

THE GOSPEL AS SPY THRILLER<sup>1</sup>  
John 12: 20-33  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
March 29, 2009

The church is a place for confession, and you know all about confession being good for the soul. So I want to begin with a confession: I am a sucker for spy thrillers. I can go on a trip with every good intention of reading a heavy theological tome that I have faithfully packed in my carry-on luggage. But when I get to the airport, I am drawn to the bookstore and end up buying one of those cheap paperback spy thrillers and getting lost in it while traveling.

I

Maybe that is a partial explanation for the unusual approach I want to take today as we come nearer and nearer to the holiest week of the year. I suggest we look at some of the events of Holy Week from a different perspective. I invite you to imagine how the Roman CIA would view the events of Holy Week.

Surely Rome had the equivalent of our CIA. After all, Rome was the world superpower after Emperor Augustus had proclaimed the *pax Romana*—the peace of Rome. The foundation of that peace was Rome's dominating military superiority. For the first time in many a century the Middle East was not at war. The Roman military had virtually eliminated

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the threat of pirates on the Mediterranean Sea, which opened the way to reliable shipping and commerce. Great cities began to develop along the seacoast such as Caesarea and Antioch, Ephesus and Corinth. These cities would never have developed into commercial centers without the *pax Romana*.

Like many declarations of peace by military powers, the *pax Romana* came at a steep price: it was a new world order in which any hint of insurrection was considered treasonous and dealt with by the most severe and terrifying measures. The Roman legions had taken control not only in the Middle East, but also in Gaul and as far west as Britain. They were truly a superpower.

In order to maintain control over such a large geographic area, Rome had to levy severe taxes on all the people under its control. Rome had a huge military budget. That explains the reference to the tax in the birth stories of Jesus: *In those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.*<sup>2</sup> So at Christmas we read about Mary and Joseph going back to the village of Bethlehem in order to pay their tax. That tax was to support the huge military budget of Rome.

In a world order based on military superiority, then as now there must have been an active Intelligence Service. This one was headquartered, of course, in Rome, but sent agents all over the Roman Empire. These spies

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 2: 1.

were responsible for providing accurate data on terrorist activities that would threaten the order imposed by Rome. One of the hotbeds of terrorist activity was Palestine. Extreme Zionists within the Jewish population were always a terrorist threat, and one of the centers of terrorist activity was none other than the town of Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. Its reputation for terrorism was so great that the Romans had a saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"<sup>3</sup>

Occasionally the occupying Roman soldiers would capture one of those terrorists, place him in prison to await a show-trial, followed by a very public crucifixion. It just so happened that one of those terrorists captured was a man named Barabbas. And during the season of Passover, when many thousands of Jewish pilgrims would throng the narrow streets of Jerusalem, the Roman spies would be a strong presence in the city. They were intently watching for any activity that might even hint toward insurrection among the people. Charismatic leaders of the people were especially watched.

It was in such a charged atmosphere that Jesus came riding into Jerusalem with a significant following. The fact that this was a charismatic young man who naturally attracted followers was enough to have him watched closely. But the added fact that he was from Nazareth that

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<sup>3</sup> See John 1:46.

hotbed of terrorism- gave them even more reason to watch him closely.

The Roman spies were on red alert for this man named Jesus.

## II

This is the pervading atmosphere behind the story we read today from the gospel of John. The Roman authorities were more than suspicious; their suspicions approached paranoia. And when we look at this story through the eyes of the Roman equivalent of the CIA, it gives us an entirely new perspective on this familiar story.

Who were these Greeks who wanted to speak with Jesus? The account tells us only that these Greeks approached Philip, one of the disciples, and asked to see Jesus. "May I take a message?" asks Philip. "No- we have to see him," they say. And how did they know Philip? The text describes Philip like this: *They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee*— another one of those hotbeds of insurrection. They came to Philip and requested a clandestine meeting. They were not willing to tell Philip what they wanted to talk about.

Imagine what this intelligence information suggested to the Roman CIA. Were these Greeks plotting something with Jesus and his followers? Were they forming a coalition with Jesus against Rome? Greek terrorists joining forces with Jewish terrorists? Exactly who were these people?

Then we are told that Philip gave the message from the Greeks to his brother Andrew, and Andrew in turn found Jesus to tell him the Greeks were seeking a meeting with him. Here is what Jesus said, and hear it as if you were a Roman intelligence agent. Jesus said, *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*. What could a Roman agent conclude after hearing that statement? It surely sounded to any Roman agent as if Jesus were planning some kind of terrorism against the Roman government which would give glory to Jesus. Jerusalem was filled with Jews who burned with resentment against Rome. Here was a popular leader who in the Roman government's view had an extensive underground network. And they suspected this network reached all the way to Greece. Who knows how much further that network reached!

I want to suggest that not only did the Roman intelligence agents have that view of him, but also that the majority of the ordinary people had the same view! This might be one reason why they would eventually desert him when he refused the way of violence and insurrection. The people saw him in chains and concluded that he had lost his heart for battle against Rome. When Pilate asked his famous question as to whom they would choose: Jesus or Barabbas, they shouted Barabbas because Barabbas was still committed to insurrection. He would lead them in the

way of violence to rid their land of the hated Roman legions. That was their dream. They had no sympathy for the way of Jesus. Give us Barabbas!

### III

The cry is still heard, "Give us Barabbas!" because much of the world has not yet embraced a better way for peace. On Thursday of last week we quietly passed the thirtieth anniversary of the longest lasting peace agreement in the Middle East: the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed by Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel, and brokered by President Jimmy Carter. It stands today as the most successful modern effort toward the elusive goal of Middle East peace.

But in spite of that success, the way of hard negotiations for peace is not nearly as popular as military domination. Barabbas represents not real peace, but control based on the threat of violence. In that sense Barabbas is no different than the Roman legions he wanted so desperately to overthrow. History has repeatedly shown that power through the tip of a sword is in principle no different than power through the barrel of a gun or through the tip of a missile. It is all based on the threat of violence.

The Roman equivalent of our CIA, I am confident, could not imagine anyone who would refuse to play that violence game, someone who had another understanding of peace than the prevalent understanding. When

Jesus said to his followers: *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*, he was refusing to play the old game of violence.

Of course, in the short term, Jesus was wrong: when he was lifted up on that cross he did not draw all people to himself. In fact, most people deserted him. It is true that his faithful mother stayed at the foot of the cross. And a disciple described by John as *the disciple whom he loved*<sup>4</sup> was there. His aunt stayed there, along with Mary Magdalene. But that's about it. The rest of the disciples seemed to agree with the crowd: maybe Barabbas was the answer! The way of Barabbas is still popular.

#### IV

A famous newspaper commentator was once asked to write a magazine article on *What's Wrong With the Universe*.+ He responded with one short sentence: *I am*.+ We all know the answer to the plaintive question when it is sung so beautifully: *Were you there when they crucified my Lord?* Perhaps that is the reason Advent is much more fun to experience than Lent. We think of a birth as far more hopeful or exciting than a death!

Yet first we have to come to grips with the dark side. Easter is coming, but not yet. First, there is Holy Week, in which we will *walk through the valley of the shadow of death*.

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<sup>4</sup> John 19: 26.