

Crossing the Rubicon

There is a model of Jeep that has become quite popular: the Rubicon. I suspect that the majority of Rubicon owners don't know where the name comes from, but Rubicon sounds bold and daring. On my desk, I have a book entitled *Rubicon*. Its subtitle is *The Last Years of the Roman Republic*. The Rubicon is a small creek in Italy, and, at one time marked a boundary of a faction of the Roman Republic. The Roman Republic had been experiencing a great deal of turmoil, with various military factions claiming territory. A truce was made in which it was decided how much territory each faction could rule, and no general could take his armies past the boundaries that had been decided upon.

One general, Julius Caesar, in a very bold act, decided that he didn't want to be just a general; he wanted to be the Caesar/Ruler/Dictator of Rome, and he led his armies across the Rubicon. Crossing the Rubicon was no major feat, for it is only a few metres wide, but the act of crossing it set into motion a major civil war in the Roman world which led to Julius Caesar's eventual claim to the title of Pontifex Maximus (Greatest Pontiff, or more literally, Supreme Bridge-BUILDER). After Julius Caesar was assassinated (on March 15, the Ides of March), Rome remained in turmoil for a couple of decades until Caesar Augustus claimed power, named himself as the emperor, and the Roman Republic (ruled by the people through their representatives) was replaced by the Roman Empire (ruled by one person, a king or emperor). When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, he set into motion the events that would remove the authority of the elected representatives and replace them with the authority of one powerful person.

The phrase, "crossing the Rubicon," has come to mean "passing the point of no return." Julius Caesar knew what he was doing when he led his army across the Rubicon, and he understood that after he did, there was no turning back. You have to be bold and daring to "cross the Rubicon," and, hence, the name given to a vehicle. The drivers of Rubicons have chosen that particular vehicle because of the image that they think it creates for them.

This week we celebrate Good Friday. There is a point in the biblical narrative when Jesus "crosses the Rubicon." When he is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body and court, Jesus was asked if he was the Messiah, the Son of God. He didn't deny or confirm the opinion of the high priest, but he quoted from Daniel 7 when he said, "From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). Jesus had to have known that to say these words meant that there was no turning back. He was applying Messianic Scripture to himself, thus saying that he was equal with God and chosen by God. Once he uttered those words, there was no turning back. His response to the high priest led him to be convicted of blasphemy, a sin punishable by death, and that led to his being convicted of treason in the Roman courts, a crime also punishable by death.

Jesus knew what he was doing, and he knew the consequences of his words. Had he remained silent he could have made it a lot more difficult for his powerful opponents to sentence him to death, for up to that point, they had not been able to make any of the charges against him stick. Jesus crossed the point of no return when he elevated himself to the very throne room of the Father.

Jesus knew what he was doing, and he also knew the consequences, for this was the very purpose for which he had come. He had come to set up a new Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, and this Kingdom would be very different from the ones that were in existence at his time, and, for that matter, which would be in existence in any place or time in history.

How does the Kingdom of God differ from other kingdoms or empires? If we consider two major empires in history, we see a commonality. The Roman Empire made every effort to conquer as much of the world as it possibly could. When it did conquer territory, it began to bring back to Rome the best that that territory had to offer. Wheat, iron, slaves – all of these were brought back to Rome for the benefit of Roman citizens. Similarly, the British Empire, as it conquered vast portions of the world, brought back to Great Britain the best that the lands under its rule had to offer. We might say that this is the prerogative of an empire, and that is why powerful empires take rather than give. While it is true that empires might invest money in conquered lands (think of Herod's temple), it is often for the ultimate benefit of the empire, not for the people. (Herod rebuilt the temple, in large part, to placate the Jews so that he would not have to deal with their desires for liberation.) Placating the masses through investment was a way to keep the empire strong.

The kingdom of God is very different, for it does not take. God does not need to take anything from this world to benefit himself, and anything taken from this world would not add to his wellbeing in the slightest. In his Kingdom, God gives: he gives security, peace, blessings, and, ultimately eternal life. What he gives costs him, and there is no benefit to him. What makes the Kingdom of God different from all the empires, kingdoms, and realms that are known to us is that under the reign of God, we benefit while the establishment of the Kingdom cost Jesus his life on the cross.

Jesus "crossed the Rubicon" when let it be known that he was sent from God. He did so intentionally and boldly. But he was not daring in his taking the step beyond which there was no return. He did not have to be daring because he knew that his heavenly Father was with him, enabling him to establish a Kingdom that will never end.

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