

23 A Teacher in Jerusalem

19: 28 – 48

That message given, for those who would come after him, Jesus went forward to Jerusalem. He was close to Bethphage and Bethany, villages on the outskirts of the city, when he sent two disciples ahead on a message: “In the village over there you will find a young colt tied up. It has not yet been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone challenges you just tell them “The master needs it.” It happened as Jesus had told them, and their explanation was accepted.¹ They brought the colt back to Jesus, threw their garments over its back and handed Jesus onto it. As he moved off, people began to spread their cloaks on the road before him.

A crowd had gathered. They were on the downward slopes of the Mount of Olives and would soon be in sight of the city. His disciples were shouting and cheering, praising God for the miracles they had seen.

Blessing on him who comes,
the King who rules in the Lord's name!
Peace in heaven
and glory in the highest heavens! (19: 38)

There were some Pharisees among the crowd, who protested: “Teacher, control your disciples.” He replied, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the very stones will start crying out.”

There is no repressing the joy and excitement of this day. The king has come at last! The one who will rule Jerusalem in the name of God is almost in sight of the city. His followers are with him, exultant that the time has come – God's time, Jesus' time, the time for Jerusalem. Now at last the angel's greeting is returned. Peace invoked on earth by the messenger of God is answered by the disciples' cry: Peace in heaven! The child declared Son of David and heir to David's kingdom approaches David's city, and the very earth is so alive with expectation that, if the disciples do not give it voice, the stones will shout.

¹ Clearly, Jesus had contacts in the Jerusalem area who were ready to co-operate with him.
Cf 22: 8 – 13

The Pharisees, appearing for the last time, try once again to bring things back under control, to impose the order they are used to dictating, but they cannot roll the revolution back – Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem.

He came in sight of the city, and wept. For he knew that the city would not respond as God had ment it to respond, that it was not redy for the time that had broken upon it. If only Jerusalem had understood the peace of God, the greeting that had been extended to her, but she had not, she did not. Another time was coming, when Jerusalem would be surrounded by enemies, besieged, overthrown, her population slautered, her fine buildings devastated. It had happened before, when Jerusalem would not listen to the prophets, and it would happen again, for Jerusalem simply did not see when the path of salvation was opened to her.

The King has come, with authority, but his city will not welcome him. He went into the temple and drove out the many traders who had set up stalls there. “The scriptures have declared,” he told them “ ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’ but you have made it a den of thieves!” From then on he made the temple his point of contact with the people and went there each day to talk with them, to teach them. But the leading priests, the lawyers and other men of influence in Jerusalem were determined to put an end to him, only they couldn’t, because he was too popular. The people were crowding around, eager to hear him.

We should stop for a moment to consider the upheaval described in these few sentences and the implications of Jesus’ bold action. He has come to Jerusalem at last, and on his approach to the city he has accepted his disciples’ acclamation. His kingship cannot be denied or suppressed, but he has come without demonstration of power, riding on a young colt with a disciple’s coat to cover it. A “real” king would be mounted on a fully mature charger.

There is no kingly palace for him to go to, for it is hundreds of years since an heir of David ruled as king in Jerusalem. Herod’s former palace, now in the hands of the Romans, was of no interest to him. He was not going to be king in the line of the Herods and he would not hold his authority by permission of Rome. In fact, he goes to the Temple, the same place he went to as “his Father’s house” when he was a boy, and there he gives a clear demonstration of authority, dealing with the abuses he finds there.

The temple is not the natural place for a king to set up in, so Jesus’ doing so is a very important act. At a practical, political level he was acknowledging that here was the true seat of government in Israel, that those who were set

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against him, the priesthood and the others who rested their authority on the Law, were, by contrast with Rome and Herod, the true leaders of Israel in God's sight, the ones whom Jesus must face with his claim.

In terms of recent tradition and expectations, he is, whether consciously or not, beginning to resolve a critical issue about the Messiah: How would the Messiah relate to the priesthood?² It was an issue that some of the Jews would have thought important. (We know, for instance, from the Dead Sea Scrolls that some had thought there would be two Messiahs: a royal and a priestly Messiah.) But only beginning to resolve. The relationship is not necessarily a predetermined one and would depend on the response of the priesthood to the Messiah, when the Messiah is presented to them, as will soon happen.

