

## Palm Sunday Anomaly

“(The crowd) proclaimed: ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.’” ...  
“Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting  
‘Crucify him, crucify him!’” Luke 19:38; 22:20--21

*A theatrical group of professional actors was hired to do a stage production of the passion. All the main characters – like Jesus, Pilate, and Peter — were to be played by members of the theatrical group. All the minor characters – like the people in the crowd scenes were to be played by local people. One of the minor characters picked to play in the crowd scenes was a girl named Ellen. She was excited about being chosen.*

*On the day of the play, the minor characters were called together. The director introduced them to a dozen men wearing red turbans. “These are your leaders,” he said. “When you get on stage, watch them carefully. Do everything they do! Shout everything they shout!” Then the director stressed that two scenes, especially, were important. The first was the opening Palm Sunday scene, where Jesus enters Jerusalem from the Mt. of Olives in triumph. The second was the Good Friday scene, where Jesus was condemned to death.*

*Young Ellen could hardly wait for the Palm Sunday scene to begin. Finally, the curtain went up. The men in red turbans shouted, “Hosanna, Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” The crowd shouted, “Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Ellen got so caught up in the shouting that she forgot about the audience and the play. It was really Palm Sunday and she was praising Jesus enthusiastically.*

*Before Ellen realized it, the scene was over. The men in the red turbans led the crowd off the stage. There Ellen waited excitedly for the second important scene: the condemnation on Good Friday. Just before the curtain went up, the men in the red turbans reminded the crowd: “Watch us carefully! Do everything we do! Shout everything we shout!”*

*The curtain rose, revealing a balcony. On it stood two people: Pilate in a gold robe and Jesus in a purple robe. Pilate said to the crowd, “Which man do you want me to set free: Jesus or Barabbas?” The men in red turbans shouted, “Barabbas!” The crowd shouted, “Barabbas!” When the shouting died down, Pilate said to the crowd, “What, then, should I do with Jesus?”*

*The men in the red turbans shouted, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Once again, Ellen got so caught up in the shouting that she forgot the audience and the play. Suddenly she found herself screaming. “No! No! Don’t crucify him! Please don’t!”*

*Years later Ellen recalled her passion play experience. She said that it taught her something she never really thought about before. The people who shouted “Hosanna!” on Palm Sunday were the same people who shouted “Crucify him!” on Good Friday. And the reason they did was because the men in the red turbans told them to do it.*

Unfortunately, today, as in the past, there are people who behave like actors and actresses in the crowd scenes of that passion play. They perform on cue, mindlessly following their leaders, even ethically challenged or downright evil ones. These generally well-intentioned and often religiously affiliated folks, unwilling or unable to question authority, docilely do as they’re told, even if it means ignoring the voice of conscience within them.

Who wear red turbans today? A few examples come to mind. Fundamentalist clerics who preach intolerance and hatred, sending impressionable people to kill themselves and others in the name of God; media talk show hosts who spout doctrinaire views while vilifying those who disagree with them; bloggers with tunnel vision who incite others to

violence; political extremists whose misguided convictions lead them to commit crimes and engage in otherwise despicable behavior.

When we blindly follow negative leaders, we fail to act with integrity. A person of integrity knows the difference between right and wrong and diligently pursues doing right, no matter the obstacles or consequences. Jesus, for example, personified a person of integrity. He understood well what every good leader knows – what’s popular isn’t necessarily right, and what’s right isn’t necessarily popular. Unswayed by what was popular or easy, Jesus lived a life of absolute fidelity to his Father’s will, up to and including accepting death on the cross.

Integrity, like a muscle, grows more resilient and powerful with exercise. Lack of exercise, on the other hand, causes integrity to wither and eventually die. Every time we avoid doing right, we increase our disposition to do wrong. The voice of conscience within gradually diminishes in volume until we don’t hear anymore.

Here’s what Vatican Council II in 1965 said about conscience: *“Deep within our conscience we find a law which we have not laid upon ourselves, but which we must obey. Its voice, ever calling us to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in our heart at the right moment...For we have in our hearts a law inscribed by God...Our conscience is our most secret core and our sanctuary. There we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths.”*

People of integrity oppose evil in our world. In the words of the psalmist, they walk blamelessly and live their lives *doing* justice. For example, they speak out against intolerance and mistreatment of unpopular minorities like atheists, gays, and illegal

**immigrants. They condemn the taking of innocent human life whenever and wherever it happens. They strive to eliminate suffering in all its aspects.**

**When we fail to do what's right, when we fail to live the gospel of love, Jesus suffers and dies all over again. In short, Christians are called to stand apart from the crowd; to challenge the authority of demagogues and false prophets, even at the expense of great sacrifice, because, as today, Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on Good Friday.**

**And, most obviously, our faith requires us not only to do what's *right*; but to avoid doing what's *wrong*. Why? For one reason, because of the power of our own example to lead others astray, especially children and impressionable adults. You and I, you see, metaphorically speaking, may be wearing... red turbans.**

**Anthony J. Sciolino**

**Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 22:14-22:56.**

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