

MUTINY ON THE PRAIRIES

Mark 8:31-38

“The Trial of the Chicago 7”

Lent B: Sunday 2

On January 6 many, maybe most, of us were mesmerized, hypnotized, traumatized, appalled, or otherwise engaged with what we saw unfolding on our news channels—the storming of the Capital in Washington, DC. We have, in the past, seen news reports of these kinds of events happening in countries we deem less stable, sometimes, in our prejudiced ways, less informed and less advanced than our Western democracies. We cheered when it happened in Eastern Bloc countries in the late 1980s. But never before had we seen something like this in a Western ally, our next door neighbor, a country thinking itself as the shining star for democracy.

Aside from anything else we saw, what we saw was a clash of cultures, a clash of politics, a clash of views of history and reality, a clash of kingdoms. Two significantly different visions and definitions of what it means to be the United States of America and an American. It was one self-styled political and national entity—what in the days before democracy we would have called a kingdom—seeking to overthrow another. Two nations within one and one would have to give.

This is largely foreign to us in Canada because of how our country came to be in 1867 and developed from there. If we take history seriously, it should not surprise us that this happened in the US. The United States became a country as the result of the clash of two kingdoms when the American colonists turned Boston harbor into the world’s largest tea pot and, from there, also “stormed the capitol,” as they launched the American War of Independence against King George III and the Kingdom of Britain. A hundred years later, coming even closer to what we saw on January 6 two nations—kingdoms without kings, if you will—at war within a

nation in the American Civil War. Again, two very different visions of reality, of history, of values, of definitions of “all men equal,” and of what a nation should look like and act like.

It is, I believe, important that we see the movie, “The Trial of the Chicago 7” and the historical events it portrays, in this context. The movie focuses on the trial of seven men alleged to be leaders in the protests and riots surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Today the media would call them insurrectionists. This was at the height of the Vietnam War controversy in the US. The protests and riots were the gathering of masses of anti-War protestors. It was the clash of two cultures, two visions of reality, two sets of values, two different sets of commitments as to what it meant to be American in the 1960s. Not only do the story and movie highlight this clash of nations around a war half-way around the world but also a clash of values when it comes to people of colour. In addition, it seemed to me as I watched the trial, it is also about a judiciary quite prepared to take sides in a trial where two nations clash. One nation—America as it was—or another—the anti-War version, non-racist America—was going to win and the other was going to lose.

As I said, this clash of nations within one nation is more foreign to Canadians even as it has been a history-long experience south of the 49th. However, this clash of nations is not restricted in the larger trajectory of history to America from the 1770s to today. It goes back, way back in history. As we fly our time machine backwards, I, as someone who thinks of himself as post-Mennonite, am tempted to stop in 16th century Europe. It is here where the Anabaptists—later known as Mennonites—initiated that same kind of clash of nations, of kingdoms, as they took a stand for freedoms we take for granted today—freedom of religion, freedom to gather, freedom of democracy and the right to believe what a person chooses to believe, religious and political.

However, we have time only to wave at these European folks as we fly by and land in the 1st century CE on a much traveled path well north of the Sea of Galilee in an area known today as the Golan Heights. On the path we see a young rabbi and his students on their way to the 1st century city of Caesarea Philippi, a city named after Caesar, the Roman Emperor, and Philip, the governor of the Roman province of which it was the capital. Here we get to listen in to the rabbi—we know him as Jesus—teaching those following him. As part of his longer lecture, we hear Jesus saying that he will be rejected, made to suffer and be put to death. Then, after a discussion with Peter, Jesus says: “If you wish to come after me, you must deny your very self, take up your cross and follow in my footsteps.”¹

“Take up your cross.” What does that mean? Hang it on a gold chain around our necks? Place it inside a church logo? Place it on a Swiss flag or the Union Jack? On a church wall or on the top of a steeple? On the front of a Crusader shield? Have you ever “taken up your cross”? If so, how did you do so?

Growing up I would over hear my parents and their friends visit and, referencing a person or family dealing with tragedy or severe illness say: “They have a heavy cross to carry.” The problem with that interpretation is that Jesus seems to suggest that taking or not taking up the cross is a choice. We can choose not to take it up. When my uncle and aunt lost two of their sons in a tractor roll-over a month before Christmas back in 1965, that was an absolutely awful tragedy. And therefore, most definitely it was not a voluntary “taking up of the cross.” Jesus must have meant something else.

Many would suggest it is a call to total commitment. Given what Jesus says after this statement, there is significant merit to this interpretation. He goes on to talk about saving our lives and losing our lives. He talks about what is most important in our lives. So, it surely seems

¹ Mark 8:34. *The Inclusive Bible*.

to reference a level of commitment and encourages a pretty careful choosing of priorities. Does it say anything about what priority to choose?

