

April 9, 2017

Holy Week 2017

The Beginning of the End

Matthew 21:1-11

Opening words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not a single week should be wasted. Have you every stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed our world forever: Holy Week! On the Christian calendar, Holy Week is the last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending at dawn on Easter. It is the week the church remembers the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. It recalls the expectations of Palm Sunday, the rejection of Maundy Thursday, the devastation of Good Friday and the final victory of Easter morning.

This is Palm Sunday and on this day, we remember Jesus's triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. The scene is truly symbolic. Jesus acts out the the words of Zechariah 9:9. The crowd acts out the words of Psalm 118:25-26. The early church understood the significance of the day. Each one of the Gospel writers recorded the event. Today, we hear Matthew's version. Our Gospel reading for today is Matthew 21:1-11. Let me call this message *The Beginning of the End*.

Matthew 21:1-11 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."

⁴This 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.'"

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

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

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

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

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

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

Pope Benedict XVI said, *"But Palm Sunday tells us that ... it is the cross that is the true tree of life."* That quote speaks to me. If that quote speaks to you, say, **"Hosanna!"**

We find ourselves today in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. A great crowd had gathered in the city of Jerusalem. It was time for the Passover. The law required the people to go, but no legislation was necessary. Everyone wanted to be part of the great holiday. It was a time to do three things. First, they made their annual animal sacrifice at the temple. Second, they paid their annual taxes. Third, they reconnected with family and friends. It is for that reason everyone wanted to be in Jerusalem for the Passover. It has been estimated that the population of Jerusalem swelled to 2,500,000 on that particular Passover, and the name on everyone's lips was the name Jesus. If you are a bean counter, a numbers person like me, Palm Sunday was a great success. There were 2,500,000 people! Yet, this is the problem: Jesus wasn't a numbers person. Jesus wasn't interested in the crowd. Jesus was interested in the committed. Jesus was the eye of the storm, yet Jesus was alone in the crowd. For this reason, I have always found Palm Sunday to be very sad. Jesus knew everyone in the crowd was there for the wrong reason. It is those wrong reasons that grab our attention today. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Hosanna!"**

Some were in the crowd that day because of sensationalism. To use modern terms, Jesus was "trending". The population had heard the stories of the miracles, so some ran to the gate to simply see Jesus. Perhaps they wanted to see a miracle in person? Or perhaps, they just wanted to be there. On that Palm Sunday Jesus was a celebrity. Do you know of anyone who has to be part of the action? The problem is, celebrity status does not last long. If you do not believe me, then ask David Cassidy. You have heard his story.

David Cassidy was a teen idol during the early 1970's. He will always be remembered as Keith on the sitcom *The Partridge Family*. In my neighborhood, we laughed at him. We were politically incorrect. We called him a sissy. The truth is, we were jealous. All the young women were crazy about him, and not about us. For several years, he was the complete entertainer: singing, dancing, acting. It was a great ride for David Cassidy, but the ride ended. David Cassidy has more problems now than fans. He has had legal problems. He has had alcohol problems. He has had money problems. Recently, he told us he has a memory problem. On Wednesday, David Cassidy will turn 67 years old. His dementia has forced him to retire. The young man who spent so much time surrounded by people will be home alone with his problems. David Cassidy will tell you, sensationalism is overrated. Jesus knew that long ago. That is why Jesus wasn't interested in the crowd, only in the committed. If you think you can remember that, say, **"Hosanna!"**

Some were in that Palm Sunday crowd that day because of selfishness. We understand selfishness because there is a surplus of selfishness in our world; there always has been. They wanted something from Jesus. Perhaps they had someone in their life with

a terminal illness. They ran to Jesus and became part of the crowd because there was no other hope. You can't blame them. I would have done the same. The problem is, when they didn't get what they wanted from Jesus, they turned on Jesus. Do you know of anyone who is mad at Jesus because they didn't get what they wanted? You must know someone. There are many. I told you about one several weeks ago.

