Declaring the civic implications of Easter

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A cross on the crown on the Queen and flames on the head of Augustus

Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven - N.T. Wright

Easter activities are useful each year as we reflect on the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Christ, and as those commemorations help to highlight a rarely appreciated civic element in the Easter narrative. That aspect has implications for our understanding of his lordship over all our governments. Easter celebrations may therefore enrich individual believers who receive the gift of salvation, and may prompt us to commend the claims of Christ over each civic system, along with his ambition for the wise leadership of every nation.

Jesus revealing himself as Saviour and Lord

During the earthly ministry of Christ, the disciples struggled to understand his role as Saviour and Lord, until the Easter events concluded (John 12:16). But as Jesus drew closer to the hour of his death, his role as Saviour and as Lord (not just as prophet, teacher or healer) was described by him to his disciples. Interestingly, those who sought only political freedom recognised his role as Davidic Messiah, which Jesus highlighted (Luke 20:41). Hence his entry into Jerusalem was accompanied by the waving of palm branches and cries of *Hosanna* (John 12:12) meaning "help now" or "save now" - recollecting the Maccabean revolution that brought liberation during the Second Century BC - which Christ approved, as he kept the feast of Hanukkah (John 10:22-23).

While the revolution brought by Jesus relates to eternal life and the cleansing of the heart, it also has implications for how societies ought to be governed. Hence the events ahead of his Passion included Jesus commending those who welcomed him as king (Luke 19:28-40), his cleansing of the temple (19:45-46) although it operated under direct Roman supervision, and his declaration that we should *give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar* (20:25).

The civic leadership dimension in the Last Supper

Appreciation of the profound civic implication of the Last Supper requires a recognition of the meal's basis in the Passover. That commemoration from the time of Moses recollects God's judgement on a pagan nation whose leaders resisted the divine plan and persecuted Israel. In part the meal should remind us that God is angry with rebellious nations and will bring judgement to them. But if the leaders and people of the nations would repent and respond in faith, since *Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed* (I Corinthians 5:7), the judgement applicable to personal and national sins would be relieved.

The civic dimension to the Last Supper is further appreciated as we recognise Jesus speaking about civic authority and servant leadership after the meal, by referring to the Roman emperor in four ways, noted in the Gospel of Luke:

- Jesus highlighted the *kings of the Gentiles* who *lord it over them* (22:25); (some Roman coins have fire on the emperor's head to assert his divinity).
- Jesus referred to *those who exercise authority* over the people (22:25).
- He used the term *Benefactors* (22:25) - a title of emperors as noted by Philo (*Flaccus* 10) who wrote about *our saviour and benefactor Augustus*.
- Jesus referred to *the one who rules*, and required him to be like himself - *one who serves* (22:26); (hence a cross on the crown of Queen Elizabeth).

His call for servant-leadership has greatly influenced nations that uphold the Christian worldview. Heeding that call, the builders of the Westminster system gave Britain and her daughter nations, including many in the Commonwealth, the ambition towards civic service - provided by *ministers* (servants) of State who administer departments that facilitate *ministry*, not *bureaucracy*. Their vocation is refreshed as parliaments in the Westminster ethos open each daily sitting with prayer that God's kingdom come and his name be hallowed.

Finally, Christ at the Passover meal directed attention to his return, by saying: *"I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God"* (22:16). In that day, his exalted status that is presently unrecognised will be seen, and Christ shall be honoured as the *King of kings and Lord of lords* (Revelation 19:16). In that day, to the *Lord God Almighty and the Lamb ... the kings of the earth will bring their splendour* (21:22-24), and *all kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him* (Psalm 72:11).

Jesus challenging the civic leaders

The action of Christ to chastise the agents of government during the events of the first Easter have profound implications for modern leaders and authorities:

Since the soldiers who tried to arrest Christ *drew back and fell to the ground* (John 18:6) it is crucial that we warn civic leaders to recognise him as Lord. Though Jesus instructed Peter: *"Put your sword away"* (18:10), Christ could nevertheless call on *"more than twelve legions of angels"* (Matthew 26:53), and in the right context it is good to buy and use swords (Luke 22:36). Hence the valued role of the military and self-defence (Matthew 24:43). Indeed God utilised the soldiers as the first witnesses to the angel opening the tomb (28:11).

As Christ gave no answer to the High Priest (Matthew 26:63), nor to Pilate (John 19:9), nor to Herod the Tetrarch (Luke 23:9), there is a time to disobey civic leaders when they operate wrongly. As Jesus argued with the governor, and brought him to account by questioning: *"Is that your own idea ... or did others talk to you about me?"* (John 18:34), we may be led by God to rebuke the unwarranted action of government. As our Lord informed Pontius Pilate, *"You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above"* (John 19:11), so we may inform our civic leaders that they are not supreme.

As Christ rebuked civic leaders when he prayed for them in their presence, saying: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:34), so we do well to lovingly rebuke civic authorities who do wrong - as we pray for them in their presence (if we have sufficient courage).

Emulating the boldness of Joseph of Arimathea

Tremendous lessons may be learned from the Easter accounts as they relate the example of Joseph of Arimathea. According to Mark (15:43-46), Joseph was *... a prominent member of the Council, who ... went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body*. Joseph had sufficient status with the Roman governor as to be received by Pontius Pilate and to ask a favour which was granted. Joseph's favourable standing with the highest civic authority in the land, and his bold usage of civic connections to honour Christ, set an example for us today. Indeed we who know the risen Lord should be braver than Joseph. As he was gripped by the Holy Spirit and went boldly to Governor Pontius Pilate, turning from secret belief (John 19:38) to openly professing allegiance to Christ, so too may we boldly enunciate our faith in Jesus to individuals and governments.

Our resurrected Lord and the civic authorities

Raised up from death, Christ is sovereign over civic leaders and governments. Hence the assertion, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"* (Matthew 28:18) as he gives supervision and headship to government:

> God raised *Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything* (Ephesians 1:20-22).

As Christians reach out to all people, including civic leaders, we do well to draw attention to Christ in his fullness, as the one who claims sovereignty over each life and every nation. As we minister the Gospel message, we do well to explain the importance of repentance and restoration for individuals and the nations.

Utilising Easter for outreach



Easter annually provides us with many ministry opportunities:

- Children in churches may be shown how to bake hot cross buns which can be given to community leaders such as police, local councillors, fire-fighters and emergency services personnel, with literature on the message of Christ.
- Pancake suppers may be used for the Gospel as we describe the Christian foundation of *Shrove Tuesday* (a day to *shrive* or confess), *Mardi Gras* (Fat Tuesday - on which fats are used up) and *Carnival* (farewell to meat) - corrupted though such celebrations may be. Easter eggs which typify new life (as a chick breaks out of the shell) may be given in outreach to families.
- Easter cards may be sent to military personnel serving overseas, as we bear in mind the special ambition God has for the military (Luke 7:9, Acts 10).

In such ways we may enrich society and highlight the name of our Lord Jesus who *is the head over every power and authority* (Colossians 2:10) - with the prayerful hope that leaders and followers, like the pagan centurion of old, will say concerning Christ: *"Surely this man was the Son of God"* (Mark 15:39).

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