

7.25.09 / Mark 3:1-6

Pharisees and Herodians

Within the first century world of Galilee and Judea there were two clear groups: the Hellenists and the Jewish nationalists. The Hellenists may or may not have paid much attention to the Jewish religion, but their way of life was Greco-Roman. They built, and attended, theaters, they played games at the gymnasium nude, they went to chariot races, they dressed in the Roman manner, and they generally accepted that the Roman way was the way. Yahweh might or might not be an important god, but, when push came to shove, Rome was big, Rome kept you safe (for some value of safe), and the Roman life was decadent and glamorous.

The Jewish nationalists were just the opposite. First and foremost, Yahweh was God. And Yahweh had some rules, and Yahweh liked Jews. So these nationalists assumed that Yahweh must hate everyone else, and all the things they do. In their minds, what Yahweh really wanted was to see the particularly Jewish way of life, what the Romans would have considered a flavor of barbarism, exalted as Israel, ruled by a Davidic king, took over the world, or at least ruled strongly in the predominant local area.

For the Hellenists Herod (both the original “the Great” and his sons, who were all Herods) was just their sort of man. Herods, old and new, built Roman-style cities, Roman theaters, Roman coliseums, and even, on occasion, Roman temples. They courted great Romans (the local top Herod, first the Great, then Antipas, was always friends with Caesar), they pushed for Roman culture, and their main aim was for Israel to be a great Roman province.

For the Pharisees Herod was a disgusting sellout. He wasn’t ethnically Jewish (his sons, who were the reigning Herods during Jesus’ ministry, were marginally better, since their mother was a Jew). He didn’t legally enforce Jewish Law. Herod the Great was so distrusted that when he said he was going to improve the Temple, which was a small structure in disrepair, the religious leaders made him gather all the materials first. They didn’t trust him not to raze the existing Temple and get bored before he built the new one.

The Pharisees were hoping for the right kind of king. A zealous Jew. A divinely-appointed Davidic King, who would, of course, put Israel in first place on the world map, and take those unpleasant Hellenists and either kill them or make them second-class citizens. (There’s probably an element of class tension here, too – Hellenists were often making lots of money off the Roman system, and Jewish nationalists were often dirt poor.) They were looking for the Messiah. They were, depending on their own personal theology and bloodthirstiness, hoping to be either his shock troops or his favorites.

The Herodians, then, are opposed to the Pharisees. The Herodians might be Herod’s relatives, his sycophants, or just regular fans, but they want Herod to rule, and rule in a Roman manner. The Pharisees want the Messiah to rule (and they think this is a man-on-a-throne-in-Jerusalem sort of reign), and they want him to purge the lands of nasty foreign ways.

So when the Pharisees go to the Herodians and say, “Let’s get rid of this would-be Messiah,” what’s happening? Presumably the Herodians already want Jesus gone. Herod the Great certainly did, slaughtering infants to rid himself of a potential Messiah. The Pharisees, though, should be defending the Messiah against the Herodians. This is the most complete rejection the Pharisees can offer. Not only are they intent on killing Jesus, but they are willing to hand him over as a secular criminal, a traitor, to get that done.
