

SPEAKING TRUTH IN THE FACE OF DECEIT

Good morning. For the world that swooshes by us in traffic on every side, this is just another Spring week, but for those of us who gather in the name of Jesus, it is the week of all weeks, leading to the day of the resurrection when we celebrate once again the mystery that God so embraced our humanity as to go through death as we do in order to lift us to life with him. My two sessions with you are tied together by Luke's portrayal of Jesus as prophet. Yesterday we thought about prophecy as putting one's body where one's mouth is, and we considered how Jesus' royal entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing the temple of merchants was the climax of his entire ministry as the prophet-king who represented the lowly and outcast.

This morning, I want to look more closely at the section of the Gospel between that royal entry ~~and temple gesture~~, and Jesus' actual arrest, trial, and execution ~~of Jesus~~. For liturgically-minded Christians, by whom I mean Catholics and high-grade Episcopalians like yourselves, the thought may naturally have occurred: what WAS happening at the start of that week. We know about Spy Wednesday, when Judas sold Jesus out, and we know Maunday Thursday when Jesus washed the disciples feet and Good Friday when he was executed, and Holy Saturday, when he was in the tomb. But Monday and Tuesday don't even have names!

It seldom occurs to such liturgical Christians to look so embarrassingly evangelical as to check the Gospels. But in fact, they tell us what they, at least, thought was going on. Both Luke and Matthew follow their common source Mark in this section of the narrative. They all agree to insert after Jesus' prophetic act of driving merchants from the temple precincts --- an act that precipitated the plot among his opponents to seek his death --- a curiously lengthy interlude of talking rather than action.

They all portray Jesus as teaching daily in the temple to a crowd that hung upon his words and in the presence of those trying to figure out how to get rid of this populist prophet without turning the

crowd against themselves, or causing the kind of riot for which Passover Jerusalem was notorious and which sometimes brought on savage reprisal from the occupying Roman garrison.

The scene is set by Luke immediately following Jesus' declaration that they had made his father's house of prayer into a den of thieves. Luke notes: "Every day he was teaching in the temple area. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people, meanwhile, were seeking to put him to death, but they could find no way to accomplish their purpose because all the people were hanging on his words" (19:47-48). The device they fall back on is the tried-and-true method of verbal entrapment. They can diminish and destroy this prophetic pretender through forcing him to "misspeak himself," as we would say it today.

This part of the synoptic Gospels features a series of verbal encounters between Jesus and the leaders of various Jewish parties. They pose questions to which Jesus responds, before he turns the tables on them with a question of his own, and with an attack on the economic corruption and oppression of the religious leaders: "In the presence of all the people, he said, 'Be on guard against the scribes, who go about in long robes and love greetings in the marketplaces, and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows, and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very lengthy condemnation.'" (20:45-47).

The interlude ends with Jesus, still standing in the temple precincts, prophetically announcing to his followers the fall of the temple --- not a stone of it shall stand upon another --- and the destruction of Jerusalem, predictions that turn out to be accurate forty years later (21:1-36).

Now What narrative purpose is served by gathering together here this set of exchanges between Jesus and those hostile to him? For the earliest church, I think, it helped position Jesus, and therefore themselves, among the various rival groups of first-century Judaism --- scribes and pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees --- by having them pose questions typical of their sect and providing Jesus' response.

For the evangelists, this cluster of exchanges provides a dramatic spacing between Jesus' entry into the city and his subsequent arrest, trial, and execution. It shows a steady intensification of the conflict between this back-country prophet and the powers-that-be. It reveals the deep divide between the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus and the business-as-usual kingdom of this world. And for us, it offers the opportunity to think about another aspect of Jesus' role as prophet, that is, speaking truth in the face of deceit.

Let us allow our imaginations to envisage the scene suggested by the evangelist: imagine the enormous space of the temple precincts --- a vast area roughly 3 football fields by five football fields --- with tens of thousands of pilgrims passing through with sacrificial animals. There, a tiny corner is occupied by Jesus and the followers drawn by his teaching. There as well, on the edges, are the agents and scouts sent by the established leaders to trap him --- not simply for embarrassment but for elimination.

Jesus had never, mind you, been shy about naming and condemning the opponents of God's kingdom who served Satan's realm. While in Galilee and in his journey to Jerusalem, he pronounced woes over the rich and the comfortable (6:24), had warned that those who sought first places at banquets would be brought down (14:7-14); had extensively condemned the pharisees and lawyers who cleansed the outside of bowls while being corrupt within (11:37-54); had, when warned that Herod was seeking his life, said, "go and tell that fox, 'Behold I cast out demons and I perform healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I accomplish my purpose; yet I must continue on my way today, tomorrow, and the following day, for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside Jerusalem'" (13:31-22).

