

Two Essential Questions

A Palm Sunday Reflection

Text: Matthew 21: 1-11; 27:22

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T.S. Eliot once observed “every now and then life drops a question on your plate.”

That’s so true! Sometimes such questions come completely out of the blue and take us by surprise. On other occasions we might see them coming and have time to anticipate our response. But, in whatever guise or manner, they have the capacity to capture our attention, and ask us to consider something, and even take us to deep places.

Our two slices of scripture for today are of precisely this variety. Each one drops a question on our plates. Each emerges from the drama of all that happened during the first Holy Week. One was asked as Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the other happened five days later, just hours before he was nailed to the cross.

That’s the stage for our wondering, and here’s the first question. It came to pass as Jesus was making his way into Jerusalem and shouts of “hosanna!” languished from the crowds. There was joy and expectation in the air for sure, but not without an undertow of ambivalence, as well. Saint Matthew’s account tells us that “all of Jerusalem was in turmoil” when Jesus arrived. Other translations place words like “shaken” or “stirred” or even “unnerved” into the scene. But, by whatever descriptive term, the question was quickly spreading through the crowd: **Who is this?**

A few summers ago, Pam and I met up with some dear college friends to take in a highly acclaimed exhibit at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It had just come in from the Louvre in Paris and was titled *Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus*.¹ It presented sixty-four of Rembrandt’s paintings, etchings and drawings that portray Jesus.

As we slowly took them in, I was moved by how dynamic and emerging Rembrandt’s portrayals were. His perspective clearly changed over his years spent with pencil and brush, charcoal and canvas; but even more, I suspect it changed as his understanding of Jesus grew deeper. As his art developed, so did his capacity to move from an idealized conception to the more human dimensions in the person of Jesus. His later depictions were much closer to the ground, and Jesus appeared more like “well, more like us. In fact, I understand that for his later paintings, he sought out living models by wandering the largely Jewish neighborhood in Amsterdam, where he lived.

Who is this? The question fits within the stir of that first Palm Sunday, but also across the stretch of centuries. Most certainly we should wonder about it as Holy Week begins, but at other times, too. We should wonder because this is the unique claim that the Christian faith makes: that in Jesus we see the human face of God. More important, in him we can come to experience the living heart of God. As William Sloane Coffin once said: “Jesus is both a

mirror to our humanity, and a window to divinity, a window revealing as much of God as is given mortal eyes to see.²

Here's the second question. It's not delivered from the stir of a wondering crowd, rather, it came at the other end of that amazingly complex week as Pontius Pilate sorts through the biggest dilemma of his life. Jesus was on trial and Pilate had the immense power of decision in his hands. And so he mused as he mulled it all over, half to himself and half to the crowd: ***What shall I do with Jesus?***

On the same visit to the museum, we saw an oil painting of lesser renown depicting the very scene in which this question is asked. But here's the twist: the artist skillfully shifted the focus from a trial of the crimes of Jesus to the dilemma of Pilate and his power. Quite appropriately, it bears the title "The Trial of Pilate." The colors are sad and melancholic. Pilate's face reflects an enormous burden – as if history had placed this great responsibility upon him. The weight of being cross-pressured almost screams from the canvas. And all the while, the vulnerable face of Jesus awaits the verdict.

One of my delights in teaching confirmation class is sharing my passion about Jesus. I do this over three evenings. On the first of these, I put up a question on newsprint that asks: "How important is Jesus in my life?" Underneath, I put a linear spectrum from 1 to 10, 1 for not important at all and 10 for very important. Then I give the kids green stick-on dots and ask them to place themselves along the continuum. At first, there is reluctance, but before long, they are fully into it and the conversation that follows is spirited. How important is Jesus to me? What does he mean to me? Why does he matter? What does it mean for me to follow him?

Fast forward to the end of the third session: we go back to the question we started with. This time, however, they get red dots to place on the spectrum. I am always amazed that learning and listening to others about Jesus causes *all* of them to move a bit the right, even if only in small steps; that is, Jesus is more important now than when we first began.

The truth again: every now and then, life drops a question on your plate. And these two questions linger, almost as bookends, side by side, nearly asked with the same breath, and essential to Holy Week: "***Who is this?***" and "***What shall I do with Jesus?***"

Martin Luther once said: "On some matters we all must do our own speaking and believing." And on these two questions we all must do our own answering as well. May we wonder all this week long to the other side of Easter's amazing dawn! Amen.

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¹ Martin B. Copenhagen. "The Faces of Jesus" in *Christian Century*, Dec. 13, 2011, pp. 12-13.

² William Sloane Coffin. *Credo*. John Knox Press, 2004, p. 12.

