

THE MASQUE OF THE MESSIAH

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Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

“The Red Death had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous.” So begins one of Edgar Allan Poe’s most chilling tales, *The Masque of the Red Death*. First published in 1842, the story evokes an earlier time during one of Europe’s many bouts with the plague. Poe introduces us to the Prince Prospero, a wealthy ruler who was not content to suffer the red death with commoners. Thus he took a thousand hale and light-hearted friends into the deep seclusion of a magnificent abbey that he himself had built like a fortress. Behind high walls and locked iron gates, the Prince and his company could indulge in a seemingly endless supply of rich foods and fine wines. They could make merry with music and dancing. Meanwhile the outside world and especially the red death were barred from their presence. No contagion could reach them.

At one point the Prince Prospero decreed that all his sequestered guests should enjoy a lavish masked ball. Everyone was to be in costume and wear a mask. The more grotesque the mask, all the better to flout the red death. So the party raged on in a warren of densely packed rooms. Strangely, when the clock struck midnight, the revelers began noticing a tall, gaunt figure who definitely was not present at the beginning of the masquerade. Who was this unwelcome gatecrasher, and how had he gained entrance? How did he penetrate so far in as to pass within a yard of Prospero? The intruder’s mask resembled a stiffened corpse, and the sight repulsed the Prince. Nevertheless, Prospero was a bold and robust man who quickly regained his wits. He gave chase and drew a dagger to slay the trespasser. But the weapon fell from the Prince Prospero’s hand, and he crashed to the floor, dead. You see, the invader was none other than the Red Death himself. “He had come like a thief in the night,” writes Poe. “And one by one dropped the revelers. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.” So ends Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*, a frightening tale for our time.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, the walled city was a warren of densely packed streets and homes. The time of year was Passover, the great festival when the Jewish people celebrated God’s rescue of them from slavery in Egypt. So the city would be bursting with tens if not hundreds of thousands of additional pilgrims who had come to sacrifice at the Temple and eat the Passover meal. The Gospels tell us that a large crowd welcomed Jesus at the gate of the city. They cut palm branches from the trees and took the cloaks off their backs and spread them along the road. They lined the streets and shouted “Hosanna.” We can imagine that they hung from their windows and cried out, almost the way people here in the New York City cheer and yell from their balconies and terraces at 7 pm every day in praise of healthcare workers on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Two thousand years ago the Palm Sunday crowd saw Jesus in somewhat the same way: as a healthcare worker. The country was infected with the Roman occupiers, and the corrupt Jewish leaders who collaborated with them. The Temple needed to be cleansed and the Romans ousted. Who would do it? The word spoken through the prophets foretold that God’s promised Messiah would purify the people and eradicate the disease from the land. What would the Messiah be like? What mask would he wear? No one knew for sure, but most assumed that the Messiah would be

a great king or a mighty warrior or a high priest. The cheering throngs weren't particular. They simply hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, who had come in the name of the Lord to restore the kingdom to Israel.

Was everyone in the city happy to see Jesus arrive? No, certainly not everyone. The Prince Prosperos of Jerusalem had a vested interest in maintaining a fortress atmosphere. With soldiers perched atop high walls, their goal was to reduce the spread of a different contagion. You see, they feared that anyone like Jesus, anyone rumored to be the Messiah, anyone with messianic pretensions would bring a virus into the city – a revolutionary fever that all the commoners would catch. Jerusalem was always on the brink of red hot rebellion. The red death had long devastated the country. Roman officials like Pontius Pilate, charged to keep the peace, had a way of dealing with rebels who challenged Caesar's authority. It was called crucifixion. In fact, certain roads approaching Jerusalem were lined with crosses bearing the corpses of crucified revolutionaries to serve as a warning to anyone so inclined.

Who else wasn't happy to see Jesus? Certain Jewish officials and Temple authorities also had a vested interest in keeping Jesus out of their abbey. Herod Antipas, who was the Tetrarch of Galilee, and Caiaphas the High Priest of the Temple had forged an unholy alliance with the Roman occupiers that would keep them in their positions of prosperity so long as they helped maintain order. Thus when John the Baptist stepped out of line, Herod had him killed. When Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple, Caiaphas devised the scheme to have him charged as an enemy of Rome. So it was that the people in power – Romans and Jews alike – looked on Jesus as the Prince Prospero looked on the Red Death. It was essential to keep him out, yet within a few days he would penetrate to the chambers of the movers and shakers, even brushing within a yard of Herod, Caiaphas, Pilate and others who would sit in judgment. "Who is this?" asked some in the crowd at the gates on the first Palm Sunday. They must have wondered as the week progressed, "How did he get as far into the city as he did?"