But Jesus is not now in an idyllic spot by the Sea of Galilee. This is the city of David, the big city, the home of government, of religion, of military force. This is where people get crucified. Mr. Deeds has

come to Washington, and is standing on the steps of the Capitol, facing the cameras and the microphones.

The analogy is not that far-fetched. This set of exchanges, if played out dramatically, would resemble nothing so much as a press-conference in contemporary politics, with the sophisticated and savvy questioners always in search of the “gotcha” moment that will bring down the populist pretender. Our interest today, then, is on another dimension of prophecy, how it means speaking the truth in the face of deceit. I will focus on only two of the exchanges, the question concerning Jesus’ authority, and that concerning payment of taxes to Caesar. These above all show us the distinction between twisted and true speech.

Luke tells us that Jesus “was teaching the people in the temple area and proclaiming the good news” (19:47) when a delegation made up of chief priests, scribes, and elders approach him. These are the elite of the Jewish people, the members of the Sanhedrin: they are our senators, congressmen, congressional aids, or, perhaps, our bishops and cardinals, members of the Vatican Curia. As we would expect of such establishment types, their question concerns credentials: “Tell us by what authority are you doing these things, or who has given you authority (20:2)?” He is on their turf and they have not authorized him, so he must be an interloper. Where are his bona fides, his yeshiva diploma, his parade permit from the temple police?

Now remember the context. Jesus has driven out merchants from the area because a house of prayer had been made a den of thieves --- his words recall those of the prophet Daniel (Dan 7:11). But, their question implies, a prophet needs a permit to be a prophet and since they did not give him a permit, no one could have. Their question, therefore, is not really a question at all; it is a challenge and a threat. And it is a threat that is terribly revealing of their own assumption: the temple is not God’s house of prayer, it is their property for profit. Worse than Jesus acting like he was Jeremiah is the fact that he

threatens their own *exousia* --- the same word for “authority” used by Satan when he tempted Jesus with *exousia* over all the kingdoms of the earth , “for they are mine to give” (4:6), and Jesus declared, “You shall worship the Lord your God; Him alone shall you serve” (4:8; Deut 6:13).

Jesus responds with a question of his own: “Tell me: was John’s baptism of heavenly or of human origin (20:3-4)?” It is such a simple question, yet it cuts sharply to the corruption inherent in their challenge. Prophets receive their authority from God not from human institutions. Every Jew knows that. So, what about Jesus’ predecessor, John, who preached a baptism of repentance --- and of economic reform? They are at once caught in their own duplicity.

And their reaction is that of all the deceitful: “They discussed this among themselves” (20:5). They went into a huddle. They consulted with each other. They sought a politically plausible narrative. They are not stupid; they understand the point of Jesus’ question. If they say John’s prophetic mission was from God, then why hadn’t they believed him and repented? They clearly had no more recognized John as a prophet than they now recognize Jesus. But to say that John was sent by God would be to acknowledge an authority superseding their own. Prophets need no divinity degree.

But they grasp as well that they have fallen into the very trap they had themselves devised. If they say that John’s authority was of human origin, they are both lying --- they knew as everyone knew that John had not attended Candler --- and they expose their unbelief in God’s authority before the people who do recognize John as a prophet, the way they are now regarding Jesus as a prophet. Afraid of the very people they ostensibly serve, the boldness of the leaders deflates. They answer Jesus with the biggest lie possible: “We do not know from where it came” (20:7).

They knew all right, just as they knew where Jesus’ authority came from. Their lie involves not their minds but their hearts, their will. To acknowledge an *exousia* from God transcending their own is to cede their own *exousia* in the temple meant to be a house of prayer to God who gives all *exousia*.

Jesus closes the exchange with the simple declaration, “Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things” (20:8). The simplicity of prophetic speech reveals the tangled duplicity of speech that is not open to truth but only defends positions of power.

Luke then has Jesus turn from this exchange to address the people with the parable of the vineyard owner who has his emissaries rejected by the managers and finally has his beloved son killed by them, with the result that the owner takes away the vineyard from them and gives it to others. The leaders heard the parable, and “sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people, for they knew that he had spoken this parable against them” (20:19). So, they shift from direct to indirect entrapment, which brings us to the exchange concerning payment of taxes to the emperor (20:20-26).

Christ This passage has been the subject of endless analysis by those interested in the respective powers of pope and emperor. But my interest is only in what Luke shows us about speaking truth in the face of deceit.

