

Among the most common movie tropes is that of the surprise villain. That moment in a movie when a character that you thought you could trust turns out to be the bad guy the hero was fighting all along. Disney movies are notorious for it. Prince Hans in Frozen. Stinky Pete in Toy Story 2. Charles Muntz in Up. Mr. Waterhouse in Monsters Inc. King Candy in Wreck-it Ralph. Evelyn Deavor in the Incredibles 2. The list goes on and on.

It's become so common that it's almost rare now to find a movie where the villain really is the villain. Where the bad guy with evil motives really is the person that the hero has to fight for the whole movie. Nothing is ever black and white. Modern cinema must always be morally ambiguous.

That may be fine for Hollywood, but the Bible doesn't operate in that way. The person in the Bible who looks like the bad guy is the bad guy. You don't have to second guess yourself on God's Word in this respect.

I bring all this up because we definitely have a bad guy in today's Gospel Reading. A villain who looks and acts and is truly villainous. They're called the chief priests.

Today's lesson is that of the Triumphal Entry. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of the prophet Zechariah: *“Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”*

This was not the way a king was expected to enter the city. The king of Jerusalem should riding on horse. On a chariot. On a golden litter carried by his disciples. Surrounded by signs of wealth and power.

Because kings are arrogant. Kings are proud. Kings enjoy displaying their royalty. King Herod lived in an absolutely magnificent palace. He had multiple homes scattered throughout Palestine. He had a nearly impervious fortress called Masada that was built into the rock of a mountain. King Herod would never have been caught dead riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

But Jesus wasn't an ordinary king. Jesus was not arrogant or proud. He had no concern for wealth or power or any of the trappings of royalty. And what he wanted most of all was simply to do His Father's will in humility.

The people didn't know this, of course. They thought he was a king. They wanted him to be the king. And so they treated him as the king. As the Son of David. As the beginning of a new Davidic dynasty of kings, anointed and empowered by God.

In some ways, they were right. He is the king. The king above all kings. He is the Son of David. The shoot from Jesse's stem. He was anointed by the Father and is indeed full of divine power.

And so Jesus doesn't stop them. They may not have all the details right. They may not truly understand his goal and purpose, and won't until after the resurrection.

But at this moment, they aren't saying anything that is untrue. They are quoting scripture that speaks about Jesus. That points to him and his work. That's a good thing. They aren't the villains here.

No, the villains are the chief priests. And they're villains for two reasons. First they're villains for what they have done to the Temple.

You see, we hear the term “chief priests” and we think of a religious figure. Someone like Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, toiling away at his religious duties, lighting incense, offering sacrifices, saying public prayers, reading scripture. That sort of thing. And those sorts of priests did exist.

But the chief priests and scribes that Matthew is describing are a slightly different sort. They are an aristocratic class within Jewish society. A set of highly positioned families with significant power, who ran the Temple for generations. And, for them, the Temple wasn't a place to find comfort in God's Word. It wasn't a place to find the forgiveness of sins. It wasn't a place of prayer.

No, the Temple was a bank. It was one of the few places where you could securely deposit your money in the ancient world. It was also one of the few places you could legally get a loan. And it was one of the few places where you could exchange foreign currency. It was a bank. A big bank.

And like banks today, it made a lot of money. It made a lot of money on loans and interest. And it made a lot of money on transaction fees for changing currency. And it made a lot of money selling animals for sacrifices. The Temple had become a corrupt business venture, run by a cartel of chief priests making big money off of impoverished pilgrims who just wanted to obey God and receive his grace.

Thus, it really shouldn't surprise us that Jesus reacts the way he does when he gets to the Temple. In fact, the most surprising part of this whole scene is that he only flips over some tables and doesn't call down fire from heaven to destroy the whole lot of them. They have twisted everything about the Temple and their function as priests into something filled with greed and sin.

So Jesus clears them out. And he gets away with it. Temple guards don't arrest him. Roman soldiers don't drag him off. Probably because everybody is thrilled that he did it.

And suddenly the Temple becomes not just a place of prayer, but of healing and comfort. The blind and the lame come to him right there in the temple, and he heals them. And this makes everybody happy... except for the chief priests. Who are somehow indignant with Jesus over the fact that he's helping people. They are angry that sick people aren't sick anymore.

Do you know how evil you have to be to be upset that blind people can now see and paralyzed people can now walk? These men are truly villains. There is no moral ambiguity about them. They are just evil.

But here's the thing. When we call them villains, we're kind of dismissing them too, aren't we? They're evil. They're corrupt. They're different from us. We're not like them. But look what happens five days later, in Matthew 27.

*“Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”... Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let him be crucified!” And he said, “Why? What evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”*

Jesus was humble and righteous. He sought for the Temple to be a place of prayer and healing. The chief priests were proud and arrogant. They sought for the Temple to be a place of greed and corruption. And yet, who do the people listen to? Who do they follow? Who do they truly worship? The chief priests.

Sometimes the villain is obvious. The chief priests were an obvious villain. But sometimes the person you thought you could trust turns out to be the villain all along.

We think we can trust our hearts. We think we're not the villain. We think there's no evil inside of us. But then another villain comes along and we find ourselves led into the same evil so easily. Because, in truth, we were the villain all along.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds shouted out, “Hosanna!” Hosanna is a Hebrew word that means, “Save us!” They thought they were crying out for Jesus to save them from villains like the Romans or even the chief priests. But, in reality, Jesus had only come to save them from one villain: from themselves.

From their own sinful hearts, filled with evil. From their own sinful flesh, that so often chases after the things of this world. From their own sinful minds, deceived and twisted by the evil one. There was no villain of this world that could destroy them like the old Adam dwelling within them.

Jesus went to the cross, not to save the innocent from villains, like in a Hollywood movie. He went to the cross to save villains from themselves. He went to the cross to save us from ourselves.

He gave his very flesh and blood for sinners like you and me. That we may eat and drink and find forgiveness. That he might overturn the tables in the Temple of our hearts and change these bodies from a place of sin and corruption into a place of prayer and healing. Where God himself dwells and we rejoice that the Son of David is with us. That the king above all kings is on his throne.

Not because he came to us in arrogance or pride or royalty, but because he came in humility. He emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. He submitted himself to death. Even death on a cross.

There is only one hero in the story of Holy Week. Obvious or not, everyone else ends up a villain. But thanks be to God, Christ Jesus came to save villains, of whom I am the most villainous. Christ Jesus came to save sinners like you and me. Amen.