What do you think about Jesus? It seems to me that everyone in Jerusalem was partially right and partially wrong in answering the question, "Who is this?" Those who wanted to keep Jesus out were right that he was indeed bringing a contagion into the city. But they were wrong about the nature of what it was and how it would spread. They thought it would involve a hot-headed call to arms, resulting in a violent, futile uprising, ending in the inevitable slaughter of thousands when Roman troops arrived to smash any rebellion. Instead, what Jesus brought was something that C.S. Lewis would call "good infection." Lewis writes:

Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons and daughters of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came to this world and became human in order to spread to others the kind of life He has — by what I call "good infection."¹

Normally, we catch the good infection and the Spirit arises in us through the Eucharist. Sequestered as we are, the sharing of Holy Communion is obviously something we can't do. But lots of internet chatter – and something I've wondered about myself – asks, why not? What is to prevent us from celebrating the Eucharist here at this table, simultaneously blessing bread and wine on your tables through the livestream? Well, the easy answer is simply to say that I am neither a bishop nor a theologian. I am but a lowly country parson who does not make the rules. The more complicated answer has to do with the secret sauce of sacramentality. The essential ingredient in blessing the bread and wine is the physicality of touch and being in each other's real

presence, not just virtual presence. When God became one of us in Jesus, God held nothing back, and took on all the risks of being one with our real presence, including viruses, insults, spitting, even crucifixion. So in the strict, narrow sacramental sense, perhaps we can think about it this way: we are safe from each other through remote worshipping. But if we can't catch a bad physical infection through cyberspace, then we can't catch the good infection either – at least not through the elements of bread and wine.

The matter is settled, then: angels are forbidden to dance on the head of a pin. Am I suggesting that Jesus can't reach us in our exile? No, I am suggesting nothing of the sort. Jesus found his way into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, and he finds his way into our Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday. You see, Jerusalem is us in our isolation. Jerusalem is your inner depths and mine. Matthew takes great pains to explain how Jesus, the Word made flesh, procured a donkey to ride into the city. *Thy humble beast pursues his road with palms and scattered garments strowed.* If the Word of God could ride a donkey into Jerusalem, then the Word of God can also reach us through the livestream. Thus we shout Hosanna today, and join our voices with those who welcomed Jesus two thousand years ago. But they too were partially right and partially wrong about Jesus. They were right in proclaiming him the Messiah, the one promised of old who would come in the name of the Lord. But they were wrong about the type of mask he would wear. He would be neither a king nor a mighty warrior. Rather, he emptied himself, and took on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. Jesus patterned his mission and ministry after the suffering servant in Isaiah (50:4-9). The Messiah would penetrate to the city's inner depths wearing the mask of a servant. Jesus finds a way into our seclusion to bring healing, to bring the perfect love that casts out fear.

Sometime ago I read a remarkable story about Helen Keller. She was born in 1880, healthy in every way until age 19-months, when a sudden, devastating illness – perhaps scarlet fever or viral meningitis – left her completely blind and deaf. Even though isolated in a world without sound or sight, the child was able to make some progress in recognizing family members, but she had no language, nor any concept of it. It was not until Helen turned 7 when her family was able to find Anne Sullivan, the woman who would connect with the girl. By spelling out words on the palm of Helen's hand, Sullivan was able to teach her that every object had a name. Once Helen grasped the concept she became a voracious learner, and Sullivan would be her lifelong guide and mentor.

At one point Sullivan determined that Helen should learn about God and Christianity. She turned to Phillips Brooks, the Rector of Trinity Church, Boston, and the greatest preacher of his day. With Sullivan acting as interpreter, the two began a conversation. Brooks told the young girl about God, and it is said that she replied, “Mr. Brooks, I always knew he was there, but until now I didn’t know his name.” When Brooks told her about Jesus, how God had come to us in him, and how Jesus died and rose again, Helen replied, “I knew there had to be somebody like that.”²

What deeply moved Phillips Brooks was that God had already reached into the child’s exile and made his presence known. Jesus was with her in Spirit and in Truth all the time. She was not alone, and neither are we in our exile. *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.*

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¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Collier Books, p. 137.

² The story is told in varying forms in numerous books and articles about Helen Keller’s faith.