

The Fickle Crowd: A Capricious Love Story

April 5th, 2020

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21: 1-11

On May 10th, 1940, Winston Churchill became the Prime Minister of Britain. Since 1936, Churchill had been warning of the rising threat of Hitler's Germany and counseling against appeasement. No one was listening.

In 1938, Neville Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement, handing over Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland to Hitler in exchange for "peace in our time."

Nonetheless, in September, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Churchill told Chamberlain in the House of Commons, "You were given the choice between war and dishonor. You chose dishonor. Now you will have war."

By May, things were going badly. Chamberlain resigned. Churchill became Prime Minister.

On the very day Churchill became Prime Minister, Hitler invaded France. Churchill told the House of Commons that he had "nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." They hadn't listened before, but they were listening now.

Soon the defense of France was a failure. Churchill said, "now the Battle of France is over. Soon the Battle of Britain will begin."

In a second speech just before the Battle of Britain, he said, "Let us brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

When Germany finally surrendered on May 8th 1945, Churchill appeared on a balcony before vast throngs of cheering crowds.

He flashed once more his famous V for Victory signal, a symbol that he had begun using way back in 1940 when he had first become Prime Minister and victory seemed an impossible dream. "This is your victory," he cried out.

But the crowds shouted back, "No, it's yours!"

Churchill went to Potsdam in defeated Germany to discuss the postwar shape of Europe with Stalin and Truman in July.

But on the evening of July 5th, 1945, unexpected news reached Potsdam. The results of Britain's election were in: Churchill's party had been defeated, and Churchill was no longer Prime Minister. The crowds had cheered him in May, but voted for someone else in July.

Out of power, Churchill left for home, leaving Stalin and Truman to wait for Clement Atlee, the new Prime Minister of Britain, to arrive.

Cheering crowds are fickle beasts. They cheer and cheer, and then they turn on you. They do so because the human heart is fickle.

We are 'what have you done for me lately' creatures, we humans.

Why, Moses led the people out of Egypt and slavery, defeating Pharaoh with the help of the mighty hand of God, and the Israelites cheered him ... just before they started grumbling about missing all the rich foods of Egypt – “we’re sick of this manna and water diet,” they said. “We miss the leaks and onions of Egypt.”

And just after Jesus had miraculously fed a multitude of five thousand people on just a few loaves and fishes, the Pharisees came to him to say, “Well, we’ll believe in you if you’ll just give us some sign.”

Um, the loaves? The fishes? The well-fed multitude? I mean, the crowd is still dispersing from the miracle when the Pharisees push their way through them to get to Jesus to demand a miracle.

So, when we hear that the crowds are cheering Jesus on his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, our hearts leap a little.

Yes, Jesus deserves all the cheers. But the crowds are expecting something. They are expecting Jesus to come into town and wipe the floor with the Romans.

They are expecting a new King David, who as a boy slew the giant Goliath. Central casting says Jesus is David; the Romans are Goliath. That’s why they are so eager to call Jesus the Son of David: “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

They are expecting a new Moses, since Jesus did feed the people in the wilderness with miraculous bread, just as Moses had done. It was goodbye Pharaoh then, it’s goodbye Caesar now! Let the smiting begin.

And remember, the reason everyone is coming to Jerusalem is that the Passover festival is coming. The first Passover happened when the angel of death went through all of Egypt to smite the firstborn, but passed over the houses of the Israelites.

It was only then that Pharaoh had recognized the power of God, and let the people go. Of course, being human and fickle of heart, Pharaoh quickly changed his mind and chased the people into the Red Sea, where Moses and the people passed through the waters to safety and victory ... and on to subsequent grumbling about God never doing anything for them!

When Jesus comes to town, we cheer with the crowds, but our hearts are uneasy. We know history. We know people. We know ourselves.

So where was Jesus headed amidst all these cheers? To the Temple. To the Temple, to drive out the money changers and those making a profit on the people’s faithfulness to God.

Hey, it’s a good plan, people thought: First, cleanse the people’s religious hearts, symbolized by the Temple. Then defeat the Romans. We get it. Good one, Jesus!

But later that week, Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar. Here was his chance to stick it to the Romans and start the insurrection. But he didn’t. He called for a coin, a coin with Caesar’s head on it, and he said, “Give to God what is God’s, but give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”

Uh oh. Now people were wondering. Is Jesus the One? Every day they came to the Temple to hear Jesus. Every day he had the opportunity to stir them up, to get them excited, get them really going against the Romans ... and every day he just sat there teaching.

