

In the courtyard with Peter on the anniversary of the L.A. riots

by Ched Myers

This we do know: Our cause is just; our cause is moral; our cause is right.

*President George Bush,
January 29, 1991
State of the Union address
during Gulf War*

People, I just want to say, can we all get along? Can we stop making it horrible for the older people and the kids? ... We're all stuck here for awhile. Let's try to work it out.

*Rodney Glen King, May 1, 1992
Press statement during
Los Angeles Uprising*

Ched Myers works for the American Friends Service Committee in California and is author of *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis, 1988. An expanded version of this article will appear in his next book, *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* Orbis, 1994. Artist **Robert Hodgell** lives in Bradenton, Fla.

Enter again the sacred circle of Story. Begin again at the end, as we are ever invited to do.

Peter had followed Jesus at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest (Mk 14:54). Twilight. The fisherman finds himself standing in the palace courtyard of the Holy City, a very long way from home. It is the end of the line for him. Jesus has just been arrested by the Jerusalem authorities. His *compañeros* have fled for their lives.

Peter is trying to fulfill his vow to follow Jesus "to the end" (14:29). Having managed to slip into the courtyard he mingles *incognito* with armed security guards and expressionless functionaries. He is just outside the courtroom where Jesus is being arraigned. Near enough to hear Jesus' screams from the holding cell where he is being tortured during interrogation.

He was sitting with the guards, warming himself at their fire. Dusk turns to deep night. The howls of pain from inside have stopped. A prevaricatory court has convened, and imperial justice



The Denial (linocut)

is being dispensed. History-as-usual, like a drunk in a dark alley, stumbles forward, unaware that a corner is about to be turned.

"You too were with that Nazarene?!" (14:67). Then suddenly, at the very moment Jesus is summarily condemned to the *via crucis* inside the palace, Peter's cover is blown out in the courtyard (14:66-72). It is a servant to the high priest who recognizes him, no doubt from earlier Temple skirmishes.

This is Peter's moment of truth, and consequences. It is the "hour" Jesus promised would sooner or later present itself to those invited to discipleship (8:34; 13:11; 14:37). So goes Markan irony: Inside the guards taunt the shackled Jesus to "prophesy," while outside the very scenario he foresaw inexorably unfolds (14:65f).



credit: Robert Hodgell

“I do not know what you are talking about!” (14:68). Gripped by conflicting loyalties in the imperial vice, Peter makes the fateful choice — he seeks refuge in the shadow world of Denial.

And he began to curse his life (14:71). Who wouldn't curse their life at such a dead end? Curse religion, or politics, or history, or one's parents, or friends, or one's own choices—curse everything that conspires to bring us to such moments. Then finally, cornered and cowering, Peter swears his oath of dissocia-

tion. Disconnection is the inevitable fruit of Denial, the decisive departure from the *via crucis*.

Peter's moment of truth in the Palace Courtyard uniquely captures the struggle with denial that characterizes First World Christianity “in the belly of the beast.”

His inconsolable sobbing echoes through the ages, resonating whenever believers have betrayed the vision they held dearest. For two millennia of the

It is almost dawn. A rooster's hoarse croon drifts hauntingly in the sudden stillness. Then, slowly, like a stake being driven into his heart, Peter's soul begins to implode, and he breaks down in bitter weeping.

“Christian era” it has kept welling up as the church has struggled with its own apostasy. Today, in the waning years of the twentieth century, in the twilight of a different imperial courtyard, this lament again lodges in our hearts.

In the *locus imperium* we Christians too have tried to “follow Jesus at a distance.” We too are being confronted by the ignominy of our historical project. We too are realizing our Denial.

In the courtyard twilight

I live in a war zone, where violence is a way of life. It is a wild fire raging across the world and a tree smoldering steadily at its core. It is my home, Los Angeles, Ca., in the United States of America.

According to the dominant culture's Dream of itself, I do not live in a war zone at all. The official story portrays my country through fantasies of grandiosity: land of the free, home of the brave, hope of the democratic world. The Dream Factory portrays my hometown through fantasies of whimsy (*La-La-land* and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*) or law and order (from *Dragnet* to *L.A. Law*.)

I know my country and my city are increasingly defined by two things: by a *gulf* and by *guns*. An ever-deepening gulf between the rich and poor, and an inexhaustible proliferation of guns. The gulf is illustrated by the voices at the start, one belonging to a man who abusively policed the world, the other belonging to a man who took a world of abuse from the police.

