

Mark 11:1-11
April 5, 2009

South Plains
Palm/ Passion Sunday

Making Sense Of It All

I'm a big fan of the Sunday comics, all the way from Mutt and Jeff to Sally Forth and Zits. For a while, the comics included one of those pictures that look like a bunch of colored dots. The idea is that when you look at those dots long enough, your eyes will suddenly see a pattern, and a picture will appear. Most of the time, I could never see the pattern, just dots. I now know the reason. The human mind insists on interpreting what our eyes see. My mind stubbornly sticks to my first impression which is always a bunch of dots.

I think the same thing happens on Palm Sunday. The first impression we have is that Jesus is riding into Jerusalem in triumph. He comes as the King of Israel. That's how the crowd sees him and that's how we usually think of him. Palm Sunday sometimes includes elaborate processions and usually begins with a hymn praising King Jesus. Everybody loves a parade and that was as true of first century Jerusalem as it is for us today. However, Jerusalem's enthusiasm for Jesus does not last. They do not hail him as king for very long. And, the church, when we celebrate Palm Sunday, knows deep in our hearts that Jesus is not the kind of king Jerusalem expected. Perhaps he is not the king we want or expect either.

At any rate, the gospels evoke a parade as Jesus enters the city. The elements of a royal procession are certainly there. Jesus enters from the Mount of Olives. The prophet Zechariah, chapter 14 verse 4 says that the Lord will stand on the Mount of Olives to save Jerusalem from her enemies and he will become king of the whole earth. Zechariah 9:9 says, "Your king comes to you triumphant and victorious..., humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." That's exactly how Jesus enters the Holy City.

Many people in Jerusalem spread their cloaks on the ground in front of Jesus. And, 2 Kings 9:13 describes a coronation where the people spread their cloaks on the ground for the new king of Israel. The gospel writers and Jesus know the scriptures.

Most significantly, the people shout the words we read this morning from Psalm 118:

Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

These are words of praise and adoration for a king. And Holy Week always starts with our recognition of King Jesus. Our first impression of Palm Sunday is right as far as it goes.

When we look at Mark's story more closely, in the light of events later in the week, we can see another pattern developing in this picture as we connect the dots. The prophecy of Zechariah is a prophecy of the end of time, a time of judgment and punishment. Salvation comes at a terrible cost. What's more, the familiar word from Psalm 118, "Hosanna!" can be a shout of praise. But, the literal meaning of "hosanna" is "save us." So, it's a call for help from people in trouble.

In contrast to Matthew's description of a large crowd, Mark simply says that "many" greeted Jesus. In contrast to Luke's gospel, there are no Pharisees or others attracted by the crowd. There are only disciples and casual bystanders. And, the people never actually call him "king." Moreover, Jesus himself makes no response in Mark's story. He sits silently astride that donkey, letting the people say what they will.

There is one other interesting feature. Jesus sends his disciples into the village to get a donkey for him to ride. It's not his donkey. It does not belong to the disciples. He tells his followers that if anyone challenges their right to take the donkey, they are to reply, "The Lord needs it." Indeed, some people standing nearby ask why the disciples are taking someone else's donkey. They reply as they were instructed; and the challenge melts away. It was all scripted out in advance. The donkey, the parade, the cloaks thrown on the ground – they were all part of God's plan, Jesus' destiny. There's a sense of

inevitability about everything happening this week in Jerusalem.

How do we make sense of it all? How do we reconcile the contradiction between the praises meant for a king and the inevitable progress of Jesus toward the cross and a tragic death?

I believe the key lies in the demeanor of the man riding on that donkey. He accepts with great restraint the bits and pieces of prophecy that point to the arrival of the king. He knows who he is. And, he knows his heavenly Father is in charge. He's comfortable in his skin. He's not happy about the danger and he's not excited about the grand entrance. Because he does not need the adulation and applause to bolster his ego, he comes in quiet dignity with an authoritative lowliness. His royalty is there only for those with eyes to see. It's an understated majesty.

The question thrust upon the people of Jerusalem that week and the question confronting the disciples of Jesus then and now is this: Can we serve a king characterized by humility? Can we worship a God who does not overthrow evil with force? Who does not marshal armies to fight fire with fire? Can we follow a Savior who bids us pick up our cross, and lose our lives in commitment to service? Can we live within the limits of our heavenly Father's care?

Someone has pointed out that people imitate the gods they worship. The real heroes claim not only our applause, but they actually shape our lives, our going out and coming in. Jesus will give his life for the kingdom that we inherit. He insists on making friends among sinners. He brings out a different life for those who are attracted to him:

the business person who cheats to make more money will change his business practices;
the unsophisticated worker accepts new responsibility;
the government contractor on the take becomes honest;
the wealthy who are attached so securely to position and prestige are able to risk position and prestige;
the notorious sinner and the one with a tender conscience find forgiveness for their guilt.

All receive new life whether they deserve it or not in the eyes of the world.

But, the question still hangs in the air on this Palm Sunday as it hung over Jerusalem:

Will we worship a king who rides to his death?
Will we follow such a king, and model our lives after his loving service?

King Jesus bids us follow him to the cross.

Mark 15:1-15
I Peter 1:18-19