

5 April 2020

Looking for God . . . In All the Wrong Places

Matthew 21:1-11

On Palm Sunday we read, as usual, the story of Christ's Triumphant entry into Jerusalem. We'll be reading Matthew's account, chapter 21, verses 1-11:

21 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' ⁴This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*⁵ 'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

*'Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

It isn't completely clear what to do with the story of the Triumphal Entry in our current context. Several things feel weird about it this year. Not least of those is the fact that it describes a scene where a crowd lines a street, shoulder to shoulder, breathing the same air, and maybe even, I don't know, shaking hands or something. [Shudder] More than that, though, there's a certain amount of weirdness in talking about any group gathering as we are now: me alone in my living room, talking to a computer, with all of you alone in your separate homes listening electronically. But perhaps most of all, as we huddle in place, seeking safety from a dangerous infection, it feels a little strange to be talking about a triumphal *anything*. Not a normal Palm Sunday.

But to tell you the truth, I never really know what to do with Palm Sunday. I do *not* find it meaningful. I know it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be a day of celebrating Christ's kingship, rejoicing in his salvation, gathering together to welcome him into the gates of our hearts, shouting his praise, let by a procession of children. What's not to love about that? It's just that some years ago, while I was still a student, it struck me that Jerusalem was not all that huge a city, and that the people who made up the adoring crowd at the Triumphal Entry were almost certainly a large part of the crowd that on the following Friday were shouting "Crucify him!" For

those people, the Triumphal Entry wasn't the inauguration of God's eternal kingdom; it was a parade, a spectacle to enjoy. And this becomes even more clear when we look at the last lines of the passage we just read from Matthew, where – after the procession was over, half the people had to ask who it was they'd just been cheering. ("Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! . . . Wow, that was great! . . . So, who *was* that guy? Jesus who? Oh! I think I've heard of him! Cool! Hosanna!")

So anyway, for most of my twenty-something years as a pastor, my Palm Sunday message has been some form of "Yeah, yelling about Jesus is great, but let's talk about some deeper and more lasting ways to follow him." This year that message is still in the background, but I want to start with a slightly different question. Given that many of those shouting had no particular investment in Jesus – to the extent that some didn't even know his name – what were they shouting about? What did they hope to get out of lining the streets and screaming? Here are a few guesses.

First, some almost certainly were glad to have some diversion, some entertainment. Life is hard, you know? So when the circus comes to town, go watch. If you're on the way to the store and see that someone's holding a parade, go check it out. It might be fun. Second, there is a certain release that comes from being in an excited crowd. You know that feeling. It's why watching a game in the stadium is different from watching at home. It's why people go to political rallies and rock concerts. Being in a crowd of people all cheering at the same time gives you at least a temporary feeling of power and belonging. I suspect both of these were in play that day, but there would have also been a third reason for the shouting. As people lined the roads, some began shouting out the lines of Psalm 118, "Hosheanna! God save us! Hosheanna! Blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord." This psalm was understood to refer to the coming Messiah, and so even the people who had never heard of Jesus would have recognized those words and realized, "A new Messiah! Cool! Maybe this is the real one, who will deliver us from the Romans!"

So, then, what happened? If all these people were excited to see Jesus, even for superficial reasons, why did they turn on him by Friday? My own feeling is that they discovered he was not offering what they were looking for. For starters, he certainly didn't offer much entertainment. During the ensuing week, as he taught in the temple courts, what he said didn't sound fun at all. He told a rich man to sell everything he owned and give it away and he praised a poor widow who actually did. He suggested in a parable that maybe Jews weren't the only people that God loved, and he talked about a God with high expectations and serious demands. Jesus was kind of a bummer. As for those who were looking for a feeling of group solidarity, he was a disappointment there, too. He seemed to divide people more than bring them together. He disrupted the temple marketplace, alienated rich people, and called the religious leaders hypocrites – which, you know, was obviously true, but it's a terrible way to start a movement that's going to need financing. It's like he wasn't even trying to create a coalition. Most of all, though, Jesus was a total washout as a military Messiah who had come to drive out the Romans. First, he seemed to say that people should pay their Roman taxes ("Did he just say that? You heard it, too?") and then he let himself get arrested without a fight and stood before the Roman governor saying, "My kingdom's not of this world." Snort. What's the use of that? Basically, to those Palm Sunday crowds, I imagine Jesus was a disappointment top to bottom.