At the most profound and far-reaching level, we who read this gospel are being taken further into the revelation of Jesus' nature and role as the Son of God. "Son of God" was a title of the Messiah, which had sometimes been given to kings to represent the great authority that God had bestowed on them. But this Jesus now teaching in the Temple is the one who, as a child, had recognised it as his father's house, and he is here now as his Father's child by right. The Son of God teaches and engages in discussion in the temple.

It is most important that we recognise the implications of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. On the one hand, the triumphal procession and acclamation of the King, and the exercise of royal authority in the cleansing of the temple;³ on the other the discussion and the teaching, his continuing in the Temple as he had begun in Galilee and speaking to the people there as he had spoken to his followers and disciples on the journey to Jerusalem.

What it does not mean is what we have often thought it means: that the "royal" demonstrations are symbolic only, pointing to kingly power in another world, about which it is Jesus' business now, as it will later be his disciples', to teach the people. The royal claim is real, relating to political and civic authority in Israel. That it issues immediately in the humble task of teaching means the rejection of power as the way to control society, and is, as we shall see, the declaration of a radical revolution.

² A beginning of this issue can be seen in the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel. When he describes the ideal Israel that will arise after the exile, he carefully allots territory both to the "Prince" and to the priests and Levites.

³ Altho it was only the priests and Levites who could carry out the worship functions of the temple, its maintenance had been, from the time the first temple was built by Solomon, a royal responsibility. See I Kings chs 5 – 6; II Kings 22: 1 - 7

We cannot maintain the pretence that Jesus was embarked on a purely “spiritual”, religious mission. He had come to Jerusalem, the political heart of Israel, and was at once in conflict with those who, in the eyes of Israel and of God, were its leaders and rulers. He had laid claim to their seat of power, the temple, expelling the traders who were using it for a market, and making it his place for contact with the people, whom he was teaching with that same authority he had shown in Galilee, only now in his own Father’s house.

The trouble is that we are misled by our conviction that the temple must be, in our terms, a non-secular, religious establishment, just as we tend to think of the Galilean synagogue as a modern synagogue for religious worship and not as the town or village meeting that it was. We fail to notice how the flow of discussion and debate about matters of law, healing, work and leisure – and the payment of taxes, as we shall see – reveal a more civic and public activity than worship alone.

We forget that the communities of Galilee and Judea, and indeed of the whole of Jesus’ world and time, had not invented the modern idea of a purely secular society, where matters of God did not intrude on the political and administrative structures. Their community, their society, whether a village or a cosmopolitan town in Galilee, or the city of Jerusalem, or the nation of Israel, was a civic and political organisation of society given and guided by God. There was one framework within which to work out relationships, obligations, economy, government and right. The Law of God was the law of life and society, of administration, economics and politics.

And the Temple itself, which was a place of worship conducted by a separate caste of priests, was meticulously divided into courts, from the innermost and holiest, where only the selected priest may go at the time of worship, where Zechariah had been frightened by the angel, to the outermost, where even non-Israelites were permitted, so removed from the holy that the temple authorities considered it suitable for a bazaar. That very exclusion, by rankings of holiness, from the most sacred parts of the temple, meant that the larger outer courts, where all and sundry might gather, were pre-eminently the places of meeting and discussion, and even a wandering teacher from Galilee, though unpopular with the priests, was at liberty to speak and claim his audience. If we are tempted to feel superior to the temple authorities, after hearing the criticisms of the gospels, we have only to remember how far more open and democratic it was than a Christian church or cathedral, where the clergy maintain a tight control over who might be permitted to speak.

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To understand what is happening, we must keep in mind the intricate and sensitive political structure of Israel in Jesus' day. As a nation, the Israelites were divided, separated in territory by the loathed Samaritans. Judea and Galilee had been thus separated for hundreds of years, and even long before that they had belonged to different Israelite kingdoms. For centuries, both had been subject to powerful foreign empires, compelled to accept such territorial divisions and such kings to rule them as their imperial masters saw fit to impose.

However, for a time during the two centuries before Jesus there had been a glorious but fraught independence under the Maccabees and their successors, when priestly military families led Israel to victories over their nominal Hellenic rulers, and, benefitting from alliance with the rising power of Rome, established themselves as a force to be reckoned with and respected. Priest and prince rolled into one, new rulers then commanded the loyalty of Israel, and even now, when they had long since been subsumed and deposed by the Roman power, they were wealthy leaders of a social order that Rome permitted to continue, as long as it bowed to Rome.

