

The Blasphemy of Easter

Please pardon the language, but Peter and John had sure pissed some people off. Important people. It started, on the day of the healing, with the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees. Which was enough to get Peter and John thrown into jail. Then, the next day, the writer tells us in verse 5 that “their rulers, elders, and scribes all assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.” John and Alexander are otherwise unknown, but Annas and Caiaphas? Oh yeah. Big names. Top dogs. You don’t wanna make them mad.

What had Peter and John done to aggravate and alarm so many people? Was it the simple fact that they had healed a man born lame? As astounding as that had been, and it did raise a ruckus, that wasn’t the reason they were mad. The writer of Acts spells it out in verse 2. He says that all these top dogs were “much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead.” There it is. That’s the reason. Because Peter and John were proclaiming the resurrection. Here’s the problem: the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection. (That’s why they’re so . . . sad, you see? That’s from an old camp song. ☺)

Let me introduce you to the Sadducees. In first-century Judaism, they were the equivalent of what we would today call a political party. They were particularly well connected with the priestly temple hierarchy. Including the high priestly family line. Suffice it to say that the Sadducees had acquired a considerable amount of power, authority, and wealth. Which essentially made them the party of the status quo. They wanted things to change as little as possible. They had a nice, comfortable understanding with the Roman empire: “You scratch our backs, and we’ll scratch yours. Don’t rock the boat, and you’ll have smooth sailing.” (Sound familiar?)

The Sadducees, as I already mentioned, did not believe in the concepts of resurrection and life after death. They stuck with—and were stuck in—the traditional, conservative Jewish belief that once we die, that’s it. Our bodies return to the ground, and our souls end up in Sheol, a netherworld of nothingness from which God is essentially absent. In this regard they disagreed sharply with the Pharisees, another first-century Palestinian Jewish political party, who shared power with the Sadducees, but who did believe in the resurrection, albeit as a future hope only, certainly not as a present possibility. On that point at least the Sadducees and the Pharisees agreed.

So yes, for Peter and John to heal a lame man was upsetting enough, to the extent it “roused” some “rabble.” For the dynamic duo to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus, and that through Jesus the resurrection was a new reality for everyone, was simply and completely unacceptable. It wasn’t scriptural, and it wasn’t true. When we die, that’s it. But guess what? That day alone 5,000 new believers had been added to the ranks of the Christ-followers, all because of John’s and Peter’s preaching. Surely you’ll agree that from the Sadducees’ perspective, that could not continue. So here’s the plan. We’ll throw them into jail tonight to at least get them off the streets, then come up with a suitable criminal charge in the morning.

One of the available criminal charges was blasphemy. Technically, blasphemy was the act of insulting or cursing God, but it also included claiming divine status or power, whether for oneself or someone else. So for Peter and John to claim that it was the power of the resurrected Christ that had enabled them to heal the lame man, well, that comes pretty close to blasphemy, doesn't it? I mean, that's almost like saying that Jesus is God. Or at least a part of God, like the "son of God." And Jesus himself had certainly been guilty of blasphemy, so chances are disciples were as well. Good thing they had gotten rid of him. Resurrection?! Not on our watch!

Turns out Easter Sunday screwed all kinds of things up for the Sadducees and other "status quo party-ites." For starters, it confirmed that Jesus really was sent by God, in fact essentially was God in human form. We can't have that. We can't have God just hanging out among the people. Why would they need priests anymore? And if they don't need priests, there goes our power. There goes our wealth. There goes our comfortable lives. Second, because of Easter Sunday, resurrection is suddenly available to everyone. People won't be afraid of death any more. And if people don't fear death, they'll be able to live much more freely, and carefreely, and generously. They won't feel the need to forestall death by accumulating wealth and possessions. People might actually start sharing with those less fortunate, including people in their own communities. Talk about upsetting the status quo! Third, because of Easter Sunday, people like Peter and John are walking around, healing people, doing all kinds of amazing things, raising all kinds of rabble. We can't have people raising rabble! And fourth, this so-called "gospel" or good news of about Jesus being Lord means that all the things we like to worship no longer are lord.

In what ways is Easter "blasphemous" today? Does it mean that the living Christ is right here among us, God with us, always available to us, not just in church on Sunday mornings but wherever we go, every minute of every day? Does it mean that we needn't fear death anymore, but can live freely and carefreely, accepting our human death as merely a part of the bigger picture? Does it mean we can live much more generously, sharing with those who are less fortunate, both in our own communities and in other, more impoverished parts of the world? Does it mean God's Holy Spirit is now available to us, enabling us and empowering us to do amazing things, the kinds of things our church has been doing for eighty-six years and counting? Does it mean we are free and freed up to raise a lot of rabble in a status quo, stuck world, including "walking out" of high school to protest the proliferation of guns? Does it mean that Jesus Christ is Lord, which in turn means that nothing or no one else is, including all the present political parties and power structures of our world?

Yes to all of the above. Which pretty much makes all of us blasphemers.

Amen.