

## Jesus the Martyr

By David Bisgrove

In all of the movies depicting Jesus' life, there is a scene where the crowd of people who had just heralded his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, turn on him, shouting "Crucify him!" As that scene unfolds one wonders why there wasn't a lone voice of reason saying "wait, wait wait...he's good! We shouldn't kill him! What are we thinking?" I'm sure that those following Jesus at the time had a similar thought "Why was this happening? How senseless and tragic! Poor, beautiful and misunderstood Jesus."

It wouldn't be completely inaccurate to say that Jesus' life could be described as a beautiful tragedy. He was born into a world of oppression. His nation was occupied by the Roman Empire. There was a spirit of insurrection that broke out from time to time as the Jewish community of which Jesus was a part looked for a Messiah who would liberate them. So when Jesus appeared and began to attract attention he was quickly seen as a threat to both the established power of his own community as well as the Roman authorities. He didn't shy away from voicing his disgust with the powerful in his own community. In one very revolutionary act that can be found in the gospel of Mark, Jesus goes into the Temple and starts turning over the tables of money changers and people who were using the Temple as a marketplace, saying, "[t]he Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves."<sup>1</sup>

And yet his resistance was non-violent, calling those who followed him to love their enemies, turn the other cheek, and forgive those who harmed them. He didn't pick up the sword in protest but sought to persuade his followers and enemies alike with a message of hope and love. But in the end he met the fate of so many well intentioned public figures, he was betrayed by one of his closest associates, sentenced to death as the result of a rigged and unjust trial, and died a martyr for a worthy cause – similar to our modern examples of Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi.

However, the portrait of Jesus the tragic martyr sanitizes the meaning of his life and death as nothing more than a tragic end to a beautiful yet somewhat naïve life at the hands of those who were threatened by his message. But a careful reading of the biographies of Jesus (the four Gospel accounts) tells a much different story. Jesus' death was not a tragedy, but an intentional surrender of his life that he himself predicted. At one point, as Jesus was describing how his mission was going to end in rejection and death at the hands of the religious leaders of the day, Peter, one of his closest friends (and the first of his disciples to identify him as the Messiah), rebuked Jesus for this passive and defeatist message. Jesus' reply to Peter was not a grateful response to a concerned

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark 11:17

friend. Mark, the gospel writer captures Jesus' words: "Get behind me, Satan!"... "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."<sup>2</sup> Later, when those very religious leaders, along with Roman soldiers come to arrest Jesus, we see a man who is neither defiant or passive:

*So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers and some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees. They were carrying torches, lanterns and weapons. Jesus, **knowing all that was going to happen to him** (emphasis added), went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. Again he asked them, "Who is it you want?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." "I told you that I am he," Jesus answered. "If you are looking for me, then let these men go."<sup>3</sup>*

And again, his disciple Peter misunderstands what Jesus' purpose was:

*Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"<sup>4</sup>*

Peter's response is understandable. He is both protecting a friend and a cause. He can't imagine how Jesus' arrest and execution could do anything but bring an end to their cause and leave them once again hopeless in the face of oppression. There was no way for him to understand the significance of Jesus' willingness to suffer and die. Only later did Jesus' followers understand the meaning of Jesus' voluntary death. For example, a few years later the Apostle Paul, reflecting on Jesus' death, summarized Jesus' mission this way -

Who (Jesus), being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!  
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:33

<sup>3</sup> John 18:3-8

<sup>4</sup> John 18:10-11

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus knew that through his willingness to become weak, he would make life and salvation possible for those who embraced him as the divine sacrifice for the world.

Jesus was the leader of a revolution. He saw himself as a divine King. But he wasn't a martyr for a worthy cause. Jesus was God incarnate who suffered and died to end suffering and death.

*David Bisgrove has lived in New York City since 1988, the year he received his MBA and MPH from Columbia University. After working nine years in Healthcare Administration and Finance, David joined the Redeemer staff as Director of Finance and Operations in 1999. He was ordained in 2004 and now oversees the areas of Prayer, Evangelism, Worship, Stewardship, and Family Ministry. He lives on the Upper West Side with his wife Alice and their two daughters Mary Claire and Charlotte.*

---

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 2:6-11