And he remains disappointing today. It's still fun to cheer and sing songs of praise about Jesus, making believe that he's exactly what we want him to be. But like the people of Jerusalem that week, once we learn what Jesus is really like . . . well, it's never exactly what we thought, or what we thought we wanted. Last week, I said that our biggest problem when we go looking for God is that we usually only look for the God we want to find, one who will shore up our own insecurities. We want a God who will provide comfort when we're distressed, strength when we're weak, guidance when we're uncertain. We tend to treat God sort of like a lifeguard: reassuring to have up on the watchtower and useful in case of emergencies, but out of sight until we need help. We treat God like the dependable gay friend who can escort you to the dance if nobody else asks you. If we approach the Messiah like those Palm Sunday crowds, with our prepared job descriptions for what we want from God, then like those crowds we are doomed to disappointment. God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, doesn't fit our preset position requirements. God cannot be crammed into any of our boxes.

Here are some of the boxes we try to cram the Messiah into today. First, there's the God of the USA. Rebecca showed me a Facebook post the other day, posted by some distant relative, calling for all Americans to come together and pray that God will lay a shield of protection against the coronavirus over our nation. It's not that that's a bad thing; it's just how obviously unconcerned that person is that maybe Brazil or Italy or India might need some protection too. There's even an implied conviction that God would be more likely to help *us* than other countries. If that's the God you're looking for – basically a tribal deity – then you're doomed to disappointment. Our God is not that God. Or there's what we might call the God of good feels – one who makes us glad when we're sad. I noted last Ash Wednesday that 40% of the psalms in the Bible are psalms of lament, whereas no more than 10% of our hymns could by any stretch of the imagination fit that description. As for contemporary choruses, 3%, tops. I don't know how often I've been told, "I go to church to get a lift! Something to pick me up before the next week." You know, kind of like Red Bull. And encouragement is a good thing and God sometimes gives it, but as the parade crowds of Palm Sunday discovered, Jesus is not dependably uplifting. He asks hard stuff from us. If the God you're looking for is a God of good feels, expect disappointment. Our God is not that God.

And then, of course, there's the God of money. This is, it would appear, the true American religion. Over the past few weeks, we have heard various voices calling for us to loosen the self-isolation orders so as to jump start the economy. Yes, these voices have admitted, there will be some deaths – mostly just old people – but maybe we need to take that chance to get the money flowing again. A minute ago, I called the "God of the USA" a "tribal deity," but this is something even more primitive than that. This is an Aztec or Phoenician god that demands blood sacrifice in return for prosperity. And this God is revolting. Now, you might say, "Yes, but that's not Christianity," and you would be right, but the fastest growing segment of Christianity in America is the prosperity gospel, declaring that God's favor is another way of saying wealth. And I say it again, if that's the God you're looking for, you will be disappointed. The homeless unemployed workman from Nazareth is not that God.

So, as I say, I've never really gotten the hang of Palm Sunday. It feels to me as if it exemplifies shallow, transient excitement over a completely erroneous idea of God, and that doesn't strike me as something that the Church needs to work on. We got that down. We can do drummed-up, artificial excitement for all the wrong reasons without even trying. Shoot, inspiring artificial excitement about things that have nothing to do with Christ is an essential part of

modern church planting. We do that stuff fine. What we *need* is to learn how to look for a very real and often disconcerting God who loves us too much to accept a limited role in our lives.

And during this time of anxiety and fear and death, when superficial things look increasingly shabby, maybe the Church is ready to look for that God. Next week, on Easter Sunday, I'm going to try to talk about how to look for a living God. One who desperately wants to be found.

As we close today, let us pray again. As we return to our semi-monastic lives of social distancing, we close with a prayer of faith from a monastic community in Northumbria:

Lord, you have always given bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.

Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.

Lord, you have always marked the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.

Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here, today I believe.

Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe;
and though you be silent now, today I believe. Amen.