

Cheering for Jesus

A Mediation on Mark 11 for Palm Sunday

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Children who worship regularly often become adults with fond memories of Palm Sunday. Marching in the sanctuary, waving palm branches or construction paper strips, singing joyful marching music—what a great memory!



It is a blessing to remember cheering for Jesus. Reading this year from Mark's account, one imagines there were children in the crowds. Scanning Mark's gospel up to this story we read that Jesus healed a boy from unclean spirits (Mark 9:14-29) and a girl from on her death bed both at their fathers' requests. (Mark 5:21-43) There were the children the disciples tried to shoo away, but Jesus welcomed and blessed. (Mark 10:13-16)

In my childhood Sunday school, we memorized a Bible verse every week from the King James Version and Jesus' words of welcome for children stuck, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:14b) As a child I wondered why Jesus would tell the adults to "suffer" me? When I became an adult, I realized how much suffering it takes to raise a child well. There are times when the King James is still the best translation.

But the story didn't stop with that memory verse. It went on. Here is a 21st century translation, "Allow the children to come to me. Don't forbid them, because God's kingdom belongs to people like these children. I assure you that whoever doesn't welcome God's kingdom like a child will never enter it." (Mark 10:14-15, Common English Bible.) After saying this to the adults, Jesus hugged and blessed the children. As we ponder what this means, we all easily imagine that as Jesus rode the donkey's colt into Jerusalem there were children waving their palm branches and cheering for Jesus.

Who else could have been there cheering for Jesus? Who else would have welcomed God's kingdom like a child?

The twelve apostles must have been there cheering for Jesus: Peter, a name he gave Simon; James and John, Zebedee's sons; Andrew; Philip; Bartholomew; Matthew; Thomas; James, Alphaeus' son; Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot; and Judas Iscariot, who would soon betray Jesus. (Mark 3:16-18) Having been the closest to Jesus, these twelve men were trained by Christ himself to do the work of preaching and healing. Two of these men had gone into a village near Jerusalem to get the donkey's colt for Jesus. Certainly, as Jesus rode to Jerusalem's gate the twelve would have marched alongside of him, waving palms, shouting "Hosanna!" Did they have any idea what was coming the following week? Was Judas already planning to betray Jesus? Did Peter imagine he was capable of abandoning Jesus to save his own neck?

We will never know but imagining Jesus' triumphal entry as the Prince of Peace, the twelve apostles most certainly all had palm branches raised high and waving in their hands. In that crowd, even Judas would have cheered for Jesus. Certainly, Peter was among the loudest cheering for Jesus.

Mark also told of eight specific times when Jesus healed an adult. The first was Peter's mother-in-law who was at death's door with a fever (Mark 1:29-34). The next three included a leper (Mark 1:40-46); Levi, a tax collector (Mark 2:13-17); and a man with a "withered hand", perhaps caused by a birth defect, a construction accident, or even a stroke (Mark 3:1-6).

Then Mark wrote of a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years. Her faith that Jesus was the Christ was so great, she believed that simply touching the hem of his clothes would heal her! To this woman Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease." (Mark 5:34, CEB) She absolutely had to be cheering for Jesus with a palm branch waving in her hand.

After healing her, Jesus healed a deaf man (Mark 7:31-37) and two blind men (Mark 8:22-26, 10:46-52). With hearing and vision restored by Jesus certainly these three were there cheering for Jesus. Maybe they were even among the men who cast their coats in front of Christ as he rode through the crowd.

So far that is 24 named people, along with a group of children and their adults all waving palm branches. But Jesus had touched more lives than just these. There were the crowds who came for healing at Peter's mother-in-law's home when the news of her healing spread. (Mark 1:29-34) There were the 5000 taught by Jesus and then fed by him using only a boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish. (Mark 6:30-44) After this miracle Jesus famously sailed across a stormy Lake Gennesaret where he was met on the shore by another crowd, who hearing of his power to heal brought their uncounted sick for Jesus to heal. And if that wasn't enough, Mark also wrote of Jesus teaching and feeding another 4000 people. (Mark 8:1-10)

Even if we assume overlap between these large groups and that not everyone could make the journey to Jerusalem for Passover that year, it is so very easy for us to imagine a very large crowd of people cheering for Jesus.

Where do you imagine yourself as Jesus rides by? Are you a child welcomed and blessed by Jesus? Are you an apostle ready to go out for Christ to teach and heal? Perhaps you are like the eight Jesus healed whose miracles were so great your story was told in detail? Maybe you imagine yourself to be among those in the crowds, a person once brought by a friend to Jesus for healing, or even the friend who carried another to where Jesus was. Or are you among those who listened to Jesus teach on a hillside and then shared a simple lunch with him a few thousand others. Are you waving your branch high in the air and cheering for Jesus? Do you believe Jesus is the Christ?

Or are you standing aside watching Jesus ride by?