Not rabble rousing. Teaching! Teaching against the elders and the rulers of the people, but not against the Romans.

After a week of this, Judas agrees to betray Jesus. Judas is getting antsy about Jesus. He's trying to force the issue. If Jesus won't do something on his own, maybe he just needs a little push, Judas might have been thinking. "I'll just set the ball rolling by provoking a confrontation, and we're on our way."

The crowds are getting antsy about Jesus. The festival is almost here, and Jesus hasn't done anything—except tell people to pay their taxes! Why, if he doesn't hurry, he's going to miss it!

Overnight, Jesus was arrested. The crowds gather in Pilate's courtyard to see what will happen. They are excited, expectant. Here it is, the great moment of conflict they've all been waiting for – Jesus fighting, Jesus triumphant, Pilate humiliated, the Romans defeated. The Passover is here, and here it comes, the big battle!

Then Pilate brings Jesus out. Jesus has been beaten. He is bloody and bruised. He doesn't look triumphant. He looks defeated.

Still, there's hope. Maybe this was the down before the up, the moment before God stood up for the defiant Jesus, and we're here to see it, they might have thought.

And then Pilate says, "This man was brought to me as one who was about to incite a *rebellion* among the people."

Here it is, the crowd thought, Jesus and the rebellion, here it comes. Everyone knows it, even Pilate! They looked to the skies for God's hand.

But then Pilate continued, "but I have examined him and have found no basis for this charge."

Wait, what? No basis for the charge? Why, Jesus must have cowered before Pilate! He hadn't announced a rebellion! He had given in, capitulated, chickened out!

So, Jesus is not a revolutionary. Not a Moses, not a David, not the Messiah, just a coward who talked big about God's kingdom, but who acted small as soon as he met the Romans.

Now the crowd is really antsy. If the rebellion is to come for *this Passover*, it would have to come soon and from an unexpected place. Well, that was God's way, wasn't it, for help to come from an unexpected corner? Where might that be?

And then Pilate brought out Barabbas. Barabbas who had been thrown into prison for leading an insurrection in the city, Barabbas the rebellion leader, Barabbas, the man of violence.

"Hey, wait a minute!", the crowd might have thought. "We get it now! God's been testing our faith. God *is* providing us with the man to lead the rebellion, God *is* waiting to step in, but God has to see our willingness to go along, God has to see our faith. We have to play our part. God wants us to get Barabbas freed!"

So the word passes among the crowd. "Ask for Barabbas! Ask for Barabbas!" And soon that's the cry: "Away with Jesus. Give us Barabbas!" What should Pilate do with the failure, Jesus? "Who cares? Crucify him! Throw that loser to the wolves!"

And so it was, from 'Save us!' to 'Crucify!', in a week. The Jesus who was, the Son of God, wasn't what the crowd wanted and expected, so they turned on him.

What can we learn from this? We, too, are human, and we, too, are fickle. As we cheer with the crowds this week, let us look inside our own hearts and make sure that we are cheering the Jesus who is, the merciful, gracious, peace-loving Jesus, the Jesus who wants to reform, not others, but ourselves, who wants to transform the world, not by power and violence, but by service and love.

Any Jesus who is there just to be what we want, to serve our needs, is a Jesus who is bound to disappoint.

Any Jesus who ought to do whatever we want of him is nothing but a figment of our imagination, and will soon enough be forgotten when the world doesn't work out the way we think it should.

Any Jesus who represents raw power and who is going to place *us* over *them*, no matter who *we* are and who *they* are, is not the Jesus who rode the donkey into Jerusalem.

The real Jesus, the one we should cheer, is the one who conquers in defeat, and triumphs in the grave. The real Jesus is the one who stands with us when we are taking a beating in this world, as he took a beating from Pilate, but nevertheless remains committed to love, saying of the centurions crucifying him, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

The real Jesus is the one who offers, not worldly success, but demands a life of striving to do what is right, to carry out justice, and to surround our neighbors with love and service. In the end, what we have is eternal success, not worldly success.

On this Palm Sunday, as Jesus is about to pass by, let's make sure we are cheering him for the right reasons. We know him better than the crowds did so long ago; we know that he has come to conquer hatred and death, not other people.

We know that he is the one who lived for us, and died for us and rose for us. Of the real Jesus, the man of Peace, who saves us from death, we can paraphrase Churchill and say, "never in the course of human history has so much been owed by so many to so few, -- or to one."

Hurray for the real Jesus, and may our cheering never stop! Amen