

Choose Your Crowd Carefully

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, March 28, 2010)

Matthew 21:1-11 (The Message) When they neared Jerusalem, having arrived at Bethphage on Mount Olives, Jesus sent two disciples with these instructions: “Go over to the village across from you. You’ll find a donkey tethered there, her colt with her. Untie her and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you’re doing, say, ‘The Master needs them!’ He will send them with you.”

This is the full story of what was sketched earlier by the prophet:

“Tell Zion’s daughter, ‘Look, your king’s on his way, poised and ready, mounted
On a donkey, on a colt, foal of a pack animal.’”

The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, “Hosanna to David’s son!” “Blessed is he who comes in God’s name!” “Hosanna in highest heaven!”

As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, people were asking, “What’s going on here? Who is this?”

The parade crowd answered, “This is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee.”

It was the Passover season in Jerusalem. In Jesus’ day, Passover was like Christmas and Easter and the 4th of July all wrapped up in one. A devout Jew would remember when God came among them at the time of the Exodus, and how God loved them and spared them from the wrath that fell on Egyptian families that day. But it was like 4th of July as well because every good Jew would celebrate the fact that their nation, the Jewish people, were God’s chosen people. But it was also like Easter for them in a sense because their nation had fallen on hard times. They were now a captive nation, living under Roman domination, with Roman soldiers in every town, watching their every move, controlling them, taxing them. Passover, in those days, was not just remembering the past and celebrating their identity as a nation, but a time when they would hope and pray and look forward to being brought back to life, restored as a proud nation, a leader of nations. Passover, to a devout Jew, was a time to come to Jerusalem, to the temple, not just to worship God but to pray for the time when God would raise them up and make them a special people, a favored people. Every good and devout Jew back then and even today, would try to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem at least once in their lifetime and would look forward to the day when all Jews would celebrate Passover in Jerusalem, and even more, when all nations would come to Jerusalem and pay homage.

Of course, it would take a leader to make this happen. But the Jews knew such a leader would come – God had promised, through the prophets, that such a leader would come. Zechariah even foretold how that leader, who they called the Messiah, would come: humble, and riding on a colt.

Now that might seem a bit strange to us, as it did to most people of that day. Military leaders rode horses, or chariots, or some, like Hannibal, rode elephants. But donkeys were too small, too slow. The only leader who would ride a donkey was one who had been defeated. He would come to the victorious general, riding a donkey, giving every appearance of being non-threatening. Because on a donkey, you couldn’t battle horse-mounted cavalry, and you couldn’t even run away. Coming on a donkey, the victorious general or king would know that you are coming to seek terms of peace. It just didn’t fit the ways of the world for their Messiah to come into Jerusalem on a donkey.

But then, God’s ways are not our ways. God does things differently than we do. And the Jewish people knew this. So when Jesus came into Jerusalem, riding a donkey, some folks had the idea that the prophesy of Zechariah was being fulfilled. Their Messiah had come. They were convinced that now the occupying Roman forces would get theirs. And the once proud nation of Israel would be restored. Roles would be reversed and all nations would bow down to them. Life would be good. And so it was only appropriate when somebody began shouting Hosannah, others joined in, and it was quite a parade.

But Jesus didn’t do what the people wanted him to do. God doesn’t work on our schedules and is not constrained by our agendas. And in disappointment, the people who had shouted Hosanna one day, in just a few days turned on him with different shouts. Listen to just a portion of what Matthew wrote to tell us, following

this “Triumphal entry,” regarding how the crowds turned on Jesus. I will be reading from Matthew 27:15-26, again Peterson’s interpretation.

It was an old custom during the Feast for the governor to pardon a single prisoner named by the crowd. At the time, they had the infamous Jesus Barabbas in prison. With the crowd before him, Pilate said, “Which prisoner do you want me to pardon: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus the so-called Christ?” He knew it was through sheer spite that they had turned Jesus over to him.

While court was still in session, Pilate’s wife sent him a message: “Don’t get mixed up in judging this noble man. I’ve just been through a long and troubled night because of a dream about him.”

Meanwhile, the high priests and religious leaders had talked the crowd into asking for the pardon of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus. The governor asked, “Which of the two do you want me to pardon?”

(They said), “Barabbas!”

“Then what do I do with Jesus, the so-called Christ?”

(They all shouted), “Nail him to a cross!”

(He objected), “But for what crime?”

(But they yelled all the louder), “Nail him to a cross!”

(He), “But?”

(They), “Nail him to a cross! Nail him!”

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere and that a riot was imminent, he took a basin of water and washed his hands in full sight of the crowd, saying, “I’m washing my hands of responsibility for this man’s death. From now on, it’s in your hands. You’re judge and jury.”

(The crowd answered), “We’ll take the blame, we and our children after us.”

Then he pardoned Barabbas. But he had Jesus whipped, and then handed over for crucifixion.

(Thank the choir.)

It has been said that there are three kinds of people in the world, those who make things happen, those who always seem to have things happen to them, and those who seem to wander through life, cluelessly saying, ‘what happened?’

There were three kinds of crowds in our lessons – those who were following and praising Jesus, those who had no idea of what was going on and those who shouted, “Crucify him.” I suspect some individuals were in all three crowds.

On the first Palm Sunday, I am sure there were some in the crowd for selfish reasons. There may have been some who saw Jesus heal the sick, and they were hoping for healing. There may have been some who were fed by him when he fed the multitude, and they were hoping for another free lunch. There may have been some who just loved the way he put down the high and mighty, and they might have been hoping some other high-and-mightys would get their come-up-ance. There may have been some who loved his stories and parables, and they might have just been following to see if there would be any entertainment today. And we know there were some who were in that crowd because they loved Jesus. Jesus had called them to follow him, and they were doing the best they could to be there for him. When Jesus did not provide stories, healing, free lunches, and when he did not do any crowd-pleasing acts, I am sure some of the same ones who were shouting Hosanna were now shouting, “Nail him to a cross!” The chief priests and elders may have started it, and it was so easy to join in. “Crucify him.” “Nail him to a cross.”

On that day, it appeared that the chief priests and elders won. They did crucify Jesus. But we know the rest of the story. We know that God raised Jesus from the dead, and through the Holy Spirit gave incredible power to those who followed Jesus. A movement began with the baptism of 3,000 more, and congregations were established everywhere. In less than 40 years, the temple and all its power were destroyed. It took several centuries, but in time the Roman Empire fell, and still, the church of Jesus Christ continued, and grew, and is very much alive even today.

There are still more crowds today. Choose your crowd carefully. Some are trying to tell us that the church is dead. Some are trying to tell us that the church is irrelevant. Some are trying to destroy the church. But still the church continues, and will continue, because God is the head of the church, with Jesus Christ as the foundation. Choose your crowd carefully. Look at who is at the head of the crowd. Is it Jesus? Then follow him.

Let us stand and sing hymn #344 as a hymn of commitment, a commitment which we are each called to make, to follow Jesus.