



The Eagle and the Crows: A Parable?

Not long ago, while walking around nearby Como Lake, I was attracted by the sound of a great commotion overhead: two crows chasing a bald eagle! The eagle, perhaps having seen a fish, was intent upon swooping down to a particular spot on the lake; but the crows were having none of it. Every time the eagle turned or dived, the crows were all over it—scolding, chasing, even pecking at its tail or backside. The battle lasted for several minutes until at last the eagle turned tail and flew away. The crows returned to the tree above the favored spot and preened their feathers.

What was going on there, and why wasn't the eagle, with its vastly superior size and strength, victorious against those pesky crows? Perhaps an ornithologist might help me make sense of it, or perhaps the eagle simply didn't want it as much as the crows that day. Is there a moral in this parable, something like "Overwhelming force may not succeed against fierce determination?" More, is there a lesson here for the country that uses that eagle as its emblem? Can the eagle be bested by smaller, but more determined, adversaries? Or was that moral only valid in Vietnam?

The United States is, no doubt, more determined now than it was in Vietnam. Still, there seem to be a lot of folks watching the drama, especially from outside our borders, who are growing increasingly disenchanted with the eagle, even though few of them would ever actively cheer for the crows. Does this matter? Do we care what they think?

And what about God? Does God think it is a good idea that, for now, there is but one superpower and that we are it? Has God even ordained this state of affairs? Many will be as vociferous in their denials of all this as others are of their affirmations. The Bible won't tell us.

The Bible is, however, remarkably skeptical of monarchy, and even harder on empire. The superpowers of the day (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome) are invariably portrayed as oppressors—probably because they were—even though they might have understood themselves to be offering the good life of Pax Romana (or equivalent). More, according to Samuel and the prophets, even Israel's kings invariably fell prey to the corruption that comes with power.

True, the Bible, no friend of anarchy, recognizes that very bad things can happen when there is no authority and people do "what is right in their own eyes"

(Judg 17:6, etc.). Kings, at their best, will “judge [the] people with righteousness,” “defend the cause of the poor and needy,” and provide “abundance of grain in the land” (Ps 72). On the other hand, the Bible, no friend of despots, recognizes that, more often than not, power will indeed corrupt. You don’t want a king, warned Samuel, because a king “will take your sons” as soldiers; a king “will take your daughters” as servants; he “will take” your fields and your crops and your cattle and “you shall be his slaves” (1 Sam 8:10–18). In an earlier day, Jotham, too, made the point with a parable: when the trees wanted a king, they got not the beneficial olive tree, fig tree, or vine, but instead the worthless bramble (Judg 9:7–15).

Certainly, whatever our politics, we will want to remind ourselves that, as Christians, we are not immune to the arrogance that comes with power. We will want to remind our leaders as well, especially when we hear things like the comments made to Ron Susskind by an aide to President Bush:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”¹

History’s actors, perhaps. But history’s decisive actors have a bad habit of getting it wrong as least as often as they get it right, especially when they believe they’re on “a mission from God,” which is how Bruce Bartlett described President Bush to Susskind in the article just cited. (Bartlett was a domestic policy adviser to Ronald Reagan and a treasury official for the first President Bush.)

In the Bible, leaders truly on a mission from God understand themselves to be humble servants. They know, with Ps 72, that “the cause of the poor and the needy” is their cause. More, they will need to learn, with Bonhoeffer, not to give way to a “driving restlessness” and “zeal” that does “not want to accept any limitation on their effectiveness” and “does not respect resistance.” This “confuses the word of the gospel with a conquering idea,” one that “requires fanatics” rather than disciples. Fanatics will discover, says Bonhoeffer, that “the world will justifiably fight back against [such] an idea.”² Or, in terms of my parable, leaders who fly too far on arrogant wings of fancy will, no doubt, find the crows waiting to peck at their tail feathers.

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¹Ron Susskind, “Without a Doubt,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004 (the article is available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html?pagewanted=2&ei=5090&en=890a96189e162076&ex=1255665600&partner=rssuserland>).

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 173.