

## What Makes You Safe? (Mark 11:1-11)

### Introduction



**Theme:** Uses Goya's famous painting of the shooting of Spanish prisoners who resisted Napoleon. ('The Third of May')

**Quote:** saying adopted from Andrew Lang Scottish poet "Beware of using safety as a drunk uses lamp posts... for support rather than illumination". (Original quote: "He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lamp posts...for support rather than illumination.")

### Safety

#### **Illustration:** Alarm

Fair to say that in our time in Port Melbourne living onsite we would regularly have various break-ins by folk who would drop in unannounced and souvenir things on the way out. Father Bob nicknamed them 'hunters and gatherers' – those broken by life specialising in scavenging among ecclesial residences. After a night-time break-in Council thought it best to have an alarm installed to at least provide some warning. As you can imagine after all the false alarms – either due to who knows what set it off and when we would accidentally set it off – everyone soon stopped taking notice of the alarm when it went off. The reality was the only thing it scared off was the Apokis family asleep – which happened way too often! On one occasion the alarm went off at about 7am – which to my mind indicated it was a false alarm. Who robs you at 7am? Anyway, I trudged down the stairs in my birthday suit and as I passed the lounge doorway to turn off the alarm, I noticed a 'hunter and gatherer' stuck in the window not sure if he was trying to get in or out. Anyway, my birthday suit gave him a suitable fright and he finally heaved himself out. We never saw him again. Fair to say the jury is out whether it was the alarm or my birthday suit that scared him from hunter and gathering in our home!

#### **Illustration:** Fear of home invasion by Africans

A number of our friends have recently expressed deep anxiety about home invasion by

Africans. I'm always taken aback - like the 19th century novels that stoked fear of white women being abducted into slavery by Africans!

The older we get the more vulnerable we feel and the more protection we want. May I venture to say there is an inverse relationship between the more we have and the more we are able to be triggered into fear and the more other-ing we generate. It just may be my projections, but the bigger the car the more entitled the driver – all part of the bigger the car the safer you feel. All part of a false economy of security that generates the human cliché of the pointless arms race – if we all have big cars then none has a big car so who is safer?

Does the need for safety just allows us to indulge in one of the other human clichés of raping and pillaging our environment! My point is not that we should stop crying wolf because there are wolves around. We know a work colleague whose family were victims of African home invasion! However, safety can be as an idol we worship as anything else!

### **Hebraic Tradition**

How is this issue of safety and protection resolved in the Hebraic Scriptures? The Psalms are full of this mixed metaphor claiming God as refuge and avenger. One moment God is my harbour and next God is the weapon of choice against my Enemies. God is my refuge is a prayer for more power and more empire of Psalm 118.

The Psalms so often have someone asking God for a big car not only to make them safe but to obliterate all those who make them feel unsafe - African home invaders. Whatever we make of the Hebraic holy war narratives with their ethnic cleansing and genocidal overtones - they are seriously uncomfortable reading. However, they are clear backdrop and therefore may have to inform theologically our understanding of the God of Jesus.

The mocking so called triumphal ride on a donkey is rooted in the Hebraic Scriptures which evokes, interprets and even mocks this holy war tradition. For the Hebraic Scriptures offer a repeated lesson that those who'd see themselves as instruments of holy war are doomed to be themselves, objects of holy war.

### **Triumphal Entry of Jesus**

So, to Jesus' so called triumphal entry we have an episode full of irony – so you think you need empire and military power to be safe and to prosper – really! Jesus is mocking those of us who rely on power for protection and beguiled by the notion that the more powerful we are, the safer and more prosperous we will be.

The bigger the car you drive, the safer you will be. Israel bemoaned it was no longer a big car so felt unsafe. The God of Jesus turns that upside down!

The wealthier you are the more prosperous you will be. Israel bemoaned it was no longer important so felt unprotected. The God of Jesus turns that upside down.

If we all have need of power to be safe and protected, then none of us is safe and protected. This is the point of Jesus driving in so called triumph on a donkey!

Jesus' so called triumphal entry challenged those present and us hearing now to ask who do we look to for true safety and protection.

Jesus is mocking having your own empire or even our own nuclear submarines!  
Jesus' so called triumphal entry challenged those present and us hearing now to ask from whom do we need to have safety and protection.  
Jesus is mocking those who would blame the Romans or African home invaders!  
The so called triumphal entry begs the Jewish question can you really rely on empire and holy war as your source of safety, protection and prosperity?  
The so called ride in triumph is more than mocking but is setting the way in preparation for his death in answer to this very Hebraic theological question, "Who can really keep you safe, protected and prosperous?"

### **Early Church**

The early church sought to subvert empire by describing the work of Jesus as a victory over the sin and devil in an upside manner. Not by overpowering them but by letting the good of his death on the cross outwit all that would seek to be powerful thus mocking their vain assertions of power.

During the first few centuries the Christian church was most suspicious if not critical of the use of military violence by empire. Yes, it had its usefulness for keeping order (Romans 14) but it wasn't the Christian way. On this basis you could be a soldier of the empire but it was ambivalent.

