

Palm Sunday 2018

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Isa 50:4-7

Phil 2: 6-11

Mark 11:1-10; Mark 15:1-39

There is brave, and then there is stupid.

The itinerant preacher leaps on a donkey, and parades into town to—let’s be honest—moderate fanfare. Hosanna!, they yell, their clothes on the ground, with branches they had pruned from their gardens.

We know where this all leads of course, and probably so did he. Colonial powers do not usually take kindly to wayward local kings. *Are you the king of the Jews?*, asks the governor. Not if that requires imperial decree or public acclamation. All the same, he polls the electorate: *Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?* Not particularly, but let’s have another

look at that Barabbas, the one who opposed Roman power with violence, like a real king might. *What shall I do with the man whom you call the King of the Jews?*, he asks for clarification. And people get real nasty real quick. And the soldiers mock Jesus and strike him, as if to check if his blood would run blue. And he gives his back to them to strike, and hides not his face from disgrace and spitting. And then, no one believing there is a drop of royalty in him, they put it on the poster anyway—the king of the Jews—and kill him. The king is dead, said nobody; long live the king.

If Jesus intended to be a rebel king, he wasn't very good at it. Sure, he had the colt from Zechariah's prophecy and Solomon's own entry into Jerusalem; and he had the foliage from the 118th Psalm, which also provided the script for his entourage. But these gestures in the direction of royal symbolism threatened just about no one. In the Book of Acts, the rabbi Gamaliel likens Jesus to Judas of Galilee and Theudas, leaders of revolts decisively crushed by

Rome's iron gauntlet, but Jesus is precisely not like them in that he neither led nor incited any such revolt. The so-called triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem might have the appearance of the beginning of a failed coup, but lacks its substance: it is a sign of something else altogether. A kingship, to be sure, but not as we have seen before.

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There is brave, and then there is stupid. And *they* were brave: Judas and Theudas, even Barabbas. Whether we like it or not, our dominant cultural representations of courage are still militant: in our collective imagination, the soldier still represents courage, the battlefield is where the brave die. Exhibit A: Braveheart, the clue is in the name. Exhibits B through Z: Every other action-adventure film that we secretly don't hate as much as we claim. And to the very great extent that we are taught to think in

adversarial terms, courage is antagonistic: it requires an enemy.

This being the case, we run the risk of focusing on the wrong things in our traditional images of courage, and end up confusing it for machismo or, worse still, the glorification of aggression. Therefore, as brave as the men and women are, who fight and die to protect our freedoms, the battlefield is too distracting a place to be the *locus classicus* of courage. The possibility of questions about those we are fighting *against* averts our attentions from what we surely know already to be the better question, which is about those we are fighting *for*.

Christians go elsewhere to learn about courage, of course. We journey with Christ to Jerusalem, and turn to face him on the cross, where we discover that to him, the world is worth *suffering* for: that we are worth dying for, you and even me. *Courage is love bearing all things readily for the sake of the object*

beloved, St Augustine ends up saying, and it's obvious what and who he has in mind. For Christians, the paradigm of courage is not might: it's martyrdom.

So, then, was Jesus brave or was he stupid? *Courage is love bearing all things readily for the sake of the object beloved*, and we are the object of love. And we are certainly not worth the trouble—I mean just look at us and at the world we have made—and to that extent, then he was a fool, not for miscalculating the reception of the religious and political establishment, but for overestimating our value. But of course God respectfully disagrees with our self-assessment, without having to deny the facts of our depravity. We are worth the trouble because God loves us, and our opinion on the matter could not matter less. And if so, and if it is true that Christ died *for us*—that his passion is directed at our good—then what we have is courage itself, true and pure enough, God willing, to make us brave also.

Perhaps it is an obvious thing to say, that Christ is our model of bravery. But then again, maybe it isn't, if we can better now notice the courage around us, in those who endure in their grief and anxiety for the sake of those who depend on them; in those who in their vulnerability seek help and in their shame forgiveness, because in their own healing is also the healing of relationships; in those whose only available answer to the world for this moment is the silence that keeps them from giving up altogether.

Maybe it isn't too obvious to say, if in seeing courage in Christ's own silence before Pilate, we can now better see our own capacity for bravery, which is nothing other than the love that drives us and helps us to face our own fears. Maybe it is worth saying, if we can begin to realise that Christ, who loves us and is therefore our courage, has brought us here together—we who share his love, here at the precipice of the city and in the shadow of the cross—here, to be each others' courage, to face together what is to come.