

The Perfect Storm

I'm indebted this week to a very insightful book by a gifted New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright. The book is called Simply Jesus and it seems to be written with an eye to the most skeptical, trying to help them find a solid footing in their understanding of who Jesus was and what He did. To illustrate the impact that the coming of Jesus had on the world of the first century, Wright looks at the Perfect Storm that occurred in October 1991 off the east coast of Canada and which resulted in the demolition of the fishing boat the Andrea Gail, out of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

A cold pressure system was moving east along the border between Canada and the U.S. At the same time a strong high pressure system was building between the Maritime provinces and Greenland. As the low pressure moved east and the high pressure intensified off the coast the collision between the two made for strong winds, what locals call the "Hallowe'en Nor'easter". On its own, this had the makings of a very strong storm, as the east-bound system from the mainland butted up against the high pressure band, turning this way and that with ever-increasing force. But, as if to pour gasoline on the fire, a fading Hurricane Grace was moving up from the south. When it met the other two systems about 340 miles out from Halifax, the fate of the Andrea Gail was assured. This storm was tearing containers off the deck of a 500' foot cargo ship -- a 72' fishing boat was no match for it.

N.T. Wright has used this forceful imagery to describe the times in which Jesus ministered throughout Galilee and in Judea. Especially, he focuses attention on Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday, forcing a climax to His earthly ministry. As we are in the season of Easter, the season leading up to Jesus' death and His resurrection, we will look at the forces that conspired together to put Jesus on the cross -- the perfect storm of Roman ambition, Jewish expectation and Jesus' ministry.

Blowing in from the west was the mighty wind of Rome, the great new power in the world that had been on the rise since the fall of Alexander the Great. They had gotten rid of their last king and become a republic in 509. Since that time they had won important battles against Carthage - remember Hannibal coming through the Alps riding on elephants - in 207 B.C., against the Gauls of northern Italy and against Antiochus, king of the area now known as Syria, in 189 B.C. The Romans had put down a long series of rebellions, had annexed Spain, Syria and Egypt along with many other territories. In the meantime they were building the famous Roman roads and aqueducts and advancing their political philosophy, their way of ruling an empire, that would serve them in good stead for hundreds of years.

The republic had ended with the reign of Julius Caesar. A general who had advanced the Roman Empire out on the frontiers, Julius did the unthinkable; he marched his army into Rome and established his power there. His family name was Caesar, but he changed it into a royal title. The titles "tsar" in Russia and "kaiser" in Germany are derived from "caesar". The traditionalists in Rome were furious with all this and had

Julius assassinated, which brought about a long civil war which ended with the victory of Julius' adopted son, Octavian. He took the title Augustus, which means 'majestic' or 'worthy of honour'. He declared that his father, Julius, had in fact become divine which made him, Augustus Octavian Caesar, the son of god, the son of the divine Julius. If you had asked anyone from Spain to Syria to Egypt, who the son of god was, they would have answered "Octavian".

Religion was a branch of the state -- no separation here. Augustus took on the role of chief priest of the empire and passed that on to his successors. His court poets rewrote history to show that the golden age of Roman history had now begun with the birth of this child. According to their story, this golden age would spread peace and prosperity throughout the known world. This is heady stuff, a unique combination of political clout and religious propaganda intended to unite the empire in nothing less than worship of the emperor.

Off the coast of Canada's Maritime Provinces a high pressure system stretched from Greenland southward to the coastal waters off New England. It was unyielding in its strength and it rebuffed the advances of the low pressure system sweeping eastward across the continent. In our scenario, this stubbornly resistant high pressure system represents the aspirations and the prophetic promise given the Jews. What we call the Old Testament was the whole of Scripture to the Jew and it told an amazing story, the story of a nation that was under God's special anointing in order to fulfill His special purpose through them. While the Romans had just started to think of themselves as being a nation of destiny, the Jews had thought of themselves that way for over 1000 years, the only nation we know about from the ancient world that had that sense of their own history for such a long time.

This belief that their story was going somewhere was tied inseparably to their God; Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their God had a purpose for them -- that much was clear from their Scriptures. And because He was the one true God, there was nothing that could prevent His purposes from coming to pass.

