

Trial and Triumph: I'm not left-handed

Mark 15:1-15

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Faith and politics; if you want a fight, these are great topics. And if you mix them you end up with nitroglycerin. So what is a Jesus follower to do when it comes to politics?

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I grew up in a culture, perhaps similar to many of you, where I came to believe at a young age that Christians were Conservative because it was inconceivable that Jesus would tolerate things like abortion or the erosion of the family. Obviously Jesus would be in favor of things like the freedom to worship.

And while I don't remember anyone saying it, the thought was that if Jesus were to show up today He would probably be more conservative than the most Conservative because He would really care about things the rest of us only kind of care about.

But then I went to university and bumped into Jesus-lovers who had a huge passion for the poor and oppressed. And the things that got their blood boiling were issues surrounding inequality of race and sex. And they cited tons of stories where Jesus cared for the marginalized. And their conviction was that if Jesus were to show up today He would be more liberal than the most Liberal because He would really care about the things the rest of us only kind of care about.

And with the realization that there were Jesus-followers on the left and the right I met others who thought it was best to avoid politics altogether. So what is a Jesus follower to do in a world like ours?

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If you've got a Bible open it to Mark 15. We are starting a series titled Trial and Triumph which is going to take us to Easter and the conclusion of Mark. So, would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 15:1-15]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Virtually everywhere in Mark Jesus talks with religious people about religious things. But here Jesus finds Himself talking with political people about political things. And so of every text in scripture this one speaks perhaps most directly to the question of the relationship between church and state.

And there are three questions in the text that drive this conversation. First, Pilate asks "Are you the king of the Jews?" Second, he asks "Aren't you going to answer?" And then he asks the crowd "What should we do with the king?"¹

¹ Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/jesus-and-politics-5486/> (Accessed March 5, 2022)

And the answers to these questions speak to the relationship between Jesus and politics and empower us to become agents of change. So let's look at the first question and Jesus' response. We get this in verse 2:

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus replied, "You have said it." (Mark 15:2)

Now just like we saw last week with the High Priest who questioned Jesus, Pilate here is not asking "Do you think You are God?" He doesn't care about that. He wants to know whether Jesus considers Himself to be a political figure. Does Jesus pose a threat to Rome?

And look at the answer Jesus gives – it's ambiguous. He says, "You said it" or "That's what you've said." It's a political answer. Have you seen one of these before?

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In 2017 the Honorable Candice Bergen asked the Prime Minister: "The question is not whether you are happy or satisfied, or feeling good about meeting the ethics commissioner. The question is 'has the Prime Minister met with the ethics commissioner, and if so how many times?'"

To which Mr. Trudeau replied "Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to work with the ethics commissioner..."

We are used to Politicians not answering questions. And in some ways that is how Jesus answers here. So Jesus is asked 'are you king of the Jews?' and Jesus, very intentionally, does not say "No. I'm a spiritual leader, not a political leader. I'm just trying to bring peace to people's hearts." Jesus doesn't say that.

But neither does Jesus say "Yes. I am a political leader. My main concern is bringing reform to society." Jesus doesn't say that.

Instead when He is asked whether He is a political leader His answer is ambiguous. And understanding this is essential to understanding Jesus. You see if you asked Buddha whether he was a political leader he would have replied "No. My teachings very intentionally are not designed to be political." But if you asked Mohammed whether he was a political leader he would have replied "Yes. I am creating a religious state." But with Jesus the answer is always yes and no. And understanding this is essential to understanding Jesus.

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So there is another passage in Mark where Jesus tackles a political question, and that is in Mark 12 where He is asked "Tell us, should we pay tax to Caesar or not?"

And Jesus says, "Whose image is on the coin?" And they say "Caesar's." And Jesus responds "Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and God what belongs to God." But the scandal here was that there wasn't just a picture on the coin, there were words too. And they said: "Tiberius Caesar Son of God." So Caesar was making a religious claim on the Jews.

But this was nothing new. Actually up to this moment in history every political leader made religious claims. Religion and state always worked together. In fact often the leader of the political world was the leader of the religious world – Pharaoh and Caesar were gods.

But when Jesus answers this question, He does something new – He makes a separation between church and state. He says “The coin bears Caesar’s image so give Caesar what belongs to him. But don’t give him everything. You don’t bear Caesar’s image; you bear God’s image. So your ultimate allegiance doesn’t belong to the state. Your ultimate allegiance belongs to God.

Jesus put a limit on what the state is allowed to ask from us. And this is a brand-new idea when Jesus speaks it. There was no human rights or freedom to protest in Jesus’ day. It was Jesus who created the space for this.

