

Who Is This?

A sermon based on Matthew 21:1-11

by Don Friesen
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I daresay that most of us have, at one time or another, gone somewhere and waited some hours just to get a glimpse of some famous personality. I certainly hope so, because I have. Years ago I caught a glimpse of Queen Elizabeth as her limousine entered our northern mining town. Since there was only one road in and out of town, it wasn't that difficult to be in the right place at the right time, and since the town itself wasn't that large, we didn't have to wait long, and I think that most everyone in town caught a glimpse of her.

Then some years ago Bill Janzen and I were at the mass celebrated by Pope John Paul on Lebreton Flats. Since we were ecumenical guests and got seats near the front I didn't have to act too unseemly, but when the Pope began to mingle I thought I saw Bill push forward a little, and crane his neck several times!

Centuries ago the city of Jerusalem was astir about an unusual guest coming to town, enough so that crowds lined the road into the city and craned their necks to get a glimpse. Had CNN been there to cover the event, one can imagine the words of a commentator saying, "The crowds are in quite a stir, Jack. Just moments ago there was a rumour going around that someone is coming into the city on a donkey! We had expected floats at the front of the parade, but I am told that recently-enacted city ordinances have severely limited preparation for parades during Passover. The police are out in full strength, in the event of trouble or a need for crowd control. The Jerusalem City Marching Band may be at the front of the parade; that has not been confirmed, Jack. Wait! Wait, I'm told the parade will soon be moving into view. I can hear the cheers. The noise is growing! ...here it is, the thing we've all been waiting for ...a slow-walking donkey is just around the corner. The crowd is pushing forward! The noise is growing! There are palm branches waving! Confetti in the air! Dancing and singing! Wait! He's just coming into view. Is it, really? Yes! Yes, Jack, it is! Seated on the donkey is the Easter Bunny!"

A cheap intro', I'll admit, but the one riding the donkey into Jerusalem may as well be the Easter Bunny if we take the easy triumph of Palm Sunday and ride it right into Easter Sunday without as much as a nod to the hellish events in between. Some trivialize the events of this week by considering them but Jesus' "last 'bad patch' on the way to glory". Or, Jesus is seen as "stage-managing" his entrance; he orchestrates his entry like some brilliant opening chess move, knowing full well that though it may look at some points as if he is losing, victory is always within his grasp. There is no tragedy here at all, only triumph. It looks like trouble; it looks like tragedy, it looks like Jesus is on trial, but it's not true. He's in charge.

It is true that triumph will have the last word, and that even in the darkness of the cross God is at work, but to dismiss the events of Holy Week as a few insignificant props on the way to glory is to trivialize the humanity of Jesus. It's a very superficial reading of his suffering and sacrifice.

The older version of the Apostles Creed summarizes the week ahead very simply, and very well, with the phrase, "He descended into hell." It's a phrase that has caused no end of theological disputation on the details and depth of his descent, but I think it describes very well the terror, agony, and isolation of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem. As Alice Meynell expresses it, on today's Lenten bookmark, Jesus "explored the deepest... Our human Lord touched the extreme... over the abyss of God's capacity for woe he stayed one hesitating hour; ...forsaken he went down, and was afraid." And when he died, at the end of the week, the Gospel of Matthew says the whole earth heaved! And the veil in the temple, the veil separating us from the Holy of Holies, was ripped from top to bottom! (27:51)

Who Is This?

The crowds along Jesus' entry route seemed to sense something important was afoot, but weren't altogether sure of its meaning. "Who is this?" they asked. (Matthew 21:10) A king? A prophet? A teacher? A rabbi? A wonder-worker? A troubler? A disturber of the ever-fragile peace in the Holy City? Who is this?

Veiled behind those palm leaves entered a paradox. If you look at the text closely, it is clearly someone who has authority. He directed some of his followers to get the animals -- a donkey and a colt -- and they did his bidding! There were clearly some in the crowd who assumed he was royalty. The laying of cloaks before him is reminiscent of the reception the Old Testament Jehu got when he was about to be anointed king. (2 Kings 9:13)

The donkey itself was an enigmatic beast. Some say that the donkey was a noble beast, and when the king rode into town on a donkey, the people knew he was a ruler, and that he came in peace. Others say Jesus' use of the donkey was a political statement, a commentary on those kings who liked to signal their power and might by entering cities on large, expensively-decorated steeds. Either way, the animal of choice seems to have some royal connotations, and to those versed in the Scriptures it brought to mind the words of prophecy: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! ...your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious..., humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

If there were things about his entry that lent to Jesus a royal bearing, it is also true that he entered the city without fear. No sneaking into town or entering quietly by a side gate, as if bringing some goods to the Farmers' Market. He rode boldly into town, with all eyes on him, including the eyes of those nervous about him. He headed straight for the temple, as if he belonged there, and he straightened things out in the temple, quite as if he belonged there and the bankers didn't! Someone unsure of himself and with no right to be there might act more belligerently -- like some prairie politico insisting he have a place at the decision-making table! Jesus acted as if he were on his own turf. His actions certainly set the tone of what lay ahead.