Ted Turner is one of the great philanthropists of our time. He made a fortune in the media world. He is well known for many things, including his atheism. Do you remember his story? He was raised in a Christian home and accepted Christ. When his sister became gravely ill he prayed that God would heal her. God didn't, so Turner walked away from God. Ted Turner is 78 years old and believes in nothing. Do you have a Ted Turner in your life? Someone who walked away from God because they didn't get what they wanted? There were Ted Turners in the Palm Sunday crowd. They left mad because they didn't get what they wanted. Within the Christian faith, selfishness has never been tolerated. Jesus wasn't interested in the crowd, only the committed. If you think you can remember that, say, "**Hosanna!**"

I believe most of the people in the Palm Sunday crowd were there because of short-sightedness. It is a form of selfishness. They saw something in Jesus to advance their own agenda. He had the power to perform miracles. He had a charismatic personality. He had all the tools to be a powerful leader. They hoped that Jesus would use those tools to lead a great revolution, expelling the Romans. That is why they yelled political slogans and did political things. They were welcoming their new political king. The problem is, Jesus wasn't interested in a political revolution. Jesus was only interested in a spiritual revolution. They, too, walked away from Jesus because they didn't get what they wanted. Do you know anyone who tries to use Jesus to advance their own political agenda? They have been told a million times by hundreds of preachers, God loves all people in all nations equally, yet they still believe God loves Americans more. There is a selfishness to that line of thinking. That is why Jesus wasn't interested in the crowd, only in the committed. If you think you can remember that, say, "**Hosanna!**"

In June of last year, I experienced something for the first time. It was a glorious day. It was a wonderful day. The Cleveland Cavaliers won the National Basketball Association championship. They beat the Golden State Warriors (and the big baby Stephen Curry) in seven games. When the details of the championship parade were announced, it was a no-brainer - I was going! I had waited my entire life to see a championship in Cleveland. If you are an arrogant fan of another nearby city who wins a championship every other year, you just don't get it. Cleveland hadn't won a major sports championship since 1964. I was going to the parade. Without communicating with anyone, I knew my family was going. I wasn't wrong. Kathryn and I drove to Stow the night before the parade to spend the night at my sister's home. However, when it was announced there would be a shortage of port-a-potties, Kathryn bailed. In the end, there was me and my daughter, Anna. There was my brother-in-law, Allan. There was my nephew Jeff and his four-year-old son, Quinn. (By the way, Jeff lives near

Washington DC. He drove up after work, picked up Quinn and arrived in Stow at 2:00 in the morning. After the parade, he drove back to Washington so he could go back to work the next day. It makes sense; he simply wanted to share that experience with his son, who was too young to appreciate it.) On the day of the parade, we were up early, got a ride to downtown Cleveland and were on the corner of East Ninth and St. Clair by 7:30. For some unknown reason, we stood in front of the port-a-potties. One was leaking - our spot was kind of ripe ☹️. At 7:30 in the morning, with hours before the parade was about to begin, the crowd was already forming. With time to spare, I got out my cell phone and called home. Kathy was watching television and said, "The parade is going to be on television". It didn't matter, I had to be there in person. I texted Dan Bryant: "Are you going to the parade? He responded, "No. I have to work." I shot a text back, "The Kingdom of God can get by without you for one day. Go to the parade!" As the crowd grew, my brother-in law asked me two magical questions: "Do you think there would be more people here if the Indians won the World Series?" I said, "Yes!" "Do you think there would be more people if the Browns won the Super Bowl?" I said, "No! All of Northeastern Ohio would be stricken by a fatal heart attack and it would just be the two of us! ☺️" Let me say it again. It was magical. It was like being in Haiti - everyone was just standing around talking. No one was working and no laws were being enforced. This is true. Few times in my life have I felt such community. Nothing else mattered but the Cav's championship. I talked to and laughed with strangers. I talked to the young and the not-so-young. I talked to men and women. I talked to people whose gender was hidden. I talked to the rich and the poor. I talked to Americans and non-Americans. It was great. Several lit up handmade cigarettes and there was a funny smell in the air. That smell took me back to my high school days at Warren Harding ☺️. I was there with 1.3 million of my best friends! When the parade arrived six hours later, the crowd was completely united in joy by the Cavalier's Championship. We were one! Sadly, the same cannot be said for the Palm Sunday crowd. That crowd was fractured.

Jesus was alone in the crowd. No one understood the significance of that day but he. I must ask you this question: Do you understand the significance of Palm Sunday? It was the beginning of the end. This is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. The crowd was gone by Good Friday because the crowd was there for all the wrong reasons. That is why Jesus was not interested in the size of the crowd. He was more interested in the level of the commitment. How committed are you? Pope Benedict XVI said, "*But Palm Sunday tells us that ... it is the cross that is the true tree of life.*" And all of God's people said, "**Hosanna!**"