

- ✘ We find ourselves today in the exact center of Mark's Gospel; the turning point, when he leaves his ministry in Galilee and sets off to Jerusalem.
  - ✓ And it's here that the nature and the consequences of his mission change, as well:
    - 8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.
  - ✓ The immediate reaction of Peter was to lecture Jesus and inform him, in no uncertain terms, that this did not make sense.
- ✘ This has been the question since the earliest days of Christianity:
  - ✓ "How was it that Jesus—who went about doing good and proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God—how did it happen that he came to a shameful death at the hands of his enemies?"
  - ✓ I heard one answer to this in a little Christmas public service announcement on 106.5 FM, Faith Radio, in which a little girl is asked what she is thankful for at Christmas time. Her answer: "I'm thankful that Jesus was born so that he could die on the cross and take away my sins so that I can get into heaven."
    - My reaction to that:
      - If Jesus had no other purpose in life than to die, then God could have saved himself a lot of trouble by having him slain at the Herod's Massacre of the Innocents
      - To say that Jesus came into the world only so he could die discounts his life and his teachings
        - ◆ And his life and his teachings were caught in the times and the political situation in which he lived.
          - ✦ And Jesus was much aware of those political realities.
            - And as his statement today reveals, he understood that what he said and did and lived would have consequences.
    - ✓ So what was it about the actions of Jesus that made it necessary for the hierarchy and the Empire to kill Jesus?
      - Here are the Top Three reasons Jesus was put to death on the cross (which are all I can give in the 10 minutes allotted to this homily):

- × (#3) In the eyes of the authorities, Jesus ran with a bad crowd and evil influences.
  - ✓ We do know from the Gospels that when Jesus was about 33 years old, he decided to join the movement of John the Baptizer.
  - ✓ John rejected the corruption of the Temple and its priests, and he called for a return to a society that was ruled by the Jewish Law, the Torah.
    - John warned that the nation's neglect of the Torah was bound to result in God's sending a divinely appointed commander to eject the foreign occupiers and install a true reign of God.
    - John gives the Messiah all the trappings of a ruthless conqueror: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary... All those who resisted would be burned like chaff, with unquenchable fire.
    - After John's death and as news of Jesus' miraculous powers began to spread throughout Galilee, Herod Antipas thought "This must be John the Baptist rising from the dead." (Mk 6:14). Antipas had just gotten rid of one agitator when another one popped up in his place.
- × (#2) Jesus could draw a crowd:
  - ✓ We read in the Gospels (e.g. Mt 4:25): "great crowds followed him, from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and from beyond the Jordan."
  - ✓ Where did these crowds come from? Didn't they have work to do?
    - No; not really. The reason for that comes from the actions of Herod the Great
    - After his ascent to the throne in 37 BCE, Herod the Great built a number of fortresses, such as Masada, around his borders; in Jerusalem he built a palace, a theater, a hippodrome and an amphitheater for gladiatorial fights. (which as the Jewish historian Josephus tells us, greatly offended the Jews) and as a conciliatory gesture for doing that, Herod greatly expanded the temple.
    - So how was Herod going to pay for all this?
      - Palestine was a country with no copper or gold or timber or export-quality agriculture. The only source of wealth that Herod had was in the highly fertile agricultural region of Galilee.
      - Herod had a problem with developing this resource. Most of Galilee's fields were cultivated by subsistence farmers...who, as the name suggests, grew just enough for their families to subsist upon.
      - Herod had a better idea (for him). He consolidated Galilee's farms into large estates that could produce high-yield, single-purpose crops, which he could export to the nearby cities and to overseas markets.
        - ◆ That was the reason he built the port at nearby Caesarea, as the shipping center for the surplus produce.

