

Sermon

John 12:12-25

Palm Sunday Misunderstandings

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 118:19–29

Philippians 2:5–11

We miss out on a lot when we don't learn about the cultural context of Ancient Israel. For example: we think that a great hero should ride a great horse into Jerusalem ... a nice white stallion with lots of bling. Listen, however, to the instructions that David gave when he wanted the people to understand that Solomon was his choice for the next king of Israel. "King David said, 'Call to me Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada.' They came before the king. The king said to them, 'Take with you the servants of your lord, and cause Solomon my son to ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon.'" (1 Kings 1:32–33) In David's day, the king rode a mule, not a horse.

Then there is the prophecy: "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King comes to you! He is righteous, and having salvation; lowly, and riding on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) Yes, the prophecy says humble, but it also says king.

If a king, a general, or some other military officer rode in procession on a war horse, then that was a sign of conquering ... domination. It meant he came to subjugate and oppress. If the king rode on more humble transport like a mule or donkey, then he was coming in peace. He was bringing the blessings of his kingdom to his people. Jesus rode into Jerusalem in humility, but he did not ride as a humble nobody. He rode as a king who was coming in peace. He rode as one who brings blessing.

The palms are another misunderstood symbol. We think of palm branches as a symbol of peace. That was not the case at the time of today's Gospel. The palm branch was a sign of patriotism ... of national pride. The palm branches indicated that the people acknowledged Jesus as royalty. The palm branches might be an indication that the people expected Jesus to do something about the Roman occupation of their land. If the Roman soldiers in the city had recognized the symbolism, they would have arrested Jesus immediately.

The people were doing the right thing when they praised Jesus, but they were doing it for the wrong reason. They were recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, but they were thinking of a Messiah who would rescue them from their earthly problems: things like sickness, hunger, injury, and so forth. Many of them were thinking that Jesus had even come to rescue them from the Roman occupation.

Things aren't all that different today. How many people think that Jesus came so that we could be happy and feel good about ourselves? How many people think that the main reason Jesus came was to teach us how to live so that our good life will get us into heaven when we die? Some people even believe that Jesus came to teach us how to be successful and wealthy.

Then there was the opposition, the Pharisees. They thought Jesus came to remove them from their positions of influence and authority. They were very frustrated that they couldn't get Jesus under their control.

Again, we have people like this today. We have people today who think that Christianity is all about taking all the fun out of life. We also have people who think they ought to be able to get control over Jesus and convert him into a giant vending machine in the sky.

The Passover Pilgrims were right in thinking that Jesus came to defeat their foes. They were just thinking about the wrong foes. The people were thinking about the hardships of this life and the political oppression of Rome. Jesus actually came to battle sin, death, and the devil.

Because Jesus was fighting a different war, his tactics were different. General George S. Patton had a very colorful saying that expressed the very basics of battle on this earth. I would paraphrase his saying as: "No soldier ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb soldier die for his country." This is a very successful approach for waging war on this earth. The people who expected Jesus to fight an earthly war were expecting Jesus to use this battle tactic.

Jesus was not fighting an earthly war. He was fighting a war that has eternal consequences. His battle plan is the opposite of Patton's plan. Jesus expressed His battle tactic in a short, one sentence parable. "Most certainly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24) These words illustrate our Lord's battle plan. He will be the wheat that falls to the earth and dies.

Jesus will fight sin, death, and the devil by not fighting. He will **actively** attack these enemies by **passively** allowing mortal men to abuse Him and nail Him to a cross. He will defeat His enemies by dying for His friends.

Jesus often spoke of His hour. Up until the time of today's Gospel, He had always said, "My hour has not yet come." (John 2:4). In today's Gospel Jesus said, "The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." (John 12:23) The hour has come for Jesus to place Himself at the mercy of His enemies, but they will show Him no mercy. The hour has come for Jesus to bear the curse of sin so that sinners may bear the blessing of God. The hour has come for Jesus to defeat death by dying. The hour has come for Jesus to endure His greatest shame and so achieve His greatest glory.

The parable that Jesus told illustrated the glory He would achieve with His death. He said that a seed bears fruit only when it dies. What fruit grew from the death of the seed?

Jesus was buried like a seed in the ground when His friends took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. Three days later, the seed sprouted. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus became the firstfruits of those who have died in Him. He knew that when He was buried like a seed in the ground, He would return to a new life. He also knew that His new life would only be the first of many. Through the glorification of His death, He offers new life to all people. When Jesus returned to life, He would not only enter the glory of God, but He would bring us along with Him. Through His death and burial a living thing would grow from Him – a living thing that is like a plant growing from a seed. That living thing is The Holy Christian Church, The Community of all who believe in Him, The Community of all who will live with Him forever.

The crowds who praised Jesus as He entered Jerusalem cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (John 12:13) They got their words right, but they didn't understand the true meaning of their praise. They didn't realize that their Messiah would soon die for the sins of the world.

I wonder. Perhaps there is a similar phenomenon when it comes to matters of faith. Think about it. How long has it been since you felt like shouting about Jesus? We Lutherans are not too much that way.

There is a well-worn story of a dear lady coming into a Lutheran Church for worship for the first time. Every time the minister said something with which she agreed, she would shout it out. "Amen... Hallelujah... Praise the Lord." Finally, one of the ushers came over to her and asked her to please keep quiet. She responded, "I just can't help myself. I have found JESUS." To which the usher replied, "Well, you didn't find him here."

What about that? Granted, we come from a conservative tradition, but is there anything about Jesus that really makes you want to shout...like when your child or grandchild was born? Or has Jesus taken on the character of something familiar and comfortable...like a child as it grows? Still wonderful, but no longer COMPELLING you to let the whole world know?

Perhaps there is another problem. Perhaps we are not inclined to shout so much anymore because we have been disappointed.

That was the problem after Palm Sunday, you know. Disappointment. The good citizens of Jerusalem were looking for a deliverer like the Maccabees had been so many years before. They brought out their palms just as their ancestors had done. They wanted someone to lead them to a glorious victory over the hated legions of Rome. But they soon realized that such was not to be. THIS deliverer was like none they had ever known before. The result? Disappointment. And the disappointment moved them from Palm Sunday to Good Friday in the blink of an eye.

Perhaps you or someone you know has been disappointed... perhaps with the Lord because the answer to a heartfelt prayer did not come in the way expected. A husband or wife was NOT delivered from cancer. A son or daughter was NOT kept free from drugs. A marriage that had begun with such high hope has crashed and burned. Or perhaps there was disappointment with the Lord's Church, disappointment because the church sometimes proves to be not quite that "fellowship of kindred minds...like to that above." Those things can stop joyous shouting very quickly.

Maybe that is why we need a day like Palm Sunday, just as we need time for family celebrations of birthdays and the like. To remind us that, in spite of everything that might tend to douse our shouts, to zip our lips, to steal our zeal...in spite of EVERYTHING, the news we have is still GOOD news, and we cannot, we should not, we MUST not keep quiet about it...just like the birth of a baby.

In this service, we will sing these same words of praise in the Service of the Sacrament We will sing, "Hosanna,". We will celebrate the Lord making His presence known in **the New Jerusalem, His church**. As He makes His presence known to us, He will give Himself to us in His body and blood. , Jesus will renew us with the forgiveness He earned for us with the ultimate glory of His suffering and death on the cross.

As we do this, we will join with all the saints in heaven and on earth who gather at the great wedding feast of the Lamb who was slain and who lives forever more. We will all join together as we sing, "*Holy, Holy, Holy* Amen