And it’s no coincidence then that throughout history Jesus-followers have often found themselves at the center of political movements where they have stood up against oppression. Think Martin Luther King Jr. Think Dietrich Bonhoeffer. There are lots of examples of Christians who have done this.

And think about it: Jesus followers are generally very compliant members of society. We pray for our leaders. We pay our taxes. We take care of our neighbours. We are good citizens. And so when Jesus-followers choose to embark on civil disobedience it’s a big deal. What we are saying is “Caesar, you can have our money but you can’t have our souls because ultimately we belong to God.”

So Jesus introduced the idea of putting limits on political power. But then Jesus stops there and doesn’t go any further. So when He gets asked “Are you king of the Jews?” Jesus doesn’t say “Yes.” And that’s because Jesus isn’t interested in being king of Rome and He doesn’t want His people to take power in His name in order to rule.

Now the church has tried. We’ve got a bad history of things like the Crusades where we killed people in the name of Jesus in an attempt to built His kingdom – do you see the problem? You can’t win people to Jesus with political power.

So what do Jesus-followers do with politics then? Do we avoid them altogether?

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Interestingly, in Jesus’ day there were religious people on both sides of this. There were some who ran away from politics altogether, and others who sought to use politics to build God’s kingdom. And Jesus didn’t commend either side.

So first there were a bunch of people called the Essenes who said “Just ignore the political world altogether. Politics is yucky and impure so don’t pay tax and don’t get involved.” And they lived off in the desert by themselves. And Jesus didn’t endorse this.

But Jesus also didn't endorse the zealots who were trying to gain political power in God's name. With His Yes and No answer Jesus is saying "Don't withdraw from society – you are the salt of the world. Your job is to preserve and influence the world for God." But at the same time Jesus is also saying "don't think that you can use the sword to build My kingdom. Don't put your hope for salvation in a political movement." "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes and no."

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So following Jesus is not about taking power in His name, but it does end up changing the world. How? And here is where we get to the second question:

Pilate asked [Jesus], "Aren't You going to answer them? What about all these charges they are bringing against You?" But Jesus said nothing, much to Pilate's surprise. (Mark 15:4-5)

Pilate asks "Jesus, aren't you going to defend Yourself and Your mission? Don't You know that revolutionaries need to fight? What's your plan?"

And Jesus' plan is to stay silent. He's not going to fight back. And Pilate is surprised, or other translations say "Amazed." It's a positive word. Pilate is impressed.

You see Jesus' enemies are worried that He is going to get off. Pilate says, verse 14, "He hasn't committed any crime." And you release people like this. So the people are frantically trying to use all their power to make sure Jesus doesn't get off.

But Jesus is totally the opposite of frantic. It's like when Wesley is fighting Inigo Montoya in the Princess Bride – best movie ever! He's losing but still smiling. Why? It's because "I know something you don't know. I'm not left-handed." The fight is aggressive, but Jesus is in control. And Pilate is impressed.

You see every other revolution is about gaining power and beating your enemies down. But Jesus is about laying His power down to love His enemies. And this blows Pilate away.

And it wasn't just Pilate. Jesus' act of laying His power down to love His enemies is objectively the most revolutionary act that has ever occurred because it transformed human history. And the evidence of this is the explosion of the early church.

I'll give you two examples: In Rome in the first century infanticide was common. As a result sociologists estimate that there were between 130 and 140 men from every 100 women in major cities.

What was happening was the Romans would expose, or throw their baby girls in the garbage because they were too expensive to raise and not worth as much as a son. But Christians said "No way! Women are worth just as much as men." And so they raised their own girls and there are accounts of Christians taking on the expense of raising Roman girls they would rescue from the dumps.

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A second crazy thing that happened was that there were several plagues that swept through Rome in the first two centuries of the church. So there was a huge one in 165AD where between a quarter and a third of the population of cities died. We've had it pretty good!

But even back then people understood how contagion worked. So there were mass exoduses from the cities. People were running to the hills to get away. And they would leave their sick relatives behind to die in the streets.

But Christians responded differently. They didn't leave their own sick behind and even helped the other sick they found along the way. They took on themselves the risk of getting sick in order to help the sick.

Now what happens if you are a Roman girl who grows up in a Christian home because some people saved your life at expense to themselves? Or what happens if you got the plague and were abandoned to die but ended up saved by Christians who risked their lives so you could live? Answer: you become a Christian.

