

Lent 2011 at Brentwood Presbyterian

Who Is This Jesus?

**April 17, 2011
Palm Sunday**

**Psalm 118:19-29 & Matt 21:1-11
(Hymns –218, 220, 171, 297)**

This is a familiar story for Christians.
Jesus enters Jerusalem
riding a donkey
at the beginning of what we have come to call Holy Week.
He is greeted by welcoming crowds,
lining the sides of the roads
and shouting their excitement and admiration.
Palm branches and cloaks are strewn on the roadway.

The passage as recorded in Matthew's Gospel
is rich in symbolism
that would have given a particular meaning
to its original readers.

The donkey was ridden by kings coming in peace,
while the horse was ridden by kings coming for war.
Jesus' intention in entering Jerusalem on a donkey
was to bring his unique kind of peace
this centre of political and religious power.
And, as Matthew points out,
in so doing he was fulfilling Zechariah's prophesy
concerning the coming of the peace-filled kingdom of God.

In many lands in the ancient Near East,
it was customary to cover the road
for someone worthy of the highest honour.
It is John's Gospel alone that specifies
that the branches used were from palm trees.
The palm branch, in Jewish tradition,
is a symbol of triumph and victory.

So, on the surface, this is a story of a very successful day,
Of Jesus' arrival in the centre of power
with all the accolades due to a king.

As we move through the week,
knowing now that the enthusiastic cheers change to mocking jeers
and that Jesus ends up on a cross for his throne,
this beginning stands in stark contrast to the end.

There is a hint of that in the story of Palm Sunday,
a little undercurrent of uncertainty among the crowds
that should give us pause.

Matthew makes it clear that the original crowd enthusiasm
is soon dampened with questions
about who this Jesus is?

You get the sense of some people
gathering to greet Jesus with enthusiasm and joy
and then other people being drawn into the excitement
but wondering what's going on and who this guy is?

Remember, Jesus has spent his entire ministry
120 kilometres to the north of Jerusalem,
in the region of Galilee.

His reputation as a teacher and prophet
had clearly spread to some in Jerusalem,
especially those whose power his presence and teaching threatened,
but he would not have been widely known yet.

So, various segments of the crowd are confused and curious.

“Who is this guy?” they ask.

Other segments of the crowd answer,
“He’s the one promised in the prophecies,
David’s long-awaited Son,
the One who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Still others consider him a prophet,
one who teaches the way of the Lord
with candor and courage.

Hopes and expectations and longings
for the restoration of a prosperous and peaceful
nation of God’s chosen people
are all bubbling up and over
in the response of the crowds
to Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem.

By the end of the week,
in seven momentous days that changed the world,
all of their expectations will be realized,
but none in the ways they imagined.

That, for me, is the most powerful message
from this passage as I have studied it again this year.

God saves us in God's unique way,
not in conformity with any of the ways we desire or imagine,
but by being Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, God comes into his royal power
through suffering and death on a cross.

In Jesus Christ, God confronts
those who distort or ignore his teachings about the kingdom
with grace and humility,
tinged with a bit of outrage
in the midst of the money changers at the Temple.

In Jesus Christ, God offers for all to see
a way of being hopeful, faithful, and loving
that *is* the gift of life over death,
of love over fear,
of flourishing over withering.

In Jesus Christ, God restores wholeness and holiness to the earth
in a way that confronts and confounds
all human expectations and imaginings.

To truly grasp the redemptive power this coming week,
we must open ourselves afresh
to the work of the Spirit
teaching us God's ways of offering faith, hope, and love
in the work and witness of Jesus Christ.
We must adjust to God's ways, not he to ours.

That journey to the wholeness that God alone provides,
in Jesus Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit,
is transformational for every creature on this earth.

And we have been given the privilege
of learning and teaching and living that life-giving energy
in our own work and witness with every breath we take
in every situation into which God leads us.