Historically, socially, the great priestly families were a power in Jerusalem, and a power that sought to maintain itself, where possible, even against the local representatives of Rome.

There was another equally significant strand in the recent history of Israel: that of the Law. From the time that the Jews had been allowed to return from Babylon and rebuild Jerusalem as peaceful subjects of the vast Persian empire, the Law of Moses had grown to be the most formative expression of their nationhood. Not allowed to have kings of their own, they had found in their own traditions a rule of law that needed no king to impose it, since it was God's own Law. It was during the peaceful generations that followed the Persian conquest that the work of bringing together the laws, begun under the latter kings of Judah, was revived and carried forward to its awe-inspiring completion: the Law of Moses, traced back thru generations of generations to the very beginning of Israel, when their ancestors came out of Egypt; the Law of God, who had saved them from slavery and given them their land.

In this work, both before and after the exile, the temple priests had played a major role, and now it was an instrument of their authority which even the Romans could not dismantle. The Law confirmed them, the priests, as the one point of contact with God. They presented the sacrifices to God, whether in expiation of sin or confirmation of the bond between God and the

community. National civic and religious life, and a significant piece of its economy, revolved around them. If their privilege was rooted in the temple, confining their direct influence to Jerusalem, there was nonetheless a network of experts and virtuous people, only too willing to share their power by spreading it throughout the land, even to the furthest parts of Galilee. The lawyers, the scribes and the Pharisees, the wealthy and the skilled, legitimated their rank in society by appeal to the Law, and to Jerusalem. The priests, in turn, were happy to support those who spread throughout the country the right influences. It all came together in the Sanhedrin, the great council of Jerusalem which could speak for Israel, the High Priest presiding and priests, Pharisees and other leading citizens sharing in its decisions for all the people.

Such was the structure of society, with wealth, as always, harnessing the energy and paying for a voice in the counsels of the powerful. It was subject to a greater, and foreign, power, the military power of Rome, but was able to continue to its owners' advantage, as long as they showed they could keep order, and obeyed the demands of Rome. You could say there were three dimensions of authority and control over Israel. There was the Roman power, upheld by an army of occupation and claiming first right to everything material or strategic. Its authority was exercised in Judea by the governor, Pontius Pilate. Then there was the King, whose father had once ruled in Jerusalem, but who was now allowed only Galilee. The Jewish, he was subject to Rome, and a willing and enthusiastic collaborator, since they gave him permission to raise taxes. And finally, there was the native Israelite leadership, designated by their wealth and status in traditional Israelite society, dependent on the respect of their people, and all the more determined, therefore, to maintain that respect.

It was this third level that Jesus had challenged, showing that in his mind, and in God's, it was the first. He did not confront or resist the Romans, although his teaching was such that it would not support a power like theirs. And he was dismissive of Herod. But the native leadership of Israel, the wealthy, the experts in the Law, the men of virtue and the priests, he took seriously – seriously enough to challenge them, to see and to show them that the coming rule of God called on them to repent and to accept from God a wholly new way of being God's people.⁴

By raising the possibility that God does not endorse the virtue of those ruling classes but calls for a lifestyle repudiating their dependence on wealth,

⁴ It was, in some ways, as if Che Guevara had challenged not the Americans and the capitalist Europeans but the leaders of the indigenous people of Bolivia.

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Jesus had set the powers of Israel against him; and now, bringing his teaching to Jerusalem, into the courts of the Temple, where the life of Israel came and went and was jealously watched by its most powerful leaders, he was putting his very life in danger.

We all too easily misinterpret what is radical and startling in the gospel's account of Jesus' last few weeks. At his birth he was proclaimed by angels as the Savior and King, heir to King David. It was not a title he had invoked with his teaching and healing in Galilee, but rather, he had spoken of the coming kingdom of God, where God's will is carried out. There, only the near disciples had heard Peter declare that he was the Messiah, the anointed King to come from God, and it was only three of them who had seen him talking with Moses and Elijah and had heard him proclaimed the Son of God.

