

# Passion/Palm Sunday

**“IRONIC!”**

**Luke 22:14-23:56**

**Passion/Palm Sunday**

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*Author's Preface: Nothing catches our attention like irony. Irony catches us by surprise. It is the experience of unexpected, of just the opposite of what we had anticipated, that grabs our attention. We expect one thing, but then get just the opposite. That is irony.*

*On one of the most popular musical albums of the last decade, Jagged Little Pill by Alanis Morissette, there was a very poignant song called “Irony.” It expressed so well the sense of irony that we have all come to appreciate about so much of life.*

*An old man turned ninety-eight  
He won the lottery and died the next day  
It's a black fly in your Chardonnay  
It's a death row pardon two minutes too late  
It's like rain on your wedding day  
It's a free ride when you've already paid  
It's the good advice that you just didn't take*

*Mr. Play It Safe was afraid to fly  
He packed his suitcase and kissed his kids good-bye  
He waited his whole life to take that flight  
And as the plane crashed down he thought  
“Well, isn't this nice . . . ”  
And isn't that ironic . . . don't you think?*

*A traffic jam when you're already late  
A no-smoking sign on your cigarette break  
It's like ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife  
It's meeting the man of my dreams  
And then meeting his beautiful wife*

Holy week is also filled with irony, a special Holy Irony. It is a week when we expect one thing and then end up experiencing just the opposite.

Our worship begins on Palm Sunday with a glorious procession into the sanctuary, every one waving palm branches and singing songs. It is a celebration of joy. We imagine ourselves with the crowds in Jerusalem welcoming the triumphant Jesus into the city shouting "Hosanna, Glory to God in the highest." Jesus is the one we have been waiting for. He is the long awaited Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams. But then just a few days later we turn on Jesus and demand his death as we scream with the crowd, "Crucify him!" How ironic!

*The Passion according to St. Luke will be read in many congregations this week. This sense of irony is focus of this crossing of that great story.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: The Greatest are the Least**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – "Ironic Danger"**

Nothing is as it appears throughout the entire Passion. Already in the Upper Room the Passover meal that Jesus celebrates with his disciples is not as it appears to be. This is more than just another Passover meal. This Passover will not be business as usual. Jesus interrupts the ancient routine and interprets it in a new way. From now on it will be the celebration of a new

covenant. But first the dangers at hand must be dealt with. The disciples think that the best response to such dangers is another kingdom (just like all the other Gentile kingdoms of this world that they have learned both to fear and admire) where they too will get to lord it over others. Judas believes that the best course of action is in betrayal. Peter thinks it is in the power of the sword. The religious leadership thinks it is in eliminating a religious heretic. Pilate believes it is in flexing Roman power in the face of civil chaos. At least one of the crucified criminals believes it is in deriding the One who makes him feel uneasy. Everyone wants to strike at the danger “out there.” Demonizing our enemies, creating an “us vs. them” world, makes it easy for us to pick up a sword and lop off the ears of our enemies. But the “other criminal” and the centurion at the foot of the cross know that all is not as it appears to be. They sense that there is a bit of irony going on here. Ironically, the danger is not all out there. Ironically, it just may be inside them . . . and us as well.

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – “Ironic Confidence”**

In the face of danger we grasp for something or someone we can trust. We want to have confidence in something or someone who will make us strong. But ironically the more confident we become, the more it betrays our insecurity and desperation. Our search for strength reveals that our real problem is not “out there” but in here, in our hearts. Our faith is weak and desperate. And ultimately the one we cannot trust is God.

Already in the Upper Room Jesus challenges the disciples’ misplaced confidence in Gentile authority as they long for the day when they can lord it over others. Jesus ironically offers a different kind of authority, an authority that resides in weakness and service and is grounded in the shedding of his own blood. Peter’s defiant confidence in his commitment to Jesus is

ironically exposed as the bombast it really is when he denies Jesus three times. Likewise, Peter's confidence in the power of the sword is not commended by Jesus but ironically is rejected. The angry crowd, the one thief on the cross and the righteously indignant religious leadership are confident in their rejection of Jesus. However, their confidence has to be propped up through the contrived accusations of one false witness after another or their own exaggerated hubris, ironically exposing the self-doubt they are afraid to admit and which still haunts them. Pilate's confidence in Roman power is shaken as he is compelled almost against his will to sentence Jesus to death. The narrative is littered with the broken fragments of misplaced confidence. One after one those who think they are strong are ironically exposed as weak. They cannot trust others. They cannot trust themselves. They cannot trust God.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – “Ironic Judgment”**

Our desperate grasps for something or someone in whom we can trust or our bold pronouncements of our own self-confidence are always and ultimately exposed for the failures they are. We can't live up to our declarations of self-confidence. Neither can we live up to the expectations of others that we have proudly embraced. We expected to receive a favorable judgment for our efforts. But ironically what we expected does not happen. We are exposed, accused, judged and condemned not just by public opinion or by our own consciences but ultimately and eternally by God.