The Christian way was to love your enemy and turn the other cheek. The Christian contribution was not quite pacifist but certainly sought to subvert and critique the place and need for empire for security and meaning in this world. A pure form of pacifism has been only a minor tradition within the Christian Church, eg Quakers, Anabaptists, personal conscience, etc. This view would argue that at no point is the Christian able to utilise violence or a coercive means to protect or promote oneself –

- no calling the police if you are robbed,
- no being employed in any government position,
- turning the cheek in every circumstance and killing people with kindness,
- not locking your home or car or anything ever.

### **Christendom Church**

In the 4th century the Emperor Constantine allocated the Christian faith as the religion of choice for his empire funnily enough the role of empire violence changed! Slowly the primary way of describing the God of Jesus was empire and church together as administrators of God's goodness. In other words the rise of Christendom, empire violence became an acceptable way of promoting the Christian way. Christendom Church sought to affirm empire as a means of promoting the gospel. From this evolved, mainly from Augustine, the notion of a just war - for self-defence or a higher calling than self-interest.

Whatever you make of just war you pick your poison - be it at one end of the scale the Crusades or at the other end the Second World War as examples of just war. However, the fact is that empires have always relied on ethnic cleansing and genocidal solutions to sort out what bugs them. It is an occupational hazard and inclination of all empires - even Christendom. We may think it is an agreed taboo but those without ethnically cleansing or genocidal sin can cast the first stone of condemnation...

## **How Should We Then Live**

### **Illustration: So what is the Christian way - the way of love?**

In the days before 911, way back when cars locked manually with a key and not an electronic device, I covenanted not to lock my car. It was as much because I was trying to keep at bay a culture that heightened self-protection. It was a symbolic act of non-resistance or pacifism. Over the years I lost a few Melways (who remembers those!), some small change, some cassettes (who would believe they are making a comeback!) which was all annoying. I persisted mainly because keeping people out of your life to protect things struck me as a back to front priority for living the Christian life. Then technology of electronic automatic locking made my symbolic action redundant.

Of course, feeling safe and protected is not illegitimate. It is who you look to for safety. That is the theological point Jesus is making in riding in on a donkey. Is it the God of Jesus who at Easter offers us the way of the Cross, the way of love or is it other gods and idols that empire relies on?

Question: What Christian testimony do we employ to discern the difference? Quote: "There is a difference between the politics of protest contrasted with the politics of responsibility." (Bryden Black)

### **Illustration: Martin Luther's two kingdoms**

Martin Luther argues that as Christians we have dual identity – one drawn to this world and one looking forward to the world to come. Luther combined both the early pacifist inclination and the Christendom mode in regards military violence. By illustration if someone comes into your house to steal your stereo there is a question you need to ask yourself before you call the police. Why are they stealing it? If they are stealing it out of greed, malice, even because you have two and they have none, you should call the police. If they are stealing it because you are a Christian, you are not to call the police but should also give them your spare stereo. Quid pro quo with the most loved people in your life or even your own life.

Now Luther's neat division is by no means without its contradictions and difficulties. Is Iraq a legitimate war, a just war because the US was attacked as a Christian nation? Tricky? Let alone the current Zionist / Islamic mess in Gaza? Wow!

### **Conclusion**

No surprise I am much more inclined to the early church's reluctance to engage in military violence as I see that as a purer expression of the way of Jesus. This not so much pacifism but the non-violent or post-violent approach. The way of Jesus is non-violent or looks beyond the violent. Jesus riding on a donkey presents himself helpless in the face of power and violence. The so-called triumphant entry declares the God of Jesus starts with those who are least powerful, least protected, least valued.

Jesus is offering himself up as the one who will stand in the face of empire and to show that this Jesus offers himself up in a death on the cross.

Jesus' death on the cross is a mocking of the hubris of empire power. For God has set God 's self to be one of the least powerful, least protect, least valued.

Jesus' death on the Cross declares that if there is to be holy war or any war then God alone is able to be the victim so that others may not die and have life.

Jesus' cry on the cross "My God my God why have you forsaken me" can be restated as "My God my God why have you holy war-ed me?"

The story of Easter has God in Jesus as the only possible object of God's holy war. The repeated lesson of Yahweh in the Hebraic Scriptures is those who'd see themselves as agents of holy war are doomed themselves to be objects of holy war. The good news of Jesus is that there is no more holy war because God has taken its full brunt - we no longer need to rely on empire violence we can look beyond it. There is no need for empire violence to secure our place and future - Jesus has accomplished this in his death and resurrection.

The so-called triumphant entry finds Jesus taking the path to his death and so it is triumphant because the God of Jesus –

- is going to stand in the breach,
- is laying in the way of empire,
- is offering his life to God,
- is God offering God's life to all of us.

While we wait and work in faith for the world to come where there is no need for empire violence to secure our safety and well-being, Easter is our focus and hope. The challenge for us as Martin Luther testifies is how do we bear testimony to the God who has freed us from holy war, from violence, anxiety and fear in this world.

As we join as followers in the triumphant entry of Jesus what form should it take?

- in smaller cars? - in smaller prisons?
- in fewer door locks? - in fewer police?
- in less traffic lights? - in less guns?
- in the absence of safety warnings! - in an absence of armies?

Our faith is in the Jesus who rides a donkey - there rests our Easter hope!