

Palm Sunday
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
20 March 2016

Luke 22:14-23:56

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, a plot of any story, what he used to call *mythos*, is the most crucial part of any story. The plot is more important than the characters, the location, the audience, and, even the sound effects. For him, a tragedy could be divided into three parts: a beginning, where the plot is set up; a middle, where the plot reaches its climax; and an end, where the plot is resolved. Now, for the plot to capture the imaginations and the hearts of the viewers it must be necessary to the story and it must be plausible. Today, we are here to witness the climax of the Jesus story. After a beginning which included the infancy narratives and three years of ministry, the plot turns towards Jerusalem, where the Son of God will be killed by the evil forces of Empire and Religion. The Romans and the Temple authorities will conspire to kill the Son of God. This is indeed the most dramatic part of the Jesus story.

In today's cinematic culture, we have some like the great Martin Scorsese, who believe that even though plot is crucial to all stories, and without it there is no story, the movies to which he returns over and over are not movies that have the best plots, but the movies that have the best characters. Many people may not remember what *Steel Magnolias* is all about, but few will forget Shirley Mclaine's character Louisa "Ouiser" Boudreaux. Some may not remember the story of Luke Skywalker, but most of us remember Dark Vader's line, "I am your father." For Scorsese, it is characters that make a story compelling and unforgettable. For others, it is the audience who determines how the plot is constructed and how the characters are shaped. Without an audience in mind, the written story is lifeless and formless. The Jesus story in the gospel of Luke is filled with amazing characters, and the audience remains constantly in Luke's mind. Let us review these characters and audience.

The first thing to remember in the Gospel of Luke is to whom the story is written. This is important because our stories are always shaped by the audience they are trying to reach. When we tell a familiar story of an event well known to those around us we might avoid certain details that are well known to the listeners. When we tell the same family story to an outsider, there are details that need to be included, otherwise the person will not be able to understand the story. Matthew and Mark are written for Jews who have come to follow Jesus of

Nazareth, whereas Luke is written to Theophilus, believed to be a Roman official. There are details Luke gives this Roman official which we don't get in the Gospels written to the Christian Jews. As such, Luke is unique in many ways.

Luke presents Jesus, his main character, as a faith healer who poses no threat to the Roman empire, who came to preach a gospel of peace and not of war, and who spent his days doing good works and preaching a message of forgiveness and love for the sinner and the lost. This Jesus is falsely accused and charged with (a) deceiving the people, (b) forbidding the people to pay taxes to Caesar, and (c) claiming to be the Messiah or King. In other words, he is charged with insurrection, inciting people against the Empire. A charge that Luke adamantly denies by repeating Jesus' innocence throughout his narrative.

In Matthew and Mark you never hear Pilate exclaim that Jesus is innocent, yet in the Gospel of Luke you hear Pilate declare this innocence three times. Pilate exclaims three times, "I have found no reason for the penalty of death." In Luke, Jesus is declared innocent three times by Pilate and once by Herod. Later on he will be found innocent by one of the thieves crucified next to him. He says, "This man has done nothing wrong". When Jesus dies, the centurion who just carried out the sentence exclaims, "Certainly this man was innocent." Then we hear that a certain Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the council had not agreed with their plan and action against Jesus, perhaps because he also knew that Jesus was innocent. Seven times we hear Jesus' innocence affirmed in Luke, 5 verbally and 2 implied. This is pretty unique to this Gospel.

The message Luke wants Theophilus to know is that Jesus posed no threat to the Roman Empire as even their own officials made clear. And, if Jesus did not pose any threats to the Empire, neither do the followers of Jesus now, 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. In fact, Jesus had no ill-will towards the Romans even at the point of his death. As Jesus is crucified, he exclaims, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." We only read these words in Luke. At the cross, Jesus forgives those who falsely accused him, those who arrested him in the middle of the night as a common thief, those who beat him and scourged him, those who mocked him and slapped him on the face, the one who ordered the execution, those who carried out the sentence of death, those who even at the cross deride him and insult him, and even the one who betrayed him, and the one who denied him.

Luke presents us with the story of an innocent man put to death as a miscarriage of justice. Yet, even at his death, Jesus forgave those who killed him. Luke wants Theophilus to know that this is the attitude of the people who follow Jesus. The early church is no threat to the empire. "They, like Jesus, seek to

forgive the Romans, not to get even. The Romans, the Jews, and the entire world need to hear Jesus' powerful words: 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.'" (Stoffregen, www.CrossMarks.com). Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Often in the Gospel he is accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors, but he also eats with Pharisees and church leaders. He even breaks bread with his betrayer a detail that is unique to Luke. In the other Gospels, Jesus speaks about his betrayer before the supper, but in Luke, Jesus only says something about his betrayer after the supper is completed. Even though by then "Satan had entered Judas' heart", Jesus still has supper with him and treats him just as he treats the others. He truly ate with sinners because he came into the world to save sinners.

Luke is clear that all of these events took place to fulfill Holy Scripture. There is a plot within the plot of the great story of Jesus. Even though we see the Romans and Temple authorities killing Jesus, nothing of what has just happened was the result of human agency alone. God was behind these events to bring salvation history to its ultimate conclusion. It is through these events that Jesus enters into his glory. These events were pre-determined by God many centuries before the Romans came into power. It was God's plan from the very beginning that his Son should redeem the world through his passion. This passion on the cross is the clearest sign of God's compassion for sinners. Jesus died for sinners everywhere whom he forgives in his name. The fact that we have a compassionate God who will go through any extent to redeem the world, and the fact that through Jesus all our sins are forgiven are the two facts that remain at the very center of the Gospel of Luke. This is the real story line. We have a God who is compassionate, and we have a God who forgives us our sins, even when we betray, abuse, and kill his own Son.

In Luke, Jesus came to find the lost (the lost treasure, the lost coin, the lost son...). He is not a political revolutionary and he poses no threat to the Empire. He is God's own son and even today he eats with sinners. This meal we are about to have is meant for us, sinners. We too are lost and we too are found. Through Christ and his cross we are redeemed. Thanks be to God! Amen.