event involving impromptu worship and long- withheld recognition, but instead an intentional act of political theatre and protest.

The first piece of evidence is found in St. Mark's account of the event. St. Mark portrayed Jesus as going to great lengths to procure the mount on which he was to ride. He sent two of his disciples ahead into the next village with very specific instructions of what they were to be looking for. He sent them for a colt, a young donkey which had never been ridden before, and he told them where they would find it. He also instructed them what to say when they were questioned. He told them to play the Messiah card and it worked. When they get back they spread their cloaks on the colt and Jesus took up his position for the procession into the capital.

It had to be a donkey! It had to be a young donkey, an unassuming gentle little creature both in order for the ancient prophecy of Zechariah to come true and in order for the joke to work. Remember, the prophet Zechariah had predicted the coming of a good, gentle king who would come to his people in a way unlike any other king had ever come – riding on a colt – to signify that he was a king unlike any other. And that was exactly what happened. But while Jesus was descending from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem from the east, another, seemingly mightier and more triumphal procession was entering the city from the west.

Borg and Crossan argue that two processions entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. Every year, the Roman governor of Judea would ride up to Jerusalem from his coastal palace in the west, to be present in the city for the Passover. Pilate would come in all his might and majesty to remind the Jews of Jerusalem and the many Jewish pilgrims to the city that Rome was in charge. As far as the powers that be were concerned, the Jews could celebrate their ancient victory against Egypt if they wanted to, but they needed to be reminded that that liberation was way back then and this was now, and real, present-day resistance to the current Empire was absolutely futile.

So, for that reason, Pilate's procession into the city would have been an over the top display of imperial might. He rode in seated on a regal stallion, accompanied by armoured cavalry and foot soldiers, glorious woven banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, the beating of drums and the clinking of metal. In stark contrast, Jesus' procession into the city would have sounded quiet and looked puny, ragtag and absurd. The King of Kings, the true and only Son of God, rode in to his city seated on a humble donkey, without any pomp or circumstance, without war horses, chariots, or weapons. He rode in with the dusty peasants who had been his companions in the alternative and subversive community he had called the Kingdom of God. And so when he rode in that day in procession, he deliberately

mocked the power of Rome, spitting in their faces and daring them to take his power seriously.

The disciples and those along the way shouted Hosanna and waved their palm branches and felt buoyant and joyous. We have no idea whether they understood what it was Jesus was doing. Did they get the joke? Did they realize that Jesus had set it up, not for them to laugh at him, but for them to laugh with him - at Rome? I doubt if they did. I doubt it because they were not interested in street theatre or satire; they were interested in revolution and a change of temporal ruler.

But we who have the benefit of hindsight and a great tradition, we should get the joke. We should tremble as Jesus must have, knowing what it would cost him to spit in Rome's face. We understand that his fidelity to his Abba and to the radical values of the Kingdom was such that he set his face like flint towards Jerusalem, mounted a donkey and took Rome for a ride. We understand that his satiric judgment of Empire so disturbed the values of the status quo and the power of those on the inside that he had to be silenced on a cross.

So, we too have waved our palm crosses and sung Hosanna but what does it mean for us who get the joke? Who are we in the days to come? Which characters do we play in the dramas of this holy week? Are we willing to be subversive comedians joking in Jerusalem? Can we, dare we, follow this clown?