

## **Matthew 21: 1 to 11      The problem with Palms**

(T/H- m: Palm Sunday 17)

I have always sensed that there was something strange about the original Palm Sunday celebration in Jerusalem. When I read the accounts of Palm Sunday in the Gospel's, I find myself asking some questions about the whole event. Think about it: A crowd estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000 lined the roadsides of Jerusalem, to cheer an itinerant preacher from Nazareth named Jesus: Yet, they were not sure why they were cheering, they were not even sure who Jesus was! To give you an idea of what was happening, imagine that a civic reception was given in Glasgow's city chambers for someone relatively unknown, and a huge crowd filled George Square to catch a glimpse of this unidentified celebrity? That's similar to what happened on that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem.

It was the year 27A.D. about this time of year, the city of Jerusalem was bursting at the seams with religious pilgrims who were in the city for the annual Passover Festival. The crowds were enthusiastic but Jesus' support was broad but shallow. He was popular with the ordinary people but the establishment of Jerusalem, those with influence, money and power hated him. Many in the crowds were not really yelling *Hurrah for Jesus* because they didn't fully understand who Jesus was! They were using His parade as an excuse for political agitation against those hated Romans who occupied their country. It was because of the Roman occupation that the people were looking for a Messiah and anyone would do. Even Jesus! These were dangerous times and any gathering of this type would give the Romans an excuse to quell what they feared may turn into a riot. But this was a parade of Jerusalem's lame and blind, with children and peasants from Galilee taking part. And who is the hero of the parade? Some forlorn figure mounted on a little donkey with his feet practically dragging the ground. What a pathetic sight! And despite the cheers and acclamation of the crowd that morning, Jesus' mood did not seem victorious.

He was reported to have wept at the beginning of the parade as He thought of Jerusalem's many lost opportunities. Perhaps he sensed that many of the folks cheering for him would soon be shouting *crucify him* before the end of the week. He was deliberately presenting himself as a king but not the kind the world knew because He would wield no worldly or political power. Jesus was fulfilling the prediction made about Him by the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament. Jesus knew these words from Isaiah well, and what awaiting him. Isaiah 53: *It was the will of the Lord that his servant should have no dignity or beauty to make us take notice of him. There was nothing attractive about him, nothing that would draw us to him. We despised him and rejected him; he endured suffering and pain. No one would even look at him; we ignored him as if he were nothing. But he endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain that we should have borne. All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way. But the Lord made the punishment fall on him, the punishment we deserved.* As Jesus was entering Jerusalem that Sunday, He was hailed as a king but Jesus knew he would rule from a cross.

From the Palm Sunday event we learn several truths: **First - Jesus always intrigues people.** Matt 21:10, *And when he entered Jerusalem, the entire city was stirred saying Who is this?* The crowd was intrigued by Jesus even though they were confused about his identity. People were interviewed for a Gallup poll recently and asked what historical figure they would like to spend a day with, and nearly two out of three chose Jesus, including 37 percent of those who claimed no church affiliation. Jesus still intrigues people! People who love him or detest him can't help calling his name. I know people who don't use conventional swear words but they profane the name of Jesus Christ without even thinking. People either worship Jesus or curse him but they can't ignore him. No wonder the Bible continues to be the world's best-selling book? Jesus had such charisma that people would sit for three days without food, just to hear His words. He was amazing!

Jesus was a fascinating, unpredictable character and he displayed a wide range of emotions: Compassion for a dying leper, exuberance over his disciples' success. A warm hospitality that callously disregarded racial and cultural boundaries. But he could burn with anger toward cold-hearted legalists. Jesus had inexhaustible patience with individuals but no patience at all with institutions or injustice. No wonder He still mystifies and intrigues people across the world.