But then, as he was entering Jericho on the last stage of his journey to Jerusalem, the blind man had called on him as Son of David; and finally he had made his entry into Jerusalem with his disciples proclaiming him King and calling blessings on his reign. He would not stop them. Something was beginning so fundamental, so urgent, so bursting with energy, that the very stones would cry out if the disciples did not. He could not enter Jerusalem without public and royal acclamation.

And yet, what kind of a king is he claiming to be? He comes riding on a young colt with a coat or two covering it, by way of royal array. He brings no army, no coffers of gold to pay his agents, no authorisation from Rome or any other powerful backer. And, once in Jerusalem, he takes to teaching in the temple. Once again, we are faced with the anomaly of a king who spends his time teaching. He taut his disciples; he taut the people in Galilee; now he is teaching the people in Jerusalem. A king should be mustering his army or organising his administration or dealing by embassy with neighboring kings; and Jesus spends his time teaching in the temple.

But then again is it so different? So different that we have to imagine Jesus' kingdom doesn't exist in this world, and only in another? Teaching, or propaganda, as it sometimes becomes, is essential for any political system. That is why the media are so powerful in the 21st century world. Whether it's the newspapers or the television, reporters, columnists, editors, chat-show hosts, the news readers, the narrator in a documentary, sometimes even the characters in a soap opera: they select information, present views or act out a moral or political assumption. Between them, they mould the thinking and attitudes of the masses, and even those who mite not consider themselves "the masses". That is why Tony Blair, before his historic election

victory, before such a victory could be assured, had to pay his respects to Rupert Murdoch and secure the approval of the press.⁵

Communist governments used to put great store by propaganda, making sure that information and explanation were controlled by authorised party officials, and that the strictest supervision directed the flow of ideas and aspirations. In the world of free speech, speech is controlled by controlling what gets to be heard. Governments rely on money, and money in turn expects compliant behavior from governments. So money buys the media and runs the media, and the leaders of the capitalist world, the owners of capital, decide by control of the media and the government what ideas will be disseminated. They do not teach, but they pay the people who do, and so decide what will be widely taut.

Power and government have always realised that one of the first tasks in government, in maintaining power, is to teach the people. You can't do everything by force. In fact, you can't do very much by force. You have to make sure that the great majority of the people learn that your power is not only the strongest but the best power, that it is historically inevitable, that the gods, or God, or science, or economics underlie and support the power in which you rule; that there is no other rational or imaginable order of society than the one sustained by your power.

And so you teach them to understand and to speak of history, politics, morality and society in terms that make sense within the systems that have given rise to the present structures of government and the present wielders of power. You make sure that young people are taut in school to love their country and to take pride in its history – and that will be their country and its history as seen in your world view, the world view of those who underpin your power. And for the adults, as we saw before, it will mean that you maintain control of their leisure time and keep their attention fixed on those ideas that are the foundations of the existing system.

I don't mean that there is a cynical conspiracy. The powerful are nearly always convinced that they are right, and they feel that promoting their views and legitimating their position is spreading the truth. They believe that the systems in which they have risen to power, and the understanding of history that legitimizes their present order is clearly the rational and desirable one, which all must be taut and reminded to appreciate.

⁵ They held a conference on an island off Queensland, Australia.

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So we are taut (passing over a long history and many systems of government under all of which people were taut the appropriate world-view or philosophy or religion) to fashion our lives around the absolute value of money and its right to rule the world. We learn about the victory over communism and the humiliation of socialism, the essential correlation of unfettered “free enterprise” with all our other freedoms, the wisdom of the market and the rights of those who know how to make money. We are trained to receive our daily bulletins on the performance of the market and currency exchange rates as reliable indicators of national well-being; to look up to market analysts as the priests of the economy, and the politicians who can quote them as people of knowledge in the matters that shape our lives. We are taut that falling prices are good, but that rising house prices are very good, that skill and hard work are rewarded with good money, so that everyone earning a lot of money must be skilful and hard-working, that permanent bondage to a mortgage is the normal way of living ... And we are taut all this by the usual methods, by constant repetition, arresting presentation, persuasive argument, catchy slogans, neat resumes and the constant filtering, shaping and interpretation of incoming information according to the world-view under promotion. Teaching, the education and guidance of the public, is essential to power and to rule. It is one of the first concerns of every kind of government.