- To make all this work, Herod imposed heavy taxes that drove the farmers into debt, after which he legally confiscated the farmlands, consolidated the individual farms into large estates overseen by a professional steward.
  - By the time Jesus began his ministry—60 years later—, many of the Galilean families had already been uprooted and deprived of the ancestral tribal lands, and this produced the multitudes of poor, undernourished people who followed Jesus wherever he went.
  - And from this we have Jesus telling the parable about the nobleman, who said: “I tell you, everyone who already has will be given more, but the one who only has little, even that will be taken from him...” (Lk19: 26)
- ✓ Now, large crowds are always a big worry to empires:
- We saw the power of massive crowds of unarmed civilians just recently
    - In the Arab Spring, from 2010 – 2012 that forced rulers from power in Tunisia, Egypt (twice), Libya, Yemen (twice) and which rattled the rulers in Bahrain, Syria, Kuwait, Morocco, Israel, and Sudan, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Palestine.
    - In the uprising in Kiev, which deposed the tyrannical Yanukovych regime in Ukraine
  - In our own United States, the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment protects freedom of assembly (with certain restrictions during Republican and Democratic Conventions), because the founders of this country recognized that inciting a crowd of people has always been one of the first steps in making social change.
- ✘ (#1). Jesus threatened to Kill the Cash Cow.
- ✓ When he entered Jerusalem, the crowds that followed Jesus, combined with the thousands of pilgrims already in town for the Passover, made the authorities very nervous.
  - ✓ And the authorities that were most nervous were the chief priests, and Sanhedrin and the Herodians and all those who depended on Rome to stay in power.
  - ✓ Who are these people? And what power did they have to protect?
    - When King Herod the Great (him, again) came to power he retained for himself the ancient right of appointing the high priest.
      - (Best and Brightest candidate?) His first selection was his brother in law, Aristobulus III, from the priestly family in Babylonia, whose loyalty to the King was without question
      - After Herod’s death, the Romans continued the practice of appointing politically reliable high priests.

- ◆ One such priestly family, the house of Annas, produced no fewer than seven high priests, including Annas himself and Joseph ben Caiaphas, who sat in judgment of Jesus.
- At the same time, the Sadducees, the quasi-aristocratic elite of the priestly class were in charge of the collection of the Temple tax, which received tithes from Jewish communities all over the Empire.
  - The Romans protected and facilitated this collection process, and the Temple treasury grew exponentially.
- ✓ Although there were skirmishes between Jesus and the religious authorities, the conflict reached its climax in the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the money-changers from the temple.
  - This was another symptom of the corruption which surrounded the temple authorities. There was a great profit to be made by the religious authorities in exchanging Roman coinage (which was not allowed in the Temple) for shekels.
    - And as Jesus knocked over the money changers' tables, he said, "Is it not written [recalling Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11], My House shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers.
    - And it was particularly this reference to Jeremiah that was most threatening to the religious authorities, because this passage was part of a lengthy attack by Jeremiah on the corrupt elite. Let's hear what Jeremiah writes about what God thinks about all this: [the Message]
 

"Don't for a moment believe the lies being spoken here: "This is God's Temple, God's Temple; God's Temple! Total nonsense!

...Do you think you can exploit the street people and orphans and widows, and take advantage of innocent people on this very site...and then march into this temple, set apart for my worship, and say, "We're safe!"

...Thinking that this place itself gives you a license to go on with all this outrageous sacrilege?

A cave full of criminals! Do you think you can turn this Temple, set apart for my worship, in to something like that?

Well, think again. I've got eyes in my head. I can see what's going on. (Jer 7: 9-10)
  - That was it, for the religious authorities: "When the chief priests and the scribes heard about it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. (Mk 11:18)
    - ◆ They needed to get rid of Jesus not only because he questioned their legitimacy, but also because they feared that any disturbance of the peace would lead to Roman intervention (Pilate was very practiced at this), and

this would destroy the symbiotic and profitable relationship between the Jewish hierarchy and Roman power.

- ✘ And this is the root of all evil that Jesus had spoken about: it's the struggle for the rights of people vs. the love of money.
  - ✓ I've seen this in many places; in the military, in embassies; in the Senate and Congress, in the Saudi, British and Dutch royalty, in the church, in my life.
    - The love of money and privilege spreads through the whole fabric of society, and it gives rise to exploitation of the weak, child labor, poverty, slums, disease, crime, and war.
  - ✓ It's no wonder that the authorities struck back at Jesus. What Jesus did was violate the cardinal rule of all those who hold power: "Thou shall not mess with the cash cow."
- ✘ Jesus told his disciples on the Road to Jerusalem that he would be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.
  - It's not that he wanted this to happen, but he knew that it would be a natural consequence of messing with those who wanted to keep their privileges intact.
- ✘ So Lent is a good time to reflect upon the life and times of Jesus as Reformer.
  - ✓ Not as "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" who simply offers himself like a sheep, as a sacrifice
  - ✓ But rather, as Jesus the Prophet, as the reformer of evil conditions.
    - And by remembering Jesus as one who does daring actions, we can enlarge our understanding of him and better understand the indispensable place of the reformer in the Christian church and in life.
    - May we be bold enough to do likewise.