

An Exercise