There were at least some in the crowds along his entry route that picked up on these signals, hailing him as the "Son of David," and praising him as "the one who comes in the name of the Lord." (Matthew 21:9) When some asked, "Who is this?" they quickly answered, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." (21:11) A prophet who is also a king? Quite out of the ordinary! Prophets usually speak to kings, and kings don't usually like what they're saying! Prophets often made life difficult for kings. To be both prophet and king was an unusual combination.

There were other things that must have caused some in the crowd to ask themselves, "What's wrong with this picture?" A king who has to borrow the animals for his entry? A king with empty pockets? With nothing to call his own? Most unusual. Something's wrong with this picture; if this were a king, would he not receive the royal red carpet treatment from the dignitaries of the city? The dignitaries or their representatives were there -- no doubt about it -- but they weren't the ones waving the palm branches, and you can be sure not one of their designer cloaks touched the dirty road! No, they were on the sidelines, watching, making political assessments, wondering how this drama unfolding before them would affect their investments.

If this was a king, some essential royal trappings were missing, and if this were a political "wannabe," he was a naive one, for what mover and shaker would broadcast Nazarene roots! And if this were a prophet, it meant trouble, for prophets invariably spoke for the voiceless, naming injustice, and calling the rich and powerful to account in the name of God! If this were a prophet... ..well, Lord, spare us from another Amos!

Who Is That With Him?

If some in the crowds along the road leading into Jerusalem asked, "Who is this?" we could just as well ask, "And who is that with him?" For I think this crowd is too often denounced for its fickleness. We assume that the people waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna" were the same people who several days later shouted, "Crucify, crucify him!" (Luke 23:21; Matthew 27:22-23) but chances are people went to the Palm Sunday procession for a variety of reasons.

In asking who was with Jesus at the Palm Sunday Parade, we may very well locate ourselves in that crowd. Some, no doubt, went there simply out of curiosity. They were keen to see what was going to happen. They knew Jerusalem was a powder-keg of political passions, and that someone riding into this explosive atmosphere in the manner Jesus did was bound to start something! He had almost caused a riot in the south already (John 10:39), of which his disciples reminded him when he seemed determined to return there after the death of Lazarus (John 11:8), prompting one of the disciples (Thomas) to mutter to the others, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)

So, when Jesus entered Jerusalem the Roman soldiers were watching, the high priests were watching, and the curious were watching. They were not there out of faith -- only curiosity, much as some people are fascinated by a fight. Violence, or the threat of it, seems to hold a morbid curiosity for many. If a grade school fistfight guarantees an adolescent crowd, adults are just as eager to watch; they will even pay to watch a fight, be it lions destroying Christians or modern gladiators dressed in wrestling togs or with a hockey stick in their hands.

Curious spectators were not the only ones at the Palm Sunday Parade, however. Some were there only out of duty; they had very little interest in what was happening and little commitment to it, one way or the other. A little like the man who for seventeen years served as the stage doorman at one of New York City's great theatres. For seventeen years he guarded that stage door and not once did he himself ever go in and watch a play. Just doing his job, much like the soldiers on parade duty that Palm Sunday. "So what?" they might say, "Tomorrow it'll be someone else." Just doing their job, eager to get it over with. No doubt the same was true of those who worked the crucifixion circuit. "How many crucifixions we got today? Just three? Shouldn't take too long. Should be home by dinner-time!"

Not everyone along that parade route kept an emotional distance from what was happening, however. Though there was some risk to identifying with this man entering the city, many did so. Many found in him an answer their needs and hopes. Perhaps some felt that his non-violent approach was the only one that made sense. The Maccabean Revolt of some years earlier certainly hadn't accomplished anything. Some had long dreamed of a Liberator, and felt their dream was about to come true. He might not be quite what they expected, but they cheered because they felt their prayers had been answered.

Some may have felt that his message of love made their violent context a little less violent. Some may have heard of what this man did for Lazarus and knew his touch was one of healing. They sensed in him someone who was prepared to descend into hell on their behalf. Whatever their various hopes and dreams, many in the crowd believed that this Jesus had come to fulfill them. Enough of them believed it that the leaders of the city were disturbed by their numbers. (Matthew 21:26, 46)

Conclusion

I assume that we would not number ourselves among those who opposed Jesus, but on the brink of his descent into hell, it might be well for us to ask ourselves whether we are but curious onlookers, whether we are just doing our Holy Week duty, or whether we bring to the events of this week an enduring commitment, a commitment to follow him through thick and thin, for what awaited him in the city was not an "Favourite Citizen Award" bestowed by the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce, but a Cross! If we commit ourselves to him, we are committing ourselves to one who "emptied" himself (Philippians 2:6-8), took the form of a servant, took on our humanity, and descended into hell on our behalf. Because he did, there is no darkness so dark that he does not experience it with us, and in it, offer us hope. Like Jesus, we are subject to pain, to suffering, to conflict, betrayal, and abandonment, but even in our darkest hours the One who walked this way before us is with us.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.