And as a result it wasn't Constantine who used his power to convert the world to Christ in the third century, the world had already been converted to Christ when he came to power. And it was won by generations of normal Christians who had been laying their power down in the greatest and most effective revolution the world has ever known.

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As an aside if you are interested in this I've got two academic books to recommend to you.²

But here's the point: When Jesus was asked whether He was a political leader his answer was yes and no. He gave an ambiguous answer because yes, Christianity impacts society, but no, political victory is not the way to increase the kingdom of God.

And second, when asked whether He was going to defend Himself and His revolution His answer was to lay His power down and love the people who were opposing Him. And no other method of revolution has come close to accomplishing what Jesus did.

So how do we live in the power of Jesus and the power of the early church? How do we follow Christ in the politically charged world we live in today?

Here is where we get to the third question Pilate asks. And here we get a substitutionary answer. Look at verse 12 where Pilate addresses the crowd:

² Sunshine, Glenn, "Why you think the way you do: the story of Western worldviews from Rome to home." (Zondervan: Grand Rapids), 2009.

Stark, Rodney, "The Rise of Christianity: A sociologist reconsiders history" (Princeton Uni Press: Chichester), 1996.

Pilate asked them, "Then what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?" They shouted back, "Crucify Him!"...

So to pacify the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He... turned [Jesus] over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified. (Mark 15:12-15)

So Pilate has two convicted men standing before him, Barabbas and Jesus. One of them was a guilty insurrectionist and a murderer who had been tearing the system down, and the other had given Himself to feeding the hungry, healing the sick and raising the dead.

Everyone knew Barabbas was guilty. Everyone knew Jesus was innocent. And the cry of the crowd was to substitute one for the other. Put the innocent one where the guilty one deserves to go. Put the guilty one where the innocent one should be. Punish Jesus and set Barabbas free.

And this is what Jesus' death is all about. Jesus stands in your place and takes your guilt upon Himself. On the cross He takes your sin and pays your debt while at the same time offering you His righteousness.

And here's where we get the answer for the relationship between Jesus and politics. But it's not simply about Jesus' example – a good example is never enough. If you measure yourself against Mother Theresa or Mahatma Gandhi you aren't going to come out feeling good – they are way better than you.

But as the early Christians looked at Jesus substituting Himself for them something happened – they got transformed. And the result was they gave up their money to raise the marginalized and abandoned, and they gave up their safety to heal the sick. And they did this, not simply because they were inspired by Jesus' good example, but because His Spirit got inside them.

You see Jesus didn't substitute Himself for us because substitution is a good thing. He transferred our death and our sickness onto Himself and transferred His life and righteousness onto us in a substitutionary way because it was the only way to restore us to what He created us to be in the beginning. We were created to bear the image of God. So He had to replace the gods at the center of our hearts with Himself.

And this is what happened to the early Christians – they met Jesus and were filled with His Spirit. It happened then and it can happen now.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus wants us to transform our world – you are the light Jesus has set on this hill or in this valley. So it's not about voting right or left. And it doesn't won't happen by leaving society to live in the desert or taking power to make people live the right way. Instead, Jesus' revolution gains ground as Jesus-followers are transformed into people who look like Him. And this happens when we encounter the radical nature of the substitutionary God.

For some reason beyond our wildest imagination the God of the universe has seen fit to love you and me. And He shows His love by stepping down into our shoes and our situation to take our place. And so He puts on our rebellion and brokenness and pays our price. And in doing this He elevates us to become who He created us to be.

You and I were created to be stewards of God's presence on earth – Caesar has his image on the money, but we've got God's image on our souls. And because of this we are able to do what only Jesus can do – bring healing and restoration to the broken world we find ourselves in – and we do it by taking on the world's pain.

So friends, Jesus and politics is a tricky issue. It's always a matter of wresting out our convictions. It's rarely black and white. It's always costly. But we follow a Master who was at total peace even as His enemies sought His death. And so Pilate questioned: "Why won't You answer? Why won't You defend Yourself? Why are You smiling and at peace?" "It's because I know something you don't know."

Jesus knew His revolution was a different kind of revolution than anyone had seen before. It didn't use any of the weapons everyone else was using. It doesn't use power to beat people down. Instead it grows by laying power down. And Jesus is still building His kingdom the same way and He invites us to participate.

So if you are a Jesus-follower then open your eyes to see the poverty and sickness and marginalization all around us – it's everywhere. See it and step into it. Bear the weight of those who suffer in order to lift them up. And do this empowered by the reality that this is what Jesus did for you, and now His Spirit lives inside.