

Politics and the Kingdom of Heaven, 1

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Easter 3: April 6, 2008, 6:00 p.m.

The movie *Barabbas* raised some interesting questions about Jesus, the Christian faith, and politics. I have been itching to address some of these issues, first with the dramatic portrayal of Barabbas during our series of Lenten dramas on Sunday, February 24th], and then with the controversy that emerged with Barack Obama and his Pastor, Jeremiah Wright. That controversy lifted up the issue of Liberation Theology, which was just beginning to cause a stir when I entered the seminary back in the early 1970s. Gustavo Gutierrez, Jose Miguez Bonino, Juan Luis Segundo: these are just a few of the names that help to remind us that Liberation Theology was originally a Latin American movement in the life of the church, which noticed that there was something radically wrong with a Christianity found to be standing with the ruling elites. This was clearly the case in Central and South America, but evident as well in Africa and parts of Asia. It seemed to follow a pattern where Western colonial powers were established and entrenched, and was more obviously a pattern where a Roman Catholic presence was pronounced and pervasive - hence, its emergence in Latin America.

Liberation Theology charged that Christianity had wandered far afield from its roots, for Jesus was hardly found mingling with ruling elites, whether we're talking about Jewish leaders or Roman rulers. Yet, by the time our 20th century arrived, the Church had become so intertwined with Western political powers that it rarely even called colonial rule into question, and often throughout the course of history created forms of Christianity that favored the rich and powerful over the downtrodden and the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez went back to the Bible, to the history of Israel and the life of Jesus, and found that the God we meet in the Bible had a good word for the poor, and that liberation from bondage was a huge part of Israel's longing and, in fact, the result of the life-changing event of the Exodus.

Liberation Theology challenged conventional models for understanding our Christian faith and the Christian Church. It is true, as we look back and examine the academic record, that from its onset Liberation Theology displayed a deep sympathy for Marxist critiques of Western imperialism. It made methodological choices that naively trusted the presuppositions of Marxist-Leninist thought, choices that caused grave concerns both in Christian theological circles and in Western political circles. But despite these significant academic controversies, all agreed that Liberation Theology provided an important service to the church, whether Roman Catholic or mainstream Protestant, in calling attention to the Constantinian assumptions of Western Christendom. The term *Western Christendom* refers to the established religion of Western Europe, as opposed to Eastern Orthodoxy. The word *Constantinian* refers to Constantine, an iconic figure in the 3rd century whose conversion to Christianity and subsequent ascent to the Roman throne as Caesar turned Christianity from a fringe group of outcasts to the dominant political class. Prior to the era of Constantine, the ruling elites alternated between outright persecution and hostile indifference in their policies toward Christians. The Christian

community, which early on had no influence and very little interest in setting a course for the powerful in our world, encouraged praying for the world and those who thought they ran it, but offered little in the way of political advice. After Constantine, the church began to see itself as having an interest in what the ruling elites were thinking about because, to some extent, these ruling elites were influenced by what the church thought, said, and supported. Exploring the contrast between early Christianity in the 1st and 2nd centuries and the Constantinian Christianity that emerged in the 3rd and 4th centuries exposes how different the Christianity we have grown up with is from the Christianity that is found in the New Testament. This is especially interesting when we examine political assumptions, which is exactly what Liberation Theology helped our churches in Western Europe and North America to do.

This contrast of political assumptions is what is at stake in our taking another look at Pilate's pairing of Jesus and Barabbas during Holy Week. Back on February 24th, when I first introduced Barabbas during Sunday morning worship, this is what I said about the movie *Barabbas*. "In the 1962 movie starring Anthony Quinn, Barabbas is plagued by the blessing-turned-curse of being the one who gave up his seat on death row so that Jesus could die in his place on the Cross. He had tried to take life into his own hands by taking up arms against Rome, fighting to give Israel back her birthright, the freedom to claim the land that God had promised. Barabbas didn't just think about such things, or merely hope for the future he desired. He wasn't satisfied with whining that things weren't the way they should be, the way he wanted things to be. He fought for that future, killed for it, and was willing to die for it." Then, when I portrayed Barabbas later that day during our Sunday Evening Lenten Service in a drama entitled *Barabbas - A Safe Terrorist*, Barabbas introduced himself by saying, "This may surprise you, but I knew Jesus the Nazarene. We both grew up in Galilee, a place filled with folks who felt the only good Roman was a dead one. Rome's occupation meant neither peace nor freedom. It was unholy that infidels should enslave God's people. Their very presence was a stain on the holy land that God had promised to us. After Jesus left Nazareth, I didn't see much of him." Jesus became an itinerant preacher, while Barabbas joined up with some local radical militants. What is interesting to me about the background material Barabbas describes is that although we have come to view the pairing of Jesus and Barabbas as nothing more than an accident in history, Jesus had actually drawn from the ranks of radical extremist militants, otherwise known as Zealots, in forming his own band of followers. There was Simon the Zealot, whose name kind of gives him away. The last name of Judas Iscariot either groups him with the local resistance in Kerioth, or describes a dagger, sicarii, used by terrorists to inflict justice on their victims. Then, there were James and John, the sons of thunder, and possibly Peter, who was armed with a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. Oscar Cullman, a New Testament scholar of note, argued that as many as half of Jesus' original twelve disciples may have been drawn from the ranks of the Zealots. (Oscar Cullman's 1956 book of interest is entitled *The State in the New Testament*.)