Luke leaves the reader in no doubt concerning the duplicitous motivations and methods of Jesus' opponents. I want to render the Greek idiomatically here. The Sanhedrin leaders “had him under observation” or “under surveillance” (*parateresantes*) and they commissioned spies (*enkathetous*), who falsely presented themselves as honest (*hypokrinomenous dikaious einai*), precisely in order to trap him by his speech (*epilabontai autou logou*). And Luke gives us the purpose: “so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor” --- that is, not the Jewish court, but the Roman prefect. We know that in the distant provinces of the empire such prefects had the *ius gladii*, the right to execute on the grounds of even the slightest quiver of revolutionary unrest. And we know that Pontius Pilate was not reluctant to exercise this option, especially at feasts like the Passover, when the huge crowds in Jerusalem tended to seethe with resentment against the Roman occupation.

The secret agents' first words seem to compliment Jesus, but their flattery actually serves to set him up: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly, and you are not a respecter of persons --- that is, you are impartial and fair --- instead you teach the way of God in the basis of truth" (20:21). They do not believe a single word of this; if they did, they would not accept the commission as secret agents and set out to get a prophet arrested for insurrection. They are only setting a trap from which they think there is no escape: "Is it lawful (or necessary) for us to pay tribute (or: a tax) to Caesar or not?" (20:20).

The question seems to present the perfect no-win set of options. He is trapped, they think, between the Jews who equate true religion with national independence and the Jews who cooperate with the Roman authorities to preserve the ancient religious institutions. If Jesus says they should pay the tax, he will lose favor with those people who in the time of feasts are whipped with patriotic fervor. But if he says they should not pay the tax, he is exposed as a revolutionary before the vigilant Roman authority. Either answer brings him down. The murderous malice of the simple-seeming question is neatly hidden by the flattery that precedes it: surely an honest teacher like Jesus, who is no respecter of persons, will answer in a way that dooms him.

The duplicity of those questioning Jesus on this point is linked to their hypocrisy, for if they themselves had not been paying the tax, they would not be there to challenge this populist prophet. And they neatly suppress the fact that a major part of their financial resources is derived from trading in imperial and other coinage in the temple precincts.

Luke tells us that Jesus "recognized their craftiness/deceit" (*panourgia*), and asked them to show him the coin with which the tax was paid, and to identify the image and inscription on the coin. Whose were they? Caesar's. The emperor produced the coin which was the medium of tax-payment. So, Jesus neatly side-stepped the impossible dilemma with the simple declaration: "Give to Caesar what is

Caesar's." It's the emperor's coinage. He can demand it back. But then Jesus adds the phrase that turns their phoney dilemma back on them, "give to God what is God's."

Jesus simply rejects the false equivalence of religion with politics. They are, in truth, radically incommensurate. There is no political position that aligns perfectly with God's kingdom, and the rule of God is never expressed adequately by any political posture. Being a faithful Jew means worshiping the Lord God with all one's heart and all one's mind and all one's life. Such devotion can neither be abetted nor impeded by the one who imposes or collects taxes, no matter what he calls himself or is called by others. It is not an image on a coin that constitutes idolatry; it is a derangement of the will that mitigates the absolute demands of obedience to God with the relative advantages of expedience for the self.

Jesus' simple and clear distinction between true religion --- giving back to God everything for everything comes as gift from God --- and human politics --- paying a ruler taxes as demanded--- this simple and clear distinction only became muddled when Christianity wedded itself fatefully to imperial power with Constantine, and when Popes claimed to govern Europe and not the life of the spirit.

Thus, centuries of anguished exegesis on this passage. Thus, turning Jesus simple speaking of truth in the face of deceit into another and even more complex form of deceit, namely, that if finding scriptural authority for human ambition.

I don't think this short reflection has distorted the meaning of Luke's text. But I hope that this plain reading of his text makes its contemporary relevance clear. We live in an age of "gotcha" discourse, whether in the traditional press and media, or in blogs, twitter, Instagram, and the other digital means of intemperate and thoughtless verbal expression. Yesterday we heard how Jesus measures adherence to God's rule: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Today, we may ourselves grow confused about the difference between speaking truth to power --- the work of authentic prophecy --- and distorting truth for the sake of power.... even if the power is as lowly and

despicable as that achieved by anonymous trolling. The Letter of James tells us “Be quick to hear, slow to speech, slow to anger, for human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness.” If we look into our hearts and our own patterns of speech, we can see how far we fall short of this level of wisdom, and how much further short of the courageous simplicity of the prophet Jesus and the simple rule of love he espouses.