I live in a country that exports war against the poor around the world, covertly from Nicaragua to Mozambique, overtly from Grenada to Iraq. It seeds a home-grown war against its own poor, from Miami to Watts, from the Rio Grande valley to Akwesasne. I live in a city that built its prosperity manufacturing the tools of military export.

Our society is among the most indebted, stratified and violent in the world.

As the U.S. empire has come to full flower in the 20th century, unrivaled in its global reach and military strength, our duplicity has become increasingly evident. Evident, that is, to those viewing the world from the killing fields of Guatemala or Mozambique or East Timor, from the housing projects of south Los Angeles ganglands or the refugee trail through Sonora borderlands or the health clinics in Lakota badlands.

It is not as evident however to those of us who, by reason of race, class and/or gender are inheritors of the imperial system. And it is certainly not evident in our official narratives about ourselves — whether in religion, education, entertainment, media or government — according to which we continue to be the epitome of the grand design of Progress, the engine driving history, the best society ever built, the *Pax Americana*.

Any suggestion of imperial hubris is dismissed: no people has been as convinced of its own benevolence and innocence. This is the power of our culture of denial. “I do *not* know what you are talking about!” screamed Peter when confronted in the Palace Courtyard with the truth about himself.

This is life in the *locus imperium*, and for those of us trying to be disciples in the lengthening shadows of its twilight, it is *our* moment of truth in the Palace Courtyard.

We must choose between those who see no future for the *locus imperium* — its gulf and its guns — and those who see no future without it. Which voice will we pay attention to? The gulf and the guns are what Bush believes to be “just and moral and right”; they are what King identifies as “making it horrible for the older people and the kids.” These are choices of great consequence, choices we can refuse only by denying what we know in our heart of hearts.

We would do well to allow Mark’s

circle of story to shape our own. Peter, as the first (1:16) and last (16:7) disciple in the story, is *archetypal*: we are *meant* to identify with him. His life runs the gamut of human emotions; it bounces around between grandiosity (14:29) and depression (14:37f). His story is ours. Given the benefit of the doubt, we love Jesus, and have vowed, perhaps even stridently, to follow him. We have recognized him as Messiah—it is just that we don’t understand what that really means.

Yet we First World Christians are more comfortable in the Palace Courtyard than Peter ever could have been. We participate obediently in its political mechanisms (and machinations). Presidents and military leaders sit in our churches.

In the Courtyard we are proximate to Palace power, although perhaps we feel frustratingly impotent. If we listen hard enough we can hear the screams of the victims of imperial justice. We know Jesus stands with them, but we can’t seem to bridge the distance between us and him—or them. It is easier to enjoy the distractions of *petite bourgeois* pleasures, to retreat to the comfort of Palace Courtyard religion. And when the evening shadows of history chill us to the bone, we huddle around the fire tended by the imperial police—chagrined, yellow ribbons pinned to our lapels.

We may be well-intentioned, but we are not innocent. Our true allegiances, which shape our social practice daily, which determine our net worth and our career aspirations, will sooner or later be revealed. Perhaps, as with Peter, it will be functionaries in service of the *status quo*

who will unmask us; they always seem to have the best nose for our vulnerabilities and contradictions, and are able to recognize the conflict in our souls by our trembling voice.

We want to follow Jesus, but we also want to stay on good terms with the Palace. And so, often unwittingly, we betray our own convictions about what is good and just and compassionate. In the courtrooms of empire, Jesus and the poor lose-and-therefore-gain their lives by choosing the Gospel (8:35). Outside in the Courtyard we gain-and-therefore-lose our lives by choosing to live in denial.

We are conformed by the imperial vice until we cannot distinguish the emperor’s voice from our own, much less our Lord’s. We are the “adulterous and sinful generation” which refuses to “see the Human One” revealed on the cross (8:38f), who will only believe if he “comes down off it” (14:32).


Peter’s moment of truth in the Palace Courtyard uniquely captures the struggle with denial that characterizes First World Christianity “in the belly of the beast.”

But the gospel is not finally tragedy; it is good news to all — *even and especially*

us. To those who face their denial and come to the end of their illusions is ever extended the grace of new beginnings.

After the debacle of betrayal comes yet one more invitation to discipleship: “Go, tell the disciples *and Peter* that Jesus is

going before you” (16:7).

There is no wayward narrative that cannot be redeemed by an historical choice to follow the Way anew. But the Way renewed is *still* the *via crucis*. 

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