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Matthew 21:1-11

## JESUS MEETS MONTY PYTHON

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week in the church, and I'll bet some of you thought it would never get here. "Why is Easter so late this year?" someone asked me the other day. The answer is that we base the date of Easter on a lunar cycle, celebrating it on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. So it can come as early as late March, but also as late as late April. It's a moveable feast, but it always begins with Palm Sunday, marking the day that Jesus made his final entry into Jerusalem, and his followers waved palm branches over their heads and shouted, "Hosanna" — blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Then on Thursday, we will remember the Last Supper, then on Friday the brutality of the crucifixion. And on Easter Morning, the trumpets will sound all over the world, lilies will adorn altars of every shape and size, and on the lips of the faithful will be a different shout —not Hosanna, but Hallelujah, he is risen!

Often the impression we get of Palm Sunday is that it is just the opening act of the real dramas which are about to unfold, the passion narrative and the drama of holy week. That makes Palm Sunday a kind of opening act, a harmless little parade at which the beloved Jesus is still begin treated nicely just before he is treated very badly. So we give the kids some palm branches, teach them to say Hosanna, and then send them off to Sunday school waving at them and hoping they don't poke somebody's eye out. But nobody thinks to mention Monty Python.

What on earth, you must have thought to yourself when you looked at the sermon title, does Palm Sunday have to do with the most irreverent of British filmmakers? Holy Week is serious business, but it begins in a way that made me think of the Life of Brian, the 1979 British comedy film that tells the story of Brian Cohen, played by Graham Chapman, a young Jewish man who is born on

the same day as, and next door to, Jesus Christ, and is subsequently mistaken for the Messiah. It is among the greatest comedy films of all time, and so funny that I dare you to watch it and not laugh yourself into a stupor.

The entire film is an irreverent parody, as only the Brits can do it, and gave us the line, "Blessed are the cheesemakers," among other unforgettable moments. The three wise men who come looking for Jesus are confused and find Brian. He grows up an idealistic young man who resents the continuing Roman occupation of Judea. While attending the Sermon on the Mount, Brian becomes infatuated with an attractive young rebel, Judith. His desire for her and hatred for the Romans leads him to join the People's Front of Judea (PFJ), one of the many fractious and bickering separatist movements, who spend more time fighting each other than the Romans.

What follows is one of the most hilarious films ever made. After numerous misadventures, including a brief trip to outer space in an alien spaceship, and escaping from Pontius Pilate, Brian winds up in a lineup of wannabe mystics and prophets and tries to act like a religious figure to keep the guards off his back. He babbles pseudo-religious truisms, and attracts a small but loyal following. He has unintentionally sparked a movement and people start following him around. Everything he does appears to be a miracle, and every word that comes out of his mouth is seized upon as a new doctrine.

People fling their afflicted bodies at him and demand a cure. When he is finally captured and scheduled to be crucified, a huge crowd gathers and Pilate tries to quell the feeling of revolution by granting them the decision of who should be pardoned. The crowd, however, simply shouts out the names and continues to shout out names containing the letter "R", in order to mock Pilate's mispronunciation. When Judith steps forward and calls for the release of Brian, which the crowds echoes, since the name contains the letter "R", Pilate then agrees to "welease Bwian."

Pilate orders the guards to release Brian, but in a moment parodying the climax of the film Spartacus, various crucified people all claim to be "Brian of Nazareth" and the wrong man is released. As various opportunities for a reprieve are denied, one by one, his so-called friends, including Judith and his mother, step forward to explain why they are leaving this "noble freedom fighter" hanging in the hot sun. Condemned to a long a painful death, Brian finds his spirits lifted by his fellow sufferers, who break into song with "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

To say the least the film was controversial, and in some places was banned. But it was religious satire and sought to critique, through humor, the

hysteria associated with blind faith. In one scene, Brian is trying to persuade an enormous crowd of his followers to think for themselves. He says,

“Look, you’ve got it all wrong! You don’t need to follow me, you don’t need to follow anybody! You’ve got to think for yourself! You’re all individuals!

The crowd responds in unison, “Yes! We’re all individuals!”

Then Brian says, “You’re all different!”

The crowd shouts in unison, “Yes, we are all different!”

Then one man in the crowd says, “I’m not.”

Whereupon another man says, “Shhh!”

Once Brian loses his shoe and some of his followers see it as a sign, but can’t agree on what it means. One of them instructs the others to “Cast off the shoe. Follow the gourd!” – a reference to Brian’s seemingly charitable refusal to accept a price for a gourd without haggling over it, when the truth is that it was a cheap unwanted gift thrown in with a false beard that he had bought earlier.

The film also meant to satirize left wing political movements in Britain at the time, but satire is dangerous. Ask Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Ask Mark Twain, if you can find a way to have a conversation with him. About the most sacred and taboo subjects we are most in need of is satire. And what has this got to do with Palm Sunday, you may be asking about now? Everything. Palm Sunday was not a happy little parade into Jerusalem with cheering crowds. It has more in common with Monty Python than you might imagine. Why?

Because the scene that is remembered by all four gospel writers is based on a vivid and unforgettable piece of street theater. What we have turned into a benign little parade, was in fact one of the most politically explosive acts of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus lampoons the political powers through a carefully planned, mock “military procession” into Jerusalem.

And he invites his disciples to worship him, rather than serving any other “powers that be.” You may notice that most of the story is taken up with the careful preparations for the entry into Jerusalem. This has led scholars to believe that Jesus had made careful arrangements for this moment in advance. This will be his last visit to Jerusalem, and he knew it, and what he does to choreograph the moment is actually more important than the adoration of the crowd, which is what the church focuses on. It’s a “hurray Jesus” moment for most of us — one last chance to say we love you before you enter into this dark week of arrest, trial, and execution.

