

Every year, Forbes puts together a ranking of the world's most powerful people. It's pretty much the people you would expect to see on such a list. The 2016 rankings placed Vladimir Putin in the top spot followed by Donald Trump and Angela Merkel. Other than Pope Francis in the #5 spot, the top 10 most powerful people are all either government officials or CEOs. Money and political might dominate the 100 spots on the list. I can't imagine this is much of a surprise to any of you. We all know how the world works and what qualities powerful person possesses.

Things weren't much different in ancient Israel. If we were to compile a similar list of the most powerful people of Jesus' day, the list would be topped by Roman leaders like Caesar, Pilate and Herod followed by the religious leaders like Caiaphas and then somewhere further down the list we might find Jesus. Knowing the impact that Jesus' life and ministry has had on the world for close to 2000 years, it can be hard to imagine that he was not really all that powerful. First of all he was a Jewish person living in a Roman occupied land. Second, he was a Galilean. Galileans were mostly farmers and fishermen. The area was part of an active trade route, so it was also fairly prosperous, but Herod's plan for Galilee was to demand such high taxes that everyone lived on the brink of poverty. If you couldn't pay your taxes, Herod would seize your land and sell it to his friends in Jerusalem. There was nothing the people of Galilee could do to stop it. Additionally, Jesus was a Carpenter by trade, and while it was a decent profession, carpenters were not in short supply so competition for work was stiff.

So this lowly carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee, the seemingly not-powerful Jesus shows up to Jerusalem as the city is bustling in preparation for Passover celebrations. Hundreds of thousands of people have made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the occasion including Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect who was tasked with ruling over Judea. Pilate normally lived in Caesarea Philippi which was the first century equivalent of living in Beverly Hills. But the time of the Passover was a time of potential unrest in Jerusalem. The festival celebrated the Hebrews escape the oppression and control of Egypt and Rome didn't want the people to get any ideas about recreating the events of liberation. So Pilate packed up and left his posh surroundings to make a show of force in Jerusalem.

Entry processions were important occasions in those days. They displayed Roman political and military power. Pilate was likely accompanied by great cavalry riding in on horses which was followed by a mass of foot soldiers clad in leather armor carrying weapons and banners. The beating of drums and the thunder of horse hooves drove fear and intimidation into onlookers. Not only did this procession display the power of the Roman Empire, it also flaunted Roman Imperial theology. A theology that believed the Emperor was not only a political ruler, but the son of God.

On the other side of the city, we find Jesus. Jesus' procession wasn't a first-century version of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. It was a statement. The author of the Gospel of Matthew makes it clear that Jesus rode into Jerusalem as an anointed king and the crowds greeted him as such. David Lose reminds us that "The hosannas the people cry have both religious and political overtones. They greet him as the Lord's Messiah and expect him to overthrow the Romans. And the Romans take note."¹

This may help us understand why Jesus was crucified. It wasn't just because he upset the religious leaders. It was the fact that we he called people to give their allegiance to a different kingdom – the kingdom of God. This proclamation, and the growing number of people who agreed with it, made him a threat.

David Lose writes of two tragedies. First, that "the people are half right. [Jesus] did come as God's Messiah. But they misunderstood what that meant – not "regime change" by violence, but rather the love of God poured out upon the world in a way that dissolved all the things we use to differentiate ourselves from others and the formation of a single humanity that knows itself – and all those around them! – as God's beloved people."²

The other tragedy is that "the religious and political authorities are also half right. Jesus was a threat. For that matter, he still is. He threatens our penchant to define ourselves over and against others. He threatens the way in which we seek to establish our future by hoarding wealth and power. He threatens our habit of drawing lines and making rules about who is acceptable and who is not. He threatens all of these things and more. But they are so wrong in thinking that they can eliminate this threat by violence. Jesus' resurrection – which in Matthew is accompanied by the shaking of the very foundations of the earth – affirms that God's love is stronger than hate and God's life is stronger than death. And eventually all will yield to the mercy and majesty of God."³

I have to admit, as I took in the news this week of the unleashing of deadly chemical warfare in Syria, the US response of raining down 59 tomahawk missiles and then this mornings news of bombings in Coptic Christian churches in Egypt that have killed at least 31 people, I wished for a God who showed up with the type of power that we humans would put on a Forbes list; the type of power that would ride in on a warhorse and demand an end to the killing of innocent children. The type of power that would shake world leaders and war mongers to their core and force them to protect human life and all of creation. But that's not how God works. The Rev. Nadia Bolz

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/04/palmpassion-sunday-a/>

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/04/palmpassion-sunday-a/>

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/04/palmpassion-sunday-a/>

Weber writes “the good news is that there is a reliable way to legitimately know about the nature of God. And it’s never to look at ourselves. And it’s always to look at Jesus. Jesus is God’s self-revelation. Jesus is like God saying This is how I want to be known. It’s like God is telling us: will you stop your projections already and just listen to Jesus, watch Jesus, follow Jesus so that you can really know who I am.”⁴

Our God is not a God of warhorses, or tomahawk missiles, or barrel bombs. Our God proclaims that true power is a love so fierce that it transgresses boundaries and challenges the status quo. This love made manifest in Jesus who was willing to die to show the world how far love will go to fight for the ones the world deems powerless. In times like this, we too cry “Save us God!” Save us from violence and war, from greed and it’s destructive power. Save us from being overwhelmed and becoming numb to the atrocities in our world. In the days and weeks ahead, may we cry “Hosanna!” in celebration when we witness God’s love at work in the world, and may we cry out “hosanna!” as a prayer, when that love feels absent.

⁴ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/04/a-palm-sunday-sermon-on-why-we-dont-go-straight-from-hosanna-to-he-is-risen/>