

A Dreamer's Final Appeal

From the Lenten sermon series: The Dream

Text: Luke 19:41-42

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Jesus was a dreamer, and it is dreams that shape the world. Dreamers die, but dreams don't die. Jesus, in his experience of God, was convinced that God was full of mercy and compassion, that God's love would reach out and embrace all sorts and conditions of humankind. After his wrestling with his calling in the wilderness, filled with the Holy Spirit, he declared his dream in his home synagogue, and in his teaching told stories which revealed his understanding of God, a God Who received the prodigal home without recrimination, simply embracing, weeping, loving, and restoring. The dream was embodied in his life, in what he taught, and in how he lived, and it was brought to supreme expression as he was being crucified and he looked at those who tormented him and he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Such amazing love and grace, the epitome of the incarnation of the dream.

He made one final appeal. After ministering throughout Galilee, after those months of his itinerary, he knew finally he must set his face toward Jerusalem, and he did. And in our lesson this morning which anticipates Palm Sunday next week, the Gospel reading tells of his final appeal to Jerusalem, his entrance into that city, and his endeavor one last time to effect a radical change, a revolution that would change the nature of that society and all human relationships. His final appeal for the embodiment of his dream in the life of the people of Israel. He went to Jerusalem because that was the center of it all. He went to Jerusalem because there was the temple and the cult and the priesthood and the temple establishment; there was the center of established power, and it was there that he must address his final appeal.

My understanding of the nature of the Gospel and the ministry of Jesus has changed in recent years, and I am so keenly aware of that in the season of Lent when we are focused on his life and ministry. I have confessed to you before that I have never known what to do with the Sermon on the Mount, and if you would have a computer readout of all those texts that I've treated over all these years, you would find a great dearth of treatment of that central body of teaching of Jesus. That might seem a paradox, but it is true. And the dearth of treatment is

because I didn't know what to do with it. The Beatitudes - the counsel about going the extra mile, turning the other cheek, offering the second garment when one was requested, and of course, culminating in that call to love one's enemies and to pray for those who spitefully treat one.

I never really knew what to do with that, to be very honest with you, because on the one hand, it is so impractical. I've been hesitant to simply say what it so obviously says, because it is so obviously contrary to our whole manner of life. It cuts against the grain of every survival instinct that we have; it's contrary to human nature as we know it in ourselves and in society. The Sermon on the Mount which was the central body in the teaching of Jesus, which was embodying that dream which motivated his life, was simply too foreign to everything I knew about myself and about all of us. I understand now why a certain biblical interpreter, Charles Scofield, interpreted the whole biblical story as he did. Maybe some of you possess a Scofield Bible, which I associate with the Bible School movement and more Bible type churches. The Scofield Bible is still being printed, as a matter of fact. Charles Scofield divided the biblical story into seven dispensations. It was his contention that we really don't even have to deal with the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, in the more radical expression of that whole school of thought, you don't even use the Lord's Prayer because the contention was that Jesus came to offer the Kingdom to Israel and, when he was rejected, then the Kingdom was postponed until a future date, and this interim period, the period of the Church Age, is a period in which that ethic of the Kingdom is not applicable.

Well, I certainly don't think that Scofield has correctly interpreted the biblical story, but I do understand now what he was dealing with. He was facing the same problem that I have faced, and that is, what do you do with that ethic? Isn't it contrary to the way you live, to be honest? Don't we really know that if we follow Jesus literally as it would seem the text would call us to follow, don't we know we would come in last? Wouldn't we be gobbled up? Can you really live that way? Can you order a society that way? That was the problem he was trying to handle, I suppose. The way it's been handled in my background and training is not that radical claim that it simply doesn't apply now, but we have been as effective in blunting Jesus' teaching by making it refer to a kind of spiritual attitude and posture of the heart, so that you don't literally turn the other cheek. You don't literally go the extra mile, but that sort of spirit washes over us a bit and does temper our human behavior. We spiritualize it. We take the sharp edge off it by saying that it is a spiritual matter and Jesus' Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. The Kingdom of God refers to a spiritual kingdom, and haven't we honestly now been schizophrenic? Haven't we really spoken of a spiritual kingdom, those ideals, and then gone on to live our practical life, (could I even say our secular existence), in quite another fashion, if we would be honest?