It's hard for most people to imagine a belief like that. There is nothing like it that grabs most Canadians or Americans or Europeans today, except perhaps the belief in progress. We hear this belief expressed once in awhile, the hope that the world is becoming more free, with greater opportunity, a kinder, gentler place where we will see fewer wars and fewer examples of people mistreating one another. Once in awhile you will hear a phrase like, "Now that we live in the 21st century" and it is usually followed by some notion that we are moving forward, that we are somehow better people than those who lived centuries ago. Except for the evidence of wars and brutalities and many crimes against humanity in the past hundred years, this idea of progress is a comforting one for people.

Now, multiply that idea several times over, extend it out for over 1000 years and you can get a glimpse of the Jewish expectation that was alive in the time of Jesus. Theirs was not just a hope from some vague thing like progress, but for a return of the

king. Listen to this passage from Wright's book:

The stories the Jews told (and when I say "told" I mean not only told one another, read out aloud in their meetinghouses, studied privately and turned into prayer, but also celebrated in national festivals which involved most of the population and brought vast pilgrim crowds from all over the world) were not simply stories of small beginnings, sad times at present and glorious days to come. They were more specific, more complex, dense with detail and heavy with hope.

And from there he goes on to talk about the exodus from Egypt, the great deliverance worked by God that brought the Hebrew people out of slavery and which gave every Jew the hope that God would do it again. The exodus, in turn, pointed further back to God's call of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to become the forefathers of a great nation, a nation that Yahweh would call His own people, a nation that would live under His blessing, a nation through whom God would fulfill His purposes on the earth. This was as powerfully ingrained in the Jewish consciousness as the high pressure system was entrenched from Greenland and southward over the Atlantic in October '91.

But there was more recent history that also played an important role in what the Jews thought, what they talked about, what they prayed for. Most important was the return to being a captive people that had occurred when they were sent into exile in Babylon about 600 B.C. They had had ups and downs before then, but had remained a free people from the time of the exodus some 7 or 800 years earlier. Now, their temple was in ruins, their national treasures stolen, their people captive and their land destitute. For 70 years the exile continued until Persia defeated Babylon and sent the Jews who wanted to return back to their homeland.

But only a remnant ever went back and the temple they built was nothing like Solomon's temple. Its treasures seemed like nothing compared to the glory of old. But there stirred a belief, a hope, a longing for the God who called Abraham, the God who delivered them from Egypt, to move again, to restore the fortunes of His chosen people.

But the reality was nothing like the dream. After Babylon was Persia and after Persia, there was Greece. Then there was the period under the Ptolemaic rule from Egypt and by the year 200 B.C., that had given way to the Seleucid empire, the eastern branch of what had been Alexander the Great's empire, based roughly in Syria. All through this time the Jews were at the mercy of foreign powers, but with the Seleucids it became too much to swallow. They insisted on transforming the whole culture to Greek ways of thinking and acting -- the process called "hellenization" which had begun under Alexander. Some Jews wanted to go along with this transformation, to ditch the Jewish law and to become thoroughly Greek. They built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, competed in international Greek games, and, according to the book of 1 Maccabees, "removed their marks of circumcision and repudiated the holy covenant." The ruler of the Seleucids from 175 B.C. was Antiochus IV Epiphanes and he pursued this forcible conversion of the Jews to Greek ways with great zeal.

He made possession of the Torah a capital offense and burned as many copies as he could find. He banned many traditional Jewish practices, including sacrifices, sabbath observance and the feasts which were so vital to Jewish religious life. A mother who circumcised her son would be killed along with her whole family. Altars to Greek gods were set up and animals that the Jews would have called unclean, according to their laws, were sacrificed on these altars. An idol of Zeus was placed on the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem.

This was too much for a rural Jewish priest named Mattathias who refused to worship the Greek gods and killed a Jewish man who had stepped forward to offer a sacrifice to an idol in Mattathias' place. He and his sons fled to the wilderness of Judea and from there they recruited a small army of guerilla fighters. After Mattathias' death in the following year, his sons, led by Judah Maccabee, conducted warfare on two fronts:

1. They destroyed pagan altars in the villages, forced boys to be circumcised and strong-armed fellow Jews into joining their cause.
2. They ran a very successful guerilla campaign against the Seleucids. They would attack small groups of Greek soldiers, then disappear into the hills. After many of these attacks, victory was secured, the Maccabees entered Jerusalem, ritually cleansed the Temple, reestablished traditional Jewish worship there and one of them was installed as high priest. A couple of asides: The name "Maccabee" means "the hammer", so the leader of the revolt was "Judah the Hammer". Second, the annual celebration of Hanukkah commemorates the cleansing of the temple that took place after the victory over the Seleucids in 164 B.C. The retaking of Jerusalem was not the end of battles between Jews and Seleucids - the fighting continued for 25 years altogether until the Syrians signed a peace agreement with the Jews.