What is different about Jesus’ teaching is the absence of power. The usual way is for those who have come to power (I don’t mean only government, but all those who hold financial, economic or celebrity power) to buy or manipulate the systems of mass education, advertising, propaganda, news, entertainment and to arrange that these are shaped in the pattern of the world “as it is”, as they and rational people all see it, in a way that it’s good for people to think. The teaching follows in the train of power. In Jesus’ case the power is not there. Authority is, for people recognised the authority in his teaching as they had done in Galilee, but it was not the authority that came from power, which Jesus lacked – as the Jerusalem authorities would soon show.

We take the picture of Jesus teaching: the crowds in Galilee, the disciples who followed him on his journey, and the people of Jerusalem in the Temple, and we draw from it a completely wrong conclusion. We see this gentle, insistent, encouraging teaching, and we see that it has nothing to do with power and the building of a power base, which is the normal way of politics in the world, so we say to ourselves, “This is not about politics; clearly Jesus’ teaching and mission are about another world.” We fail to see that Jesus is refusing not politics and the organisation of civil, economic life, but the power which is our way of managing such matters.

I see that I was passing over the many examples of power and teaching in history, but two are worth looking at, by way of comparison and contrast. The communist revolutions of the 20th century were preceded by intensive and widespread teaching. Learning Marxist theory, its interpretation of history and the inevitability of the proletarian revolution was fundamental; from the intellectuals, discussing and disseminating ideas, to the workers learning and spreading the word, men and women were taught to recast their understanding of the economic world in line with communist theory, to see where that theory could be put into practice and to recognise the patterns of power that shaped or would soon shape society. Communist study went hand in hand with organisation, the building of cells, committees, networks, even a Communist International. And study went with preparation for a violent revolution.

The other example comes from fiction, but fiction which is true to life, and, I think, true to history. In Charles Dickens' classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Defarge, the wine merchant of Saint Antoine, is one of those who sees the coming revolution in France long before others. He and his wife prepare for it, passionately but patiently and with steadfast purpose over many years, nursing their hatreds and confident that the day will come for making an end to the aristocracy. An essential part of that preparation is the subtle education of the masses, friends and neighbors in their suburb of Paris, and, wherever their contacts reach, out into the country villages. Defarge makes sure that people see things, storing up memories that will shape attitudes for the future and fire their passion when the Day comes. He makes sure that his intimates see for themselves the pitiful wreck of a man who, luckier than most, has been released from the Bastille and is living secretly in a room near the wine shop. They have to learn what they are hating and what they will revenge.

Dickens knew people, especially people in the harsh ruff and tumble of poverty, and in *A Tale of Two Cities* he showed a knowledge of those who prepare for revolution. When Defarge makes friends with a country road-mender who comes to Paris with news of an execution in his village, he undertakes to teach him, again by showing him things. He shows him parts of Paris, and when the man expresses a desire to go to Versailles to catch sight of the nobility there, Defarge is happy to take him. He doesn't mind when the ignorant road-mender cheers the parading aristocracy like the rest of the crowd. Such passing excitement can soon be channelled in a new direction. It's important that the simple man should become familiar with the enemy by seeing them. There will be plenty of experience in Paris from which to teach him that they are the enemy.

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What is similar to the coming of the kingdom in Jesus' work is the role of teaching and learning. What is different is the motives and goals of those who teach. The communist movement, bent on seizing power by violence was careful to organise itself towards power, ("Power to the people!") and so quickly fell victim to the men of power. Stalin and Mao-Tse-Tung became dictators as powerful as ever the Czar or the Emperor had been. Defarge, guiding and shaping the poor of Paris for revenge on the powerful aristocracy, was making a mob whose power would be real enuf, but fit only for revenge and destruction, a power to end in the chaotic Reign of Terror. Jesus was teaching the disciples, and teaching the people generally to prepare them for the coming kingdom of God, in which neither he nor they would seek to exercise power at all, as the world recognises power. Jesus was teaching for a revolution more radical than any modern revolution has dared to be.

When Jesus brought his teaching into the Temple it was like teaching socialism on the White House lawn, or proclaiming democracy in Tiananmen Square – a supremely political act, but one that doesn't make you powerful friends. What had begun with the preaching of repentance – in policing and tax-taking as much as in any area of morality – was culminating in a challenge to the highest authorities at the very centre of national life. The coming kingdom of God, and the coming death of Jesus, are not the repudiation of politics or of revolution, but the renunciation of power as the way for politics or revolution.