Peter followed Jesus at a distance as he is led off to trial. He is too ashamed of his three desperate denials to get any closer. His bitter tears reveal that he knows he is guilty of not living up to his own, bold declarations. Even Jesus' look at Peter in the courtyard is an accusation and judgment from the very One he had committed to love. Ironically Jesus is exactly what his critics accuse him of not being: the Son of God and the King of

the Jews. Ironically the other thief on the cross and the centurion at the foot of the cross are the only ones who get it right. Because they are right, those who thought they had rightly judged Jesus to be worthy of death are judged wrong. Worse yet, because Jesus really is who he is, Jesus' critics are under judgment by the ultimate judge of all there is and are truly worthy of death. The civil greatness of Rome and the moral greatness of the religious leadership are exposed for the frauds they are. They thought they were great but in reality they are weak, under the very judgment of the God they thought they were defending. In the end only Peter and the other thief on the cross seem to have realized this irony. Peter's abrupt departure and tearful desperation and the thief's acknowledgment that all ought to fear God because all are under God's death sentence are the only appropriate responses to this deadly fate we all have brought upon ourselves.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Least are the Greatest**

### **Step 1: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – “Ironic Death”**

The greatest irony of all is that only in the death of Jesus can there be life for those under divine judgment. Jesus rightly dies under those divinely called to defend God's civil order (Pilate and Rome) and God's moral order (the Jewish religious leadership). But God's marvelously ironic plan uses this judgment of Jesus to end God's judgment of all of us. Because Jesus really is the Son of God and the King of the Jews, the judgment finally falls on its own author. In Jesus God ironically suffers the judgment we all deserve so that we might be free from the power of its judgment over us. And Jesus' resurrection on the “third day” confirms this surprising truth about this death. Ironically his death brings life.

Already in the Upper Room Jesus speaks of this ironic death. It will be by becoming humble and weak, even unto death, that he

will be truly great. The irony continues to abound in the events of the Passion: Jesus really is the King of the Jews despite the mockery of the Soldiers and Pilate's inscription posted over Jesus on the cross; Jesus really is the Son of God despite the Jewish council's protestations to the contrary; Jesus refuses to defend himself when on trial because he really knows who he is and therefore has no reason to avoid death; Jesus actually is the Messiah even though he refuses to come down from the cross. And because of this ironic truth, Jesus' death brings to an end God's judgment on this world. Even though Jesus does not appear to be a great and mighty figure who has the power and authority to accomplish something like this, ironically he does. The power and authority of the Kingdom of God are manifest in their opposites. Ironically it is through the weakness, service to others and the death of this crucified messiah that God brings true greatness and life.

### **Step 2: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – “Ironic Faith”**

In a world where everyone wants to take charge and “do something,” where to be regarded as the greatest is to assert yourself, your rights and “come down from the cross,” Jesus offers us a distinct and ironic alternative: we don't “have to” do anything. Ironically all we need is faith. We no longer have to strive to be great in order to lord it over others. Ironically we “get to” trust what Jesus promises us and we “have” have a place of honor at the table in Jesus' Kingdom. Trust in this crucified and risen one gives us the confidence and peace that we never were able to find in ourselves or in this world.

Repeatedly throughout the Passion Jesus offers a promise that he invites others to trust, a promise in which they can truly have confidence, a promise that appears to be weak and powerless but ironically is just the opposite. In the Upper Room Jesus “confers” on his disciples a Kingdom in which they will no

longer be under judgment, not only the judgment of others but also of God. They need only “remember” the suffering he is about to do for them when they eat and drink this Supper. Jesus offers to remember the thief on the cross and promises that because the thief trusts him, “today you will be with me in paradise.” Ironically such faith “does” nothing other than to “receive” what Jesus offers, i.e., “paradise.” Even the centurion merely stands by and observes what is happening and yet comes to confess a simple faith in this crucified one.

### **Step 3: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – “Ironic Kingdom”**

Trusting the promise of Jesus gets us a place in his Kingdom. This is a kingdom where we get to sit in judgment on the world (on the twelve tribes of Israel) not by condemning them but by delivering them from judgment. We get to do that in the same way Jesus did: ironically by being a servant, not by lording it over others but by giving up our lives in service for the well being of others . . . even unto death. We get to passionately live out Jesus’ Passion in our lives. In his Ironic Kingdom the least (in the eyes of the world) are the greatest (in the eyes of God).

Throughout the Passion we see Jesus living out his vision of the Ironic Kingdom. In this kingdom the least are the greatest. Here a servant is greater than being a master. In the Upper Room Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Passover reminds us that this kingdom is grounded not in his saving himself but in giving his life away in death. At the Mount of Olives Jesus’ refuses to use the power of the sword to resist his enemies and instead heals the ear of one who has come to destroy him. Before the religious leadership, Herod and Pilate, Jesus’ refuses to worry about his own welfare and defend his innocence. Instead Jesus permits his life to be substituted (sweetly swapped!) for the life of another, Barrabbas, a foreshadowing of the meaning of his own death. Instead of getting back and getting even with his enemies, Jesus forgives them from the cross. Even to the bitter

end Jesus is unconcerned with his own welfare, still gathering new members to his Kingdom ("today you will be with me in paradise.")

It is just this sort of irony that Alanis Morissette had in mind when she sang, "And isn't that ironic . . . don't you think?"