My point is not that Jesus might have been a Zealot, a radical Middle Eastern extremist, but that he was attractive to that crowd. This helps to confirm the idea that Jesus was up to some really revolutionary stuff, although not along the same path as the Zealots. They were on the war path, while Jesus was inviting his followers to join him on the peace path. This is a crucial difference. Despite what we may think of Jesus' politics, or lack of politics, his followers were across the board pacifists when it came to life in the Roman Empire; and what is more, an examination of New

Testament texts and early Christianity provides evidence for the view that, for the most part, Christians followed this pacifist way for its first two-hundred-plus years, until the time that was marked by the conversion of Constantine, which ushered in a dramatic shift in the life of the Church. From that point forward, the story of the Church became intertwined with the story of Western culture extending its power far and wide, with the Church benefiting from becoming priests to the powerful. Several significant changes followed. As Christianity became more intertwined with the privileged and powerful, the long-acknowledged Biblical principle expressing a *preferential option for the poor* became less central to its attitudes and teachings about wealth. Another significant implication of this Constantinian shift was the peripheralization of pacifism and the emergence of just war thinking as the normative Christian view. Pacifism still had its place, specifically among those who were ordained into the priesthood, and then, much later on, in the historic peace churches. But the mainstream view, both Catholic and Protestant was that the use of violent force in service of peace, justice, and order was not unfaithful to the core principles of following Jesus. Holy War still shows itself from time to time, not just during the Crusades, or only among extremist Moslems advocating jihad, but also whenever Christians are so strongly committed to the cause of their nation that they virtually equate their nation's cause with the cause of the kingdom of heaven, or some other cause that God clearly and unequivocally supports.

Principled pacifism, just war realism, holy war fanaticism: these are the historic choices for Christians trying to figure out how to be faithful to God and our neighbors in a world where issues of power complicate our lives. Our adult Sunday School class has been taking some time to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's birth. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who was imprisoned during World War Two for resisting Hitler's Nazi rule in Germany. He was very much impressed with New Testament scholarship that explored the principled pacifism of Jesus. He was also very much moved to use what force Christians had at their disposal to resist the evils of our world that had become so manifest in the horrors of Nazi Germany. His own position was one where one could not rule out any options that God might place on the table. In the end, he discerned God's call leading him to participate in a plot to kill Hitler, and that was what led to his execution and death in a Nazi prison camp after the war was lost but before the Allies could liberate the prison camp in Flossenbug. Bonhoeffer's martyr death illustrates the challenges that are posed when we look both at the New Testament record of Jesus' life and teachings, while struggling to apply our knowledge of God's will to our worldly realities.

Barabbas affirmed the role of violent force in resisting the violent force controlled by the establishment. He joined with the Zealots in seeking to oust the Romans from Palestine. While he could be classified as a holy warrior, he accepted Rome's terms of using violence to fight violence. Thus, while it may seem at first that establishment Romans and rebel Zealots were far apart on issues that mattered, on the most important issue, whether or not to use violent force to attain our aims, they were in basic agreement. This might be a good way of understanding the relationship between Liberation Theology and Constantinian Christianity. Both reject principled pacifism as essential to faithfulness. Both accept using the power of violent force to attain aims that seem good and just and right. In the case of Liberation Theology, this means using power to empower the powerless, to help the poor, to pursue policies that serve those least able to defend their interests. In the case of Constantinian Christianity,

this means preserving order, maintaining the status quo, and lending support to the ruling elites in their calling by God to serve by leading.

To be honest, it is difficult to enter into the wave of criticism that has been aimed at Pastor Jeremiah Wright without also being critical. Many of the quotes attributed to him are raw and incendiary, to say the least. As a result, the controversy has come to focus less on what Liberation Theology is about, and more on whether Pastor Wright is anti-American or un-American. That is not my interest in Liberation Theology. Nor is it my interest in the pairing of Jesus and Barabbas. Liberation Theology has been thought, by advocates and critics alike, to be revolutionary in its thinking. But how revolutionary can it be if it accepts the same terms as the establishment powers it critiques when it comes to using violent force to secure its aims, politically speaking? Barabbas thought himself to be a revolutionary of sorts. Again, how revolutionary was he when he accepted the same use of brute force as did the Romans, except that he used these means for his aims, and the Romans used the same means for their own aims? Here's how I said it back on February 24th: "The radical revolutionary extremists used violence to destabilize the world around them. The Romans used their might to intimidate locals through the preponderance of power at their control. Jesus chose a different way, a way that was far more radical than radical militants imagined, with far more revolutionary effect on our world than the Romans ever anticipated."

So, what does any of this have to do with Jesus, or with us? Did Jesus have anything to say about the use of violent force in securing order, peace, or justice? It turns out that a case can be made that he did have something to say about these matters, that he was quite consistent in what he said and how he lived, and that early Christians heard what he said, remembered it, recorded it, and remained faithful to his vision of a kingdom, where we were asked to love our enemies, return good for evil, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us. Sure, these words were remembered in Luke (6:27ff.) and Matthew (5:44ff.); but they were also remembered in Paul's writing (Romans 12:14ff) and Peter's writings (1st Peter 2:21). Constantine's turn to faith turned the church in radically new directions. Many have heralded the turn as a sign of God's favor, and fulfillment of God's promise to establish his kingdom through the lordship of Christ and the mission of the Church. But which was transformed by what? Has the world been transformed by Christ's vision of the kingdom of heaven, or has the Church been re-formed by the world's ways of wielding the sword and using power here on earth? Movies like *Barabbas and Kingdom of Heaven* remind us that issues like these have a way of complicating our sense of who Jesus was and what he came to accomplish as the Christ, God's Son, our Savior. That's what Liberation Theology was trying to do, too.