Some would suggest that taking up our cross is a reference to martyrdom. We should be so committed to our Christian faith that we are ready to die for it rather than recant it or give up on it if we are threatened by those who do not share our faith. And though I want to take nothing away from those who have suffered and died for their Christian faith, that use of the phrase makes Jesus statement primarily a religious statement and Jesus came to do away with religion (all religion, not specifically Jewish), not call for a deeper commitment to religion. So then what did Jesus mean?

Come with me as we briefly check out two other texts and/or stories that are part of Mark's Good News Story Collection and, together with ours today, really give shape and content to the entire Collection.

First, Mark 1:1. Makes sense, I would say, to start at the beginning. Mark begins with: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."² Sure, we say. What's the big deal? Mark lays out for us what the stories that follow will be about. Maybe, but I think it says something much more significant. All around the Roman Empire were buildings with the following inscription, for all who passed by and/or lived in the neighbourhood to see: "The beginning of the good news of Caesar Augustus, the son of god." "The beginning of the good news of Caesar Augustus, the son of god." What did Mark say: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." That my friends, I am convinced was/is no coincidence. Mark was very intentionally and boldly declaring Jesus to be a challenger to the rule of the Roman Caesar. Mark was saying: "Here is a new king, a new emperor, whose reign and rule and kingdom is in direct competition with that of Caesar."

² NRSV.

Just fifteen verses later, Mark summarizes all of Jesus' preaching with the following: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."³ The kingdom of God is arriving. This is the same kingdom we pray about every Sunday when we say: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The rule of God is breaking in. There are now two kingdoms, two nations within the one Roman Empire and, as Mark's version of the Good News of Jesus is going to show us, these two nations will clash just like the America/Britain clash in the 1770's, the North/South clash in the American civil war, the anti-war/pro-war clash in 1960s America and the Trump followers/Congress clash on January 6. With one dramatic difference. God's Kingdom will not use violence.

That is precisely the point Jesus is making when talking to his disciples. There was only one crime for which Rome crucified people. And when they did so, the condemned person had to carry the cross beam of the cross from the court room to the place of execution. The one crime for which you would be crucified, the one crime you had been found guilty of if you were seen carrying that horrible cross beam was treason. When Jesus told his disciples about his imminent suffering and death and said his followers, if true to Jesus and God's kingdom, would have to carry their cross, the point he was making was to that to follow Jesus and to be loyal to God's kingdom is to commit treason to whatever nation you find yourself living in. That is, your first loyalty is to a different Kingdom And that can spell trouble.

This is what happened to Jesus. And like in the case of the Chicago 7, judge and jury had their minds made up before the trial started. Empires do not take kindly to being challenged. Jesus was crucified because he was seen by the Romans as a traitor, an insurrectionist. In Mark's version of the sentencing of Jesus, Pilate gives the people a choice between two

³ Mark 1:15. NRSV.

insurrectionists—Jesus or Barabbas. They choose Barabbas for freedom and Jesus for death. Those who threaten a nation, an empire, a government must be killed.

The cross is not about religious martyrdom. The cross is not about uninvited suffering. The cross is not about religion. The cross is not about punching your ticket to heaven. The cross is about loyalty to God's Kingdom which means treason to any and all kingdoms, nations, governments, ways of thinking in society, and Facebook chatter that currently exist or have ever existed. The values of God's kingdom, Jesus says, will sooner or later put us at odds with the society and nation in which you live and the circles in which we drink coffee, play bridge, and discuss politics. Fortunately in our 21st century world, many of our nation's values have been influenced by Kingdom values and that is good. At the same time, many policies and attitudes in our world are not.

Total and complete loyalty to the values of the Kingdom, even if means being charged with treason—either literally or metaphorically by our friends and neighbours—is to shape all our actions and thinking. How we vote in the ballot box. How we build relationships with Indigenous people. Joining the railroad blockades when First Nation land is being stolen by oil and mining companies often in collusion with governments, provincial or federal. How we respond to immigrants and immigration levels. How we welcome refugees, legal and illegal, even when it makes us less secure. Since we have already signed up for cross bearing, safety and security is not high on the list of Kingdom values. How we support social welfare programs and the creation of a living wage. What we do about creation care, even when it jeopardizes wealth. Wealth is pretty low on the list of Kingdom values. What we think about foreign aid.

Those are but a few examples of areas of life that are to be impacted by our commitment to Kingdom values, to following Jesus, values that may well put us at odds with the values of our

larger society and the policies of our government. The Good News of Jesus is that society and nation are to be radically transformed into a world of justice, peace, non-violence, and care for those on the margins. God invites us, calls us, to partner with God to make that happen. That may put us at odds with our society. That is taking up our cross.

God's Kingdom come; God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.