But if that's true, then why go to all the trouble to plan for and then perform this carefully orchestrated piece of street theater which is intentionally and comically subversive? He begins at the Mount of Olives, the traditional location from which people expected the final battle for Jerusalem's liberation would begin.

From this location, Jesus would begin his "final campaign." When he sends out for provisions, however, the situation quickly becomes as strange as the Life of Brian. He doesn't ask for weapons, which would come in really handy if one is about to launch a military campaign. He asks for a donkey instead--and in the very first version of this strange tale, in Mark's gospel, it is not even a full grown donkey, but a colt.

Now just try to imagine it, and remember the Life of Brian. If you are director, making a movie meant to mock our religious assumptions and our sacred cows, then put the messiah on a very small, mangy little animal, with his legs raised up so they don't drag on the ground, and then have this poor little donkey, straining under the weight a full-grown man, come wobbling into the ancient city of kings bearing a bearded man without any weapons to a cheering crowd of mostly poor, and some might say, hysterical people.

Just imagine how this scene would have looked to those who hoped to overthrow Rome by force. If you want to make it into a Life of Brian scene in your imagination, go ahead — it's won't be hard.

"Who's the chap on the donkey?"

"Brian of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

"On a donkey! Who's advising that man?"

"They say he planned it himself — trying to make some kind of statement I guess."

"Well it's working for him—loser!"

If one more person tells me that the gospel is not political I'm going to send them a Monty Python gift set for Christmas. Here is a Galilean peasant, squatting on a mangy, spindly little donkey throne, stumbling and baying it way into the city of kings, and it is all one grand lampoon, pure satire, mocking the idea that true power comes at the end of a sword. If they had been making a movie in those days they would have banned it, claiming it was blasphemy. An unacceptably irreverent insult to the Pax Romana.

Notice what the people do. They do everything a victorious military leader would expect. In actions that would have been considered treasonous by the empire, the crowd spreads branches and cloaks before Jesus as a symbol of

honor. They shout Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. “God saves.” “Long Live the King!”

As Jesus passes through the midst of them, his so-called “triumphal entry” is really a dangerous and to some deeply offensive piece of street theater. He is not on a throne, but as low to the ground as he can get, and on a lowly animal at that. He comes without wealth, but as one who humbly rejects domination. He comes to serve the poor, and the rich do not find it amusing — they never have.

Jesus meets Monty Python. Jesus in the role of jester, turning the idea of “ruling” on its head. It’s a carnival moment, as humorous as it is disorienting. Think of those New Orleans jazz band processions. If you have ever watched one, you know that those at the bottom of society are festively unmasking and challenging the dominant social order.

Or let’s bring it home in a more dangerous way, shall we? Do you remember in 2003, in Baghdad, when invading U.S. troops pulled down that statue of Saddam Hussein? The Sunday following that piece of street theater was Palm Sunday in the church. I doubt that many preachers made the connection, but that moment, made for the cameras to look as if a great crowd had gathered, when it was only a few, and some of them had been paid to look on and cheer wildly, is exactly the kind of military rule that Jesus is lampooning when he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey.

How ironic then that we should have tried to baptize prisoners against their will, referred to what we were doing as a crusade, and had Bible verses etched into the barrels of our guns. Is that a joke, because if it is it is a sick one, far more irreverent in my opinion than a movie like the Life of Brian. Sometimes it takes a jester, a comic, a satirist to tell us the bitter truth about ourselves.

“I think he said blessed are the cheese makers” is funny, but the truth runs much deeper. What Jesus actually said, of course, was “Blessed are the peacemakers,” which we all applaud but roundly reject, as an obvious failure. Martin Luther King Jr. tried to make peace between the races and they took him out. Bobby Kennedy gave his eulogy and then someone pays someone to take him out. Anwar Sadat tried to make peace with Israel and they took him out in broad daylight during another parade. Yitzhak Rabin tried to make peace with the Arab world and a religious fanatic took him out. Benazir Bhutto tried to lead Pakistan toward peace and she had to be blown to pieces. Blessed are the cheese makers would at least have a slice of truth to it if you will pardon the pun.

Plato said, “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” And since war is big business, how is anyone supposed to get the message across that it is also ultimately futile, that those who live by the sword really will die by the sword? So said a brooding reformer from a backwater town in the most troubled part of the world. After a little a street theater, he went straight into the temple and acted out another scene whose message was far less amusing to the powers that be. He said that religion should be no joke, and you have turned it into Wal Mart. And that, my friends, was the last straw. Rome might have just laughed off the so-called triumphal entry as the pathetic antics of a troop of Jewish actors, but an attack on the temple is an attack on the system by which people are oppressed and then allowed to worship a God that promises to make it all better someday—but not today. Religion as the opiate of the masses. Make a sacrifice or two but don’t mess with the man.

So let this Holy Week begin. We ought to call it the Week of Subversion. And we ought to warn people about how far down the road to Jerusalem they should walk. You may find yourself wanting to turn over some tables, and I can’t promise you that there will be anybody to bail you out.

In the end it’s hard to know which is worse--that the satirical film the Life of Brian was banned by people who admitted that they had not actually seen it. Or that Christianity is endlessly recommended by people who haven’t read or studied the Bible, and would have been among the first to have the real Jesus arrested. Things are often not what they appear to be.

Thank goodness. Let the most dangerous of all weeks begin . . .