Secondly: **Jesus is still misunderstood by most people.** Matt 21: 10 tells us that the people of Jerusalem were speculating about who Jesus was. They thought He was a prophet and nothing more. Jesus asked his disciples who people were saying He was and they replied *John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets.* People then and now don't understand who Jesus is. Even today many people misunderstand Jesus and in recent years, some people have tried to domesticate and tame Jesus. They've turned him into something resembling a 1960's type hippie flashing the peace sign. A sweet loving Jesus, meek and mild, who wouldn't hurt a fly which is a mistake. Jesus wasn't crucified for saying *Let the little children come unto me or love one another.* Jesus was considered dangerous because he physically assaulted the money-changers in the temple, He turned over their tables and drove them out with a whip saying *Get out of here, you bunch of crooks!*

The real Jesus was an utterly exuberant and frighteningly courageous character. He enjoyed parties, think of the wedding at Cana. He loved company and He didn't seek out the socially safe crowd. He preferred the company of rough fishermen and tax collectors. He accepted the prostitutes, beggars and lepers and children. And because of this, some people misunderstand Jesus and try and make Him the champion of their own agenda. Some take the scripture *Anything you ask for in my name, I will give* and they pray for success in business, more wealth implying that Jesus is the path to wealth and power. They transform greed from a sin into a virtue.

On the other end of the political spectrum, some church leaders try to make Jesus the spokesman for the disaffected: They distort Jesus' teaching to try and make the Gospel accessible to all regardless of the clear teaching on sin and repentance. We try and re-create Jesus to fit our beliefs, but Jesus is bigger than anybody's narrow agenda. Jesus is bigger than the public's perceptions of him. Jesus did what only God can do: He forgave sin. He allowed people to worship him. He said *I and the Father are one*. The great British teacher C.S. Lewis was right when he said that *Jesus either was who he said he was, the Son of God, or else he was a madman or a liar*. And liars and people with delusions tend not to be worshipped two thousand years after their death. The crowds have usually been wrong with regard to who Jesus is.

That brings us to a third and central truth: **Jesus becomes King, one heart at a time!** He wins the world, one heart at a time and each of us in the privacy of our own hearts must decide who He is. After Jesus questioned the disciples about the crowd's perception of him, He asked them *Who do you say that I am?* and Peter responded *You are the Christ of God*. Each time a person makes that affirmation, Jesus the unidentified king is crowned in that person's life as the King of kings.

Imagine that Jesus' Palm Sunday parade is passing down Main Street, Thornliebank instead of Main Street, Jerusalem. We stand with the crowds on the pavement and cheer, and Jesus invites the people to join His parade. We sense that to step out into the street to join him would be thrilling, but perhaps costly. We would be publicly identified with a controversial leader. After all, those in authority have censored Him and to belong to His group is politically risky. What's more, if we join His group He might change our values, our habits and priorities, our friends and even our vocation. Perhaps it's safer to just stand and cheer. There again, He may never pass this way again and we sense that if we resist His call today; we may always regret it. What do we do?

Each time we are willing to publicly claim him as Lord and Saviour, His circle of influence grows. Each new disciple becomes a bridge to others and Jesus' kingship spreads.

In Glasgow today if asked, most Christians identify themselves as British or Scottish and then Glaswegian. Then they'll tell you their occupation and then last of all, they may tell you they are Christian. I used to be a Housing Manager from Edinburgh. Imagine the impact I could have made if I had courageously declared I am a Christian, who happens to be from Edinburgh and who was a Housing Manager. I'm sure that would have sparked conversation. And if I declared Jesus as king and explained why, I wonder what impact that could have made? What about you? Are you first a Christian and then a clerk or a teacher; a mother or father or British or Glaswegian? Is the word *Christian* our most important adjective? If it's not, why not?

In the classic novel, *The Robe*; there's a character called Marcellus who has become enamoured with Jesus. In letters to his fiancée Diana, he writes about Jesus' teachings and miracles and His crucifixion and resurrection. Finally, Marcellus informs Diana that he has decided to become a disciple of Jesus. In her reply, Diana says *What I fear is that this Jesus character might affect you. The story of his life is beautiful. Let it remain so. We don't have to do anything about it, do we?* And that is the attitude of so many Christians! In answer to Diana's question I would answer: *Yes we do!* Jesus is still marching down the streets of the world, calling people to make decisions. Jesus is the unidentified king who has no crown or kingdom until one person at a time declares by faith *Jesus is Lord and He will reign in my life.* Maybe Jesus has walked the streets of your life for a long time, seeking a heart to rule, a soul to save, a life to transform. **Maybe today you will crown him King!** *If something about what's been said has touched you and you want to discuss faith in Christ further, please speak to me after the service. Amen*

(1816 words)