

NOT OF THIS WORLD

Empires wax and wane. Kings and presidents come and go. Rulers rise and fall. Some disappear due to the normal cycles of life, while others, as we were reminded this week when Eliot Spitzer resigned, fall prey to hubris, pride or a mistaken sense of immunity from the dictates of law. But in the end, no government, no political ruler, lasts. They all, in time, pass away. This has never been more eloquently captured than in Percy Shelley's poem "Ozymandias."

I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

In 1787, the Scottish lawyer and author Alexander Tyler wrote: "The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been two hundred years. Since his time a whole host of empires, including the British Empire and the Soviet Union, have collapsed in far less time than that.

Ultimately, all earthly governments hold their power in and through force. Citizens are kept in line by laws that circumscribe their behaviors, laws which are enforced by various governmental authorities who are armed with weapons or punishments. International disputes are often settled by war. But in time, all use of force reaches a breaking point. Governments are overthrown. Rulers deposed. It is a rather grim reality, but it is just that, a reality. Empires wax and wane. Kings and presidents come and go. Rulers rise and fall.

But as Jesus entered Jerusalem on that first Palm, Sunday, so many centuries ago, that is precisely what many of his fellow country men and women longed for. They longed for a ruler, a savior, a Messiah, who would come along and lead them in a revolt. They were held down and held back by the vast Roman Empire, and they wanted freedom!

But they misunderstood. They didn't get Jesus at all! Yes, he rode into Jerusalem like conquering rulers had done in the past. But he came in on a donkey. As Stanley Hauerwas writes: "It is a triumphal entry, but one that parodies the entry of kings and their armies . . . Victors in battle do not ride into their capital cities riding on [donkeys], but rather they ride on fearsome horses." (*Matthew*, 181)

In fact, Jesus had absolutely no interest in being a political ruler. He had no interest in leading a revolt or in becoming a king—at least not in the way they, and we, understand that word.

Later in the week, as he stands before the Roman governor, charged with treason and sedition, Pilate asks him point blank about his aspirations.

"Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus questions his reason for asking, and then responds, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over" (*John* 18:33b, 36a)

Now take note, when he says his kingdom is not of this world, he doesn't mean he's going to reign in some far-off heaven, rather he means he doesn't operate by the standards normally followed by rulers and governments. If I did rule in the usual fashion, he is saying, I would use force and violence to protect my power. But the rule I follow is God's rule of love—self-giving love. I didn't come to create a kingdom on earth, and I didn't come to use the world's methods of kingdom building. I came to build a kingdom of the heart.

Karen Armstrong, in her biography of the Buddha, spends a fair amount of time discussing the formation and development of the Buddhist monastic community known as the *Sangha*. At the end of that discussion she makes a very important observation. "The *Sangha*," she

writes, “Is one of the oldest surviving voluntary institutions on earth The great empires, manned by vast armies of soldiers, have all crumbled, but the community of [Buddhist monks] has lasted some 2,500 years The message seems to be that it is not by protecting and defending yourself that you survive, *but by giving yourself away.*” (159, emphasis mine)

It is a lesson we just don’t seem to learn. Not in Buddha’s time, not in Jesus’ time, not in our time, as recent events in Tibet seem to illustrate. But still it is offered up. When Jesus enters Jerusalem he is prepared, if necessary, to give himself away. Make no mistake. He doesn’t want to die, that’s clear in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane when, wrestling with the reality he is about to be arrested and executed, he asks God to take away the cup that lies before him. But if giving up his own life is what it will take for people to get the point, then that is what he will do.

Throughout his life he has said it over and over again. The only way to survive, the only way to truly live, is to give yourself away—to live a life of service. That is how God’s kingdom operates. And that kingdom of love is the only one that will truly last.

“Jesus,” wrote the martyred German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer “is no draftsman of political blueprints.” (*A Testament of Freedom*, 318) Or, as a contemporary bumper sticker puts it: “God is not a Republican. Or a Democrat.” Jesus didn’t want to rule an empire on the first Palm Sunday, nor does he want to on this one. But he does want his followers, you and me, to take God’s rule of love, and apply it to all areas of our lives, and, since we don’t live in monasteries tucked away in the mountains, that includes politics.

As citizens of a democracy we have an obligation to participate in the process of government. We have an obligation to vote, to share our views with governmental officials, and, for some of us, even to hold public office. But as Christians, we also have an obligation to carry our moral convictions into our all our involvements; moral convictions that include respecting the right of others to hold different values. Moral convictions that include recognizing the growth that comes out of diversity of opinion, and out of the open give and take of public conversation. We should speak out in the public square

But when we do speak out in the public square, we are wise to heed Jim Wallis’ advice: “The best public contribution of religion,” he writes, “is precisely not to be ideologically predictable or a loyal partisan. To always raise the moral issues of human rights, for example, will challenge both left- and right-wing governments that put power above principles” (*God’s Politics*, 5) Some good Christian folks are Republicans, some are Democrats, some are independents. The issue is not which party you support, but rather how you bring your faith to bear on your actions and beliefs. It is not my job to promote any particular candidate or party. It is not my job to tell you how to vote. But it is my job to

remind you that each one of us is called to take our faith into all of life—and that includes politics.

Some, I'm sure, would rather I didn't mention politics at all. Some would rather I avoided the topic altogether. Especially on Palm Sunday. But the truth is, the text itself pushes us to explore the issue. The Palm Sunday text, which is all about the relationship between politics and religion, really leaves me little choice. For we live in a world filled with politics.

Empires wax and wane. Kings and presidents come and go. Rulers rise and fall. That is the way of the world. But the way of Jesus is not of this world. It is a way that transcends all governments, a way that crosses all party lines. The question on this Palm Sunday, as on one so long ago, is still the same. How then will we live in the world? As Christians, the answer is quite clear. We are to live as Jesus did. Loving God by loving others. Serving them no matter where life might take us. At home, at school, at work, or in the public square.

Empires wax and wane—but the love of God endures forever.

Amen

John H. Danner