Well, one of the things that has changed my ministry in recent years has been the large amount of research that has surfaced about the times of Jesus, the social

situation, the politics and the economics of the life of his time, and what is becoming evident is that Jesus was not talking about some spiritual kingdom in heaven by and by. Jesus was addressing very concretely the life and society of his day. When he said these things, he meant them. He was serious. He was talking about quite another way to live out one's human existence, and quite another way for a society to be in community together.

The cultural studies of that time will reveal that Jesus was taking the side of the poor and the disaffected and the alienated and the outcast over against an established official temple religion with a holiness code that managed the social arrangement of society, and which excluded large numbers of people. And what Jesus was interested in and concerned about was the concrete life of the people of his day, particularly the disenfranchised. Particularly the poor, the landless, the voiceless, and the powerless. Jesus was serious. Jesus was speaking about real people and real social relationships in the concrete history which he was living.

Jesus was reaching back to an old tradition of his people. There really are two traditions in the Hebrew scriptures. You may perhaps remember last October when we were going through that survey of the history of Israel. When we came to that section in I Samuel, Israel had entered into Canaan. They were now in and settling the Promised Land. They were under the leadership of judges. That Hebrew biblical book by that name tells the story of various of those judges. These judges were the spiritual leaders, but they had no continuing authority. They had authority when the spirit of God came upon them; they were raised up by God to meet a crisis and, once the crisis was met, they went back home to the farm. You remember Samuel, the greatest of those spiritual leaders, how some came to him and said, "Samuel, this just isn't going to do. You have stature and authority, but your sons are not following in your steps. We need a king; we need to be like other nations." And you remember Samuel said, "You are rejecting God." However, in those chapters in Samuel 8 and 9, you have two traditions side by side, and one says let them have a king, and the other says to have a king is to reject God. There were two positions, two traditions; they were in tension with one another, one wanting to maintain that relationship with God directly, and the other wanting a human figurehead on the throne.

And the one tradition, the Sinai tradition, coming from Moses, is the tradition that says let God be our king. Moses had led them out of Egypt. What was Egypt? Egypt was slavery. Egypt was empire. Egypt was a place of the royal throne, and that royal consciousness permeated Egypt and it oppressed people, and the Israelites were a part of that oppressed people. And God set them free. Moses led them out of bondage, into their own land. Here they were, free. Their own people. And then some came and said to Samuel, "We'd like a king." Samuel said, "You got such short memories? Don't you remember what kings do? Kings tax. Kings raise armies with your sons and daughters. Kings oppress. Are you crazy? Having been delivered from that, do you want now to go back to that?" And they said, "Yes," and they did.

The second tradition is called the Zion tradition. The great king of Israel was David. We really love David because we think about David as a shepherd boy. David was one clever individual - very charismatic, very strategically smart, acute, and the first thing David did was conquer Jerusalem, which up to that point had not been conquered because it was a natural fortress. He established Jerusalem as Mount Zion, and he built his house there and made it the center of this new monarchy. He wanted to build a temple, too, because every throne needs the legitimacy of the temple. But God said, "No. You've been a man of war." So what did he do? He gathered the building fund, so that when Solomon and his son came, they could build the temple. Now you have the royal house and the temple on Mount Zion, and you have all kinds of references in the Hebrew story and Israel's history in the Old Testament of the exultation of Mount Zion. Don't hear me as saying one of these traditions is biblical and the other isn't - they are both there. The Sinai tradition, the wilderness tradition, the Mosaic tradition where God is king- and the Zion tradition where the House of David is supreme, and where the house of David which is the reigning family occupying the royal house is in collaboration with the temple of Zion, temple of our God.

Now, you see, when Jesus came teaching, he talked about the Kingdom of God. So often in the church we have blunted what he was really saying because we have spoken of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven as a spiritual reign above us, not connected with our concrete reality. But as a matter of fact, when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, Jesus was speaking about the rule of God, the rule of God in my life and in your life and in our life together. The kingdom of God was not some far off future ideal. It was that which Jesus was calling his people to, here and now. And when he came to Jerusalem, he was serious. He was making one final appeal. Jesus did not go there without hope. He didn't come there without expectation. He came there because he knew that, until he had entered Jerusalem, to the very temple court itself, and offered this alternative, he would not have fulfilled his mission.

