

## “Parody and Power”

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*When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” <sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matthew 21:1-11)*

Saturday Night Live has had some good times and some bad times, but over the years I think one of its greatest strengths has been its parodies: parodies of political debates, movies, TV shows, and especially commercials. When Wheaties cereal was being marketed as “the breakfast of champions” like Michael Jordan and Mary Lou Retton, John Belushi posed as a decathlete who swore that “Little Chocolate Donuts” was the staple on his training table. To poke some fun at Nyquil, the “nighttime sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, stuffy head, fever, so you can rest medicine,” the SNL cast made a fake commercial for “Hibernol,” which featured Chris Farley drinking a comically large bucket of green syrup that didn’t just knock him out for the night, but for the entire flu season.<sup>1</sup> Sketches may hit or miss, but the commercial parodies almost always make me chuckle. And, sometimes, they even change my perception of the product being lampooned.

That, I would say, is highest form of parody. At its most basic, a “parody” is an imitation of something that exaggerates certain attributes of that thing for comedic effect. But the best parodies aim at more than a laugh. The best parodies use the joke to make a point, or even to challenge the status quo. One example of such a parody came from another late-night television show, “The Colbert Report.” In 2010, when the US Supreme Court issued its ruling in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the decision cleared the way for an avalanche of spending by corporations and special interests in American elections. In the wake of the decision, host Stephen Colbert concocted an elaborate parody of those politicians who were rushing to create so-called Super PAC’s to funnel money to their pet causes. He actually created and launched his own Super PAC, which he called “**Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow.**” Posing as a conservative pundit, he boasted that his new committee could raise almost unlimited and virtually untraceable funds. He claimed he would use the money not just for political

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<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Night Live: The First Twenty Years*, edited by Michael Cader (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), pp. 50-69.



advertisements, but also for “normal administrative expenses, including but not limited to, luxury hotel stays, private jet travel, and PAC mementos from Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus.”<sup>2</sup> It was initially meant as a joke, but the parody quickly took on a life of its own. Over the following two years, the Colbert Super PAC raised over \$1.2 million dollars, and Colbert lampooned the absurdities of the process every step of the way. In the end, Colbert ended up receiving a Peabody Award from the National Association of Broadcasters for his elaborate exposé, which many believe altered the landscape of the campaign finance debate in America.<sup>3</sup>

As you can see, the highest form of parody does not simply imitate and exaggerate for comedic effect. The best parodies aim to make a point that needs to be made, in the hope that perceptions might be changed, and that, in turn, the world might be changed.

Why, you might be asking, am I going on at such length about parody on Palm Sunday? It is because I believe this story of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is an example of the kind of parody I have been talking about. I believe Jesus is purposefully, pointedly imitating something to the point of absurdity -- not for laughs, but in order to reveal a truth that had been hidden from human vision... in order to make a point that needed to be made... in order to change our perception of the world.

The “something” that was being parodied was known by many as the "Roman Triumph." The Roman Triumph was an extravagant parade that a victorious, conquering general would receive upon his return to Rome. To qualify for one, the general would have had to have killed at least 5,000 enemy combatants in his campaign. If he met this high standard, a massive procession would be planned, and when it all came together, it would go something like this:

- As the parade entered the city, trumpeters would lead the way.
- Then came towers or floats representing the captured cities.
- Next were the wagons full of the spoils of war (gold, silver, gems and works of art), followed by seventy white oxen, marching stoically toward their sacrificial deaths.
- Captured enemy leaders followed behind them, and their fate that afternoon would be exactly like that of the bulls.
- Then musicians, pipers, harpists and incense-bearers would signal the entry of the military general himself.
- Led by all that pomp and circumstance, the general would finally enter, riding in on a flamboyant chariot wearing a purple toga and a crown of gold. If he had children, they might be in the chariot with him.
- Behind the chariot, the secretaries and aides of the army would march in.
- And last but not least, to accentuate the show of force, came the full array of soldiers, each of them wearing a crown.

This procession would wind its way through the city to the summit of the Capitol, where the victorious general would offer the sacrifices of bulls and captured enemy leaders

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<sup>2</sup> “Colbert Super PAC,”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colbert\\_Super\\_PAC#:~:text=Americans%20for%20a%20Better%20Tomorrow,television%20series%20The%20Colbert%20Report](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colbert_Super_PAC#:~:text=Americans%20for%20a%20Better%20Tomorrow,television%20series%20The%20Colbert%20Report).

<sup>3</sup> <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/1939/859>

in thanksgiving to the gods<sup>4</sup> and take the throne of honor. This glorious, day-long celebration, this "Roman Triumph," was the entrance that would be expected for a true conquering hero in Jesus' time.

Against this backdrop, we begin to see the genius of the parody that Jesus offers. Jesus had to know that, if he really wanted to claim the title King of Kings, this would be the kind of show that everyone expected. Hearing of his power, they must have imagined the Messiah to roll in heavy – strong, ripped, bronzed, and idealized – surrounded by throngs of powerful people lining up around him.

But when Jesus arrives, there is no chariot. Just a borrowed donkey.

Where the rows of soldiers, aides and dignitaries should be, there was just an unruly crowd of very unremarkable people: itinerant fisherman, tax collectors, women and children.

They did not come brandishing weapons; just waving soft, leafy branches.

And Jesus had not killed 5,000. He had fed 5,000, and did that with just a few loaves and fishes. But Rome probably wouldn't be all that impressed with that.

And as for a crown, Jesus wasn't wearing one – at least not yet. In a few days, when he does receive one, it will not be one of gold and glory, but one formed with common thorns, pressed upon his head in cruel mockery, and tinged with his own blood.

And yes, at the end of the procession, Jesus will be elevated above the people, but not on a throne. His throne will be a crude wooden cross adorned with gruesome iron nails.<sup>5</sup> And on that cross this royal procession will end in a sacrifice, but not of bulls or conquered enemy kings. The sacrifice of this procession will be the king himself. The priest would serve as his own sacrifice, and the prophet would be doomed by his own prophecy.

For those who were hoping for the mighty Jesus, the triumphant Jesus, the ripped and beautiful and not-to-be-trifled-with Jesus, this so-called "triumphal entry" would seem like a cruel joke. But this parody was not for laughs, because the best parodies aim higher than that. They seek to make a point that needs to be made in the hope that people might see the world the way it needs to be seen.

So, on this Palm Sunday, may we understand that this triumphal entry that hardly seems triumphant may be more than what is visible on the surface. Let us allow this Parody of Power to help us see the world as we ought to see it as followers of this man who forsook the chariot for a donkey, chose a cross instead of a throne, and found his greatest strength in love and humility. As we descend down into the difficult valley of Holy Week, may we be open to learning something new from the grand parody of power that we see in his life, death, and resurrection. This year, may we see something new that we need to see, so that we might actually change, and learn to live humbly as he did, to serve selflessly as he did, and love tenaciously as he still does.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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<sup>4</sup> Will Durant. *Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325*. New York: Simon & Schuster (1944), pp. 82-3.

<sup>5</sup> Michael L. Lindvall. "Palm Sunday Power Play." Delivered on April 1, 2012

<http://www.brickchurch.org/Customized/uploads/BrickChurch/Worship/Sermons/PDFs/2012/040112.pdf>