

Our Lenten theme has been “Flipped,” the idea of truth emerging in reversal. God’s values are often the mirror opposite of our values, and the kingdom of God puts the last first and the first last. But of course this is true all year long, not just during Lent. Lent and Easter simply amplify the truth of God’s upside-down ways.

The story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem subverts the notion of kingship, especially the way Mark tells it. In Mark’s version, you’ll notice, there is no humility. *Riding*, itself, is a kingly thing to do; common people walk. In 1 Kings 1:33 Solomon rides King David’s donkey; here Jesus rides a colt that has never been ridden, signaling that he is doing a new thing. He rides in like a king who has conquered a city, but Jesus has *conquered* nothing, to our knowledge.

He accepts the respect of the crowd that greets him with their version of the red carpet and their cries of the kingly Psalm 118, and goes to the Temple, but instead of making an offering at the Temple he simply looks at it and then goes back out to Bethany. What he has not done speaks volumes. *Not* fought a battle, *not* honored the Temple by celebrating there. He has just opened up a big hole, a big emptiness, in the order of things . . . and it will not be filled.

So now to the story of the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus at the house of Simon the leper. Gregory Jones, a professor of theology at Duke Divinity School, tells a story of how he was asked to preach at a large Episcopal church some years ago. He was to preach on Mark 14:1-9. The church administrator asked him for his title and he sent it to her. So he sat, robed and ready to preach, before the assembled congregation that Sunday. He opened up the bulletin and looked through the order of worship and saw, to his horror, this note. "We are grateful to have as our guest

speaker this morning His Extravagant Holiness the Reverend Dr. Gregory Jones."

This is a story of extravagance recognized and mirrored.

Again, what happens is a version of a pattern everybody would recognize: a prophet designated by God and acting on God's command would anoint a man to become king. Samuel anointed Saul and later David. "The Lord anointed So-and-So" becomes an equivalent expression for "So-and-So became king." This time, however, we have a nameless woman assuming the role of prophet, and preparing a man on his way to the cross to be king. It's an affirmation of Jesus' kingship—but his kingship is not triumphal but self-giving. Jesus' kingly power is expressed not through his conquests but through his willingness to go even to death to get across his message of the imminent Kingdom of God.

The other dinner guests scold this woman—her gift cost about a year's wages and was completely unreasonable and out of proportion to the occasion—but she has simply acted appropriately: as a mirror to the gift that Jesus is giving. She is a prophet because she can see God revealed in the kind of king that Jesus is. She can see that the coming suffering is not because of abandonment by God or failure by God, but because God acts through powerlessness. The only way out is through, as they say in AA, and the way out of the vicious cycle of violence and injustice and violence again is to succumb willingly, let death do its worst, and then let God do what God does, always and forever.

This story of extravagance is bracketed by cruelty. Right before this story, Mark tells us that the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. Right after this story, Judas Iscariot goes to those chief priests to

arrange the betrayal. In the middle is this crazy gift, that makes sense only to one who recognizes this upside-down kind of kingship and anoints her king for burial. “Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world,” Jesus says, “what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” As is so often the case in Mark’s gospel, the sandwiching of one story (of generosity and comprehension) between two stories of fear and incomprehension highlights the slippery nearness of the Kingdom. The two stories, the conspiring of the chief priests and the betrayal by Judas are so, so familiar—they could be right out of an episode of *House of Cards*. We understand them immediately, and we maybe can even remember feeling similarly threatened or disgusted and alienated, tempted to do our own violence.

But this obscure woman, with no background, no education, no history with Jesus, gets it and right in the middle of Machiavelli’s *Prince* or the *House of Cards* she makes visible the Kingdom of God. T.S. Eliot wrote of the momentary visibility of the ineffable in “Little Gidding”: “The voice of the hidden waterfall/And the children in the apple-tree /Not known, because not looked for /But heard, half-heard, in the stillness/Between two waves of the sea./Quick now, here, now, always--/A condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything)” Between two waves of the sea, two nests of cruelty, the kingdom appears and when you have seen it, it cannot be unseen. “Not known, because not looked for/But heard, half-heard, in the stillness,/Between two waves of the sea./Quick now, here, now, always--/A condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything).”

We have caught a glimpse of the kingdom now and again. We have heard between the waves the voice of the hidden waterfall. We don’t always see and hear

it, but when we do, we recognize it, the hand of God. During Holy Week the image flips again and again, faster and more bewilderingly: are we seeing a king or a criminal? Betrayal or civic-mindedness? Feckless disciples or pragmatic bystanders? A victor or a pathetic loser? Triumph or ignominious defeat? The answer is Yes.

Let us pray:

God made known to us by Jesus, we find you in the oddest places—in failure, humiliation, abandonment. We pray that we may not turn away in disgust and disappointment, but embrace the lowness, so that we may find ourselves in your glorious kingdom. Amen.