And so, he came, and in this final appeal, there were two dramatic acts. The one was simply the entrance itself on a donkey. He came on a donkey, not a war horse. It was a symbolic action. In Zechariah 9, you'll find that the man of peace comes riding on a donkey, and Jerusalem is rid of its war horses. Jesus came as a peace candidate. Don't we hate peace candidates? Aren't they pains in the neck? Peace candidates. Chairman of the Peace Party. Coming into the city, Jesus went right to the temple and, as we speak of it, he "cleansed" the temple. I'm believing that I've preached that one wrong all my life, too. I always thought that he came in to cleanse the temple because they were turning the Temple Court into a bazaar and overcharging the poor pilgrims. But, it wasn't that they were doing business in the temple court. Doing business in the temple court was a part of the whole temple structure. Those who were doing business in the temple court were simply serving the temple system, which was a holiness system. A holiness system determined who was in and who was out. Who was right and who was wrong. When you came to the temple, you had to pay your temple tax, but you

didn't pay your temple tax with a coin that had an image of Caesar on it. So you had to turn your temple tax, your coin with Caesar on it, into the treasurer there and get a holy coin so that, in turn, you could take the holy coin to pay your temple tax. And in the meantime, the temple skimmed a little off. You know, maybe only 5%. (I'm thinking about instituting that.) And if you were a pilgrim from far away you cannot bring a ritually pure animal in for sacrifice, and so, wonder of wonders, they're available. It was part of the system. It was perfectly legitimate. And those who were doing it were doing it in the service of the whole temple structure. It was not that they were doing business or having commerce.

What they were doing was they were reinforcing a system that said to the poor that had no coin at all, "You can't come in." What they were doing was reinforcing a system that said to the poor who had no bird, "You can't come in." What they were doing was keeping intact a system that said, "You're in; you're out." Jesus went to the very heart of the temple cult and he said, "Your separateness, your separating, your dividing, your choosing, your setting those outside, alienating, your determining who can and who cannot -this is wrong! It's contrary to what God would have. This temple is for all people." And he quoted from Isaiah 56:7. You read that chapter and in that chapter the prophet says as a mouthpiece for the Lord, "Do not say, you foreigner, that you are separated from my people. And you who are eunuchs who are supposed to be outside because of dysfunction, don't say you were outside. You come in, because my house will be for all people with joy." That's what Jesus was after. That's why he went to the temple. He went to the temple because it was the very center of a society that excluded the broken and the bruised and the bloodied, that excluded the poor and the hopeless and the powerless and the voiceless. He went to the very temple and he said to those who were in authority there, "You are collaborating with the occupying power in order to maintain the status quo of a society that is on its way to death. And if you maintain this posture, you will lead this people to disaster."

That's why when he came to the city he wept over it as he saw it in all of its splendor and beauty. He wept for it because he loved it. He wept for it because, in solidarity with all who had no access to it, he felt their pain. He wept for it because those who were the very guardians and the custodians of the city were so blind as to what was the consequence of their course of action. He was full of anguish, not anger. Anger only elicits anger in return. But genuine anguish has the possibility of permeating through the shell of a heart. Jesus wept. And what he appealed for was so radical that they had to kill him, because in the Gospel reading this morning, it says that the people were hanging on his words because, with the people, what he was after rang true. And every regime, whether of church or of state, fears when the people hear another drumbeat and find resonance in their soul.

But Jesus wasn't a victim. There was no self-pity, and there was no recrimination. Jesus was a dreamer, and he couldn't rest until he had brought his dream right to the heart and center of all of that that kept the dream from being realized. But

making his appeal and being crucified, he was born again onto eternal life. He was a free man. He lived by a grand dream. He lived with power, with dignity, with integrity. He lived with joy because, when one is captivated by a dream and lives the dream faithfully with passion, then come what may, one is free. Then one knows joy.

Next Sunday marks 50 years since the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I like what he says about his own learning what it means to be a Christian.

Later I discovered and am still discovering to this very moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. One must abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint or a converted sinner, a churchman, the priestly type so called, a righteous or an unrighteous person, a sick man or a healthy one. This is what I mean by worldliness. Taking life in one's stride with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith. That is metanoia, or repentance. And that is what makes one a Christian. A human being.

And then these words,

Can success make us arrogant? Or failure lead us astray when we participate in the sufferings of God by living in this world? No. No room for arrogance. No room for despair, but following the dream and being true carries its own reward, and that reward is freedom and it is joy.

I still don't know what to do with the Sermon on the Mount. Don't test me by cuffing me on the cheek. But what you are doing, here and there, in small ways, and what we're trying to do together, to be a community of compassion, that's at least a small step on the way, trying to live out the dream of the one whom we say we follow. Jesus. Really something. Really somebody. What a way to go!