

Palm Sunday – “Who Is This?”

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Matthew 21:1-11, Psalm 118: 15-29

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21 As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me.³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”^[a]

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna^[b] to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”^[c]

“Hosanna^[d] in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Matthew 16 ¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,^[c] the Son of the living God.”

Everyone loves a parade, don't you?

Have any of you been to the Rose Parade on New Year's Day in Pasadena? It really is a remarkable experience. Yes, the roses are magnificent, along with the workmanship on all the floats, everything being decorated with completely natural “ingredients”. Amazing.

In addition to the incredible floats, there are the drum and bugle corps, the antique cars, the dance and drill teams, the horse drawn carriages and equestrians, and my personal favorite, the marching bands.

There are a couple of things that are purposely omitted from television broadcasts: the people who follow the equestrians with giant pooper scoops and wheelbarrows, and the regular but unscheduled delays due to floats that experience mechanical breakdowns.

When a float cannot continue under its own power, tow trucks parked along the route, are ready to be pressed into action. But sometimes there are long pauses, during which all the parade participants must simply remain in place.

Once, when one of these delays occurred, it happened that the group right in front of us on the parade route, was the UCLA marching band. They soon realized they had a captive audience, so they made the most of it. They played lots of Christmas songs, encouraged everyone to sing along, and even took requests. The cheerleaders and pep squads alternated sides of the street, leading various cheers, drumming up lots of crowd participation. It was fun. We found ourselves chanting loudly, for UCLA who would later that day be competing in the Rose Bowl.

Now, mind you, neither of us attended UCLA, nor were we fans. We were just caught up in the crowd's excitement and joined in.

Imagine a similar situation: Jerusalem at Passover. The population of the city would triple during Passover, everything was crowded. There was excitement in the air.

Under the circumstances, the powers that be—that would be the Roman Emperor's generals and troops—took advantage of the opportunity to make it perfectly clear who was in charge. In the event that anyone was entertaining any revolutionary plots or crazy ideas of overthrow, a parade would provide an impressive show of force, showcasing Roman power and might. It was quite likely that such a military parade would march through the streets during Passover, in order to intimidate the citizenry and any visitors in town.

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the city another parade is forming.

Jesus is orchestrating this one. He gives his disciples very deliberate instructions in order for them to retrieve, a previously unridden donkey.

Why does Jesus want a donkey? Why not an impressive chariot drawn by a massive stallion?

What is Jesus trying to communicate in his choice of transport? In contrast with the Romans flexing their militant muscles, Jesus rides a donkey as a symbol of peace. He is NOT the conquering hero, he is the Prince of Peace.

Unlike previous occasions, when the people begin to shout and call him the Messiah, today, Jesus does not shut them up or tell them to keep it secret.

No. Today the cat is out of the bag.

The horse is out of the barn.

The truth will be paraded through the city.

But who will receive it? Who will believe it?

In some ways this is a moment of truth. Jesus' true identity is revealed.

Have you ever watched the television show, "Undercover Boss"? The company CEO goes undercover as a new employee in his own company to get a firsthand look at who his employees are and to grasp the actual day to day challenges that they face. It is revelatory—a reality check! If the CEO is paying attention s/he learns a great deal and often makes significant changes based on recommendations of his employees. But at the end of the program, is the great reveal: those he worked with undercover are brought into the boardroom, and he appears as himself. More often than not, the employees react with "shock and awe".

In some ways that is a perfect metaphor what God has done in sending Jesus into our world as a human being. He identifies completely with us and experiences all the same joys, sorrows, challenges that we experience. When his true identity is revealed—it is too much for some. He is misunderstood. He is crucified.

It appears that the people are rallying around Jesus, giving him the royal treatment!

They shout a royal greeting, part of an ancient Passover song:

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

They pave the road with their cloaks, and wave palm branches like cheer leaders wave pompoms.

They shout: "Hosanna!" which means "Save us!"

Save us, but from what or from whom?

Caught up in the contagion of the crowd, the hopes and expectations of the people rise. They are giddy with joy. They hope against hope, that perhaps *this* Jesus *is* the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior, the coming King; the one promised by the ancient prophets.

But we all know that the celebrity who is popular today, is easily forgotten tomorrow, abandoned to history in a heartbeat.

Those in today's crowd, shouting his praises, will be shouting "Crucify him!" before the week is over.

People are unpredictable. Tides turn. It is a temporary triumph.

Between my junior and senior years in high school I had a summer romance with a young man. What began after school was out in June, ended on the first day of our senior year when I saw him walking hand in hand across campus, with his former girlfriend. Yes, indeed. He lived up to his name. His name? Carl Fickle!

Jesus knew things would change.
But Jesus is in the moment. He is being obedient to his Father's will. He acts deliberately, and does so in order to fulfill the OT prophecies, specifically this one from Zechariah 9:9-10

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River^[b] to the ends of the earth.

Jesus was secure in his identity. He knew who he was. He would be true not only to his identity but to his purpose and the reason for which he came.

His purpose? "To seek and to save the lost..." "to give his life, a ransom for many."

According to Matthew's gospel, the crowds raise this question, regarding Jesus:

"Who *is* this?" (21:10)

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples:

"Who do people say that I am?"

And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (Matthew 16:13-14)

Like people in the crowd on that day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, there were many different ideas about him. If Gallup had taken a poll, the results would be mixed. No clear consensus. No overwhelming majority opinion.

If we took a poll today, I imagine the results would be similar.

Jesus was a great moral teacher.

Jesus was a healer and miracle worker.

Jesus was a controversial figure who was crucified as a traitor to Rome, a rebel.

Jesus was a lunatic, a delusional demagogue. He thought he was God, after all!

Each person—then and now—must answer this question for him/herself.

Each one in the crowd that day, and in this congregation here today must answer:

“Who *is* this?” Jesus asks: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

We have an advantage over those in the crowd that day. We know “the rest of the story”. We know, not only the betrayal, the denial, the fake trials and floggings, the brutal hours on the cross that Jesus endured until he breathed his last on Good Friday. We know “the rest of the story”. We know that he was buried and entombed for three days. We know that Sunday’s a comin’!

But the people in that crowd that day, were clueless. They knew none of this.

Still it is up to us to answer this question for ourselves: Who *is* this?

Jesus lived, died, and rose again –all for love of you and me. ⁹ God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. (I John 4:9-10)

Jesus deeply desires a personal relationship with you. It’s not good enough to rely on the faith of a parent or grandparent, a spouse or best friend.

You must decide for yourself and answer for yourself this question:

Who *is* this Jesus?

Jesus himself said: I came that they may have life and it abundantly. (John 10:10)

It’s as easy as A_B_C:

A--Admit that we are sinners—imperfect people, in need of a perfect Savior.

B--Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, place our trust in Him.

C—Confess or acknowledge Christ as your Lord and Savior...Jesus himself said:

³² “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:32-33)

¹⁵ Jesus said to them (the disciples), “But who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, ^[c] the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:15-16)

How will you respond? Who *is* this man?

Let us pray.