

## A Revolutionary without a Gun: A Reflection on the Passion

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This anachronistic title serves as a symbol to underline a historical reality: Jesus was executed as a revolutionary – without a gun or at least without a sword. This is why he was crucified alongside two revolutionaries, offered as a swap for the guerrilla leader Barabbas, and why the charge on the cross read: “King of the Jews”. It was an extension of the mockery which the first tellers of the story imagined must have followed the charge on which he was convicted before the Roman prefect, Pilate, and may well have done. “King of the Jews” mean Messiah, in Greek Christos, Christ, a word that normally designated someone who like David would be a liberator of his people, crushing the armies of the oppressors. Tagged with this title Jesus would have been in serious trouble with the Romans, for whom the last thing they wanted was more instability on the eastern flank of their great empire.

But Jesus was Messiah without a sword, a revolutionary without a gun. That is why his followers were not also rounded up and executed. The Roman totalitarian regime could not afford the niceties of fine distinctions beyond that. Jesus instigated unrest. He had to go. Crucifixion was a deterrent. The horrific scenes of bodies hanging on crosses along the highway, sometimes up to a hundred at a time, were a brutalising warning against dissent. The Romans killed Jesus, not the Jews, though the early accounts of what was probably only a Jewish hearing before the temple authorities may preserve their concern that it was in the interests of protecting the people from increased Roman interference and curtailment of their freedom to worship that they collude in having such populist movements kept quiet. An obvious way to do that was to remove their leader.

What was revolutionary about Jesus? We lack sufficient evidence to know if he ever agreed to be designated Messiah despite Christians doing so and having always to backtrack and explain that they were using the title not in its usual sense. The only allusion to it in Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry, our earliest, has Jesus silencing the theme, rejecting Peter’s understanding of what it meant, and preferring the enigmatic title, Son of Man, instead. Those accounts which have made the Jewish hearing into a Sanhedrin trial sound too much like the court appearances of Christians decades later when they were charged with blasphemy for their claims about Jesus.

What was revolutionary about Jesus? He came with a vision, shared with many of his fellow Jews of the time, that God would intervene to restore justice and freedom to the people. His was a particularly generous image, likening the future to a great feast, a rare highlight in first century life, where all were invited to have a place, a vision which in highly stylised form lives on in the Christian celebration of Holy Communion. His version, which contrasted with the many rather more exclusive versions of the hope among his contemporaries, was more than a hope. It was an agenda and informed what he did and had his followers do, namely build communities of caring and inclusion in the present. His engaging socially with tax farmers and their promiscuous associates earned him disfavour with the pious. His defence, that God is like a father who cares for all his children, not just the good ones, failed to persuade some but won others. Provocatively he had a Samaritan set the example of what loving God and neighbour meant in practice.

He was also known as a faith healer and exorcist. Proliferation of wonder stories inevitably surrounded such figures and their followers employed them as propaganda for their cause. Christians were no different in the early decades despite the protests from the wise, including a number of our New Testament authors. But under the maze of imagination and exaggeration there will indeed have been some truth to the claims. People explained illness via demonology and, however we understand it, Jesus had some success in turning people back to sanity and healing. Illness and disability meant poverty then, so such acts were an integral part of the good news for the poor which he announced.

His revolutionary vision inspired his revolutionary challenge to his contemporaries to engage now in its realisation, a kind of micro-realisation of the future macro-realisation which was the centre of his hope. However he was understood or misunderstood, his message won a following, apparently not strong in Galilee, but strong enough to count when he took his vision to the seat of power in the region, Jerusalem. While the city, let alone the world, did not stand still, when his small band entered the city, we may assume the authorities' spies had him on their list. The symbolic act of overturning tables in the temple would have been over so quickly and sufficiently out of sight not to have activated the temple police, but the intelligence was that here was another Galilean spruiking change in the name of God and so a potential cause of volatility amid the Passover festival crowds which thronged Jerusalem in their tens of not hundreds of thousands. Whether at the end he allowed the tag, Messiah, or some of his followers insisted on it, it stuck and has survived. He was a Messiah not like a Messiah, a revolutionary without a gun.

In reality his revolution was to espouse and live out an experience and theology of God as love, so much so that later generations would see him not illegitimately as like an extension of deity itself. Here was an event which unleashed a revolution of its own. It did even more than sacrifices in setting people back on track with God. It was hailed as a victory over life's arch enemies, clothed in hate or demonic images. It was recognised as what faith had always foreseen in the psalms or prophetic wisdom, now realised in stark reality.

His execution has become something much more than an event which we can tentatively reconstruct from the mists and tangles of history. What was woven within the fabric of quaint beliefs in demons, a flat earth, an expectation of history's impending finale, becomes an image which we revisit in the hope, at best that we might see God, see others, see ourselves in a new way. For we know the journey of love in ourselves and in our society. We know its liberation and hope. We also know how violence can crush it. We know how in much more subtle ways we silence it with the respectable crucifixions of the soul which settles for apathy or indifference, which will not march for justice, which will not speak up for those without a voice, which will not engage in love, let alone in being loved.

So 2000 years later we face the cross as though looking in a mirror and see ourselves – sometimes identified with the broken crucified one, sometimes identified with those who drove the nails. It brings us to our own judgement day, but with hope for rehabilitation, forgiveness and renewal. That then becomes for us the hope of resurrection, of beginning again. But before that can happen we need to stay with the experience, with the reality, with the mirror and dare to look.