For 101 years, the Jews again were a nation that didn't have to look outside to some foreign power for permission to do what they felt was right. But, in 63 A.D. Pompey of Rome marched into Jerusalem to restore peace between warring factions of Jews and the era of freedom was once again over.

From a wealthy herdsman in the land of Canaan to a slave nation in Egypt, maybe 600 years all told. From Hebrew slaves these people became a nation because of God's great deliverance in the Exodus from Egypt. They became a people under God's law when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and they became a people in God's promised land under the leadership of Joshua. Through their sin and rebellion against God they became a people living in exile, a people raising their families in Babylon. And after that, one glorious century of freedom, marred as it was by civil strife, but a century in which God's people threw off the constraints of foreign armies and lived as a people under God, for God.

The Jews of Jesus' day lived in the recent shadow of that century. In and of itself, it didn't inspire them the way the kingdom of David did. They didn't look back at the period of the Maccabees and say, "If only it could be like that again." But it was a

victory, a glimpse of what would happen if God were to come and deliver His people again. And while they waited for God to act and for David's kingdom to be restored, they told the stories, again and again, of what God had done in the past, of His great interventions in their history ... and they recited the Psalms, telling the story of His glory going out over all the earth.

So we have the fierce system blowing across the continent, the empire of Rome with all its military might and with a new sense of its destiny ... and we have the strong ridge of high pressure, immovable, the Jewish belief in their destiny as God's chosen people and their hope of a Messiah. This is enough to create a powerful storm in and of itself, and it did, more than once. Simon Bar-Giora was the leader of a rebellion in Jerusalem which the Romans put down in 70 A.D., destroying the temple in the process and Simon the Star or Simon bar-Kochba led a revolution that lasted from 133-135 A.D. and ended with the banishment of all Jews from Jerusalem. By the end of 135 the high pressure system had been defeated by the gales coming from the west and Jewish aspiration became a private matter for the next 1800 years.

But there is another storm coming from the south, an entirely different kind of storm, a hurricane. One of the things that continually got lost in the Jews story-telling was that God always seemed to act differently than they had expected Him to. He was unpredictable, He was free and He was sovereign. He did what He intended to do in a way that continually surprised people, His people, the ones who thought they knew what He would do next.

When Jesus came, it was not the God-visit that was expected by the Jewish rabbis and priests. They always expected God to come and reinforce their expectations, reinforce their ways of seeing the world and their agenda for the Jewish nation. They expected an Egypt-like deliverance from the Romans who walked their streets, who crucified their criminals and who taxed the working families at will. But Jesus came to fulfill, not the expectations of the chief priests and teachers of the law, but the expectations of His Father. He came as the wind of God, blowing away the religious complacency of the day, the lack of true devotion to the Father, the politics of power that had taken over the temple. He came to fulfill the words of the prophets who had warned that the day of Yahweh would not be all good news, that it would bring judgment on God's people as well as on the nations around Judea. Jesus' coming was the unpredictable wind of God.

The story will continue over the next four weeks, but for today I want to end with one paragraph from Wright's book, Simply Jesus:

All his public career Jesus had been embodying the rescuing, redeeming love of Israel's God, and Israel's own capital city and leaders couldn't see it. The divine hurricane sweeps in from the ocean, and to accomplish its purpose it must meet, head-on, the cruel western wind of pagan empire and the high-octane high-pressure system of national aspiration. Jesus seizes the moment, the Passover moment, the Exodus moment, not least because these too speak of the sovereign freedom and presence of God as much over His rebellious and incomprehending people as over the tyranny of Egypt. And as we watch

the events of Jesus' final days unfold, we cannot simply look on and register them as an odd quirk of history. The claim being made in the stories of Jesus is that this was the perfect storm. This was where the hurricane of divine love met the cold might of empire and the overheated aspiration of Israel. Only when we reflect on that combination do we begin to understand the meaning of Jesus' death. Only then might we begin to understand how it is that the true Son of God, the true High Priest, has indeed become king of the world.

And nowhere do we see more clearly Jesus' understanding of Himself as the focal point of this perfect storm than when He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to the shouts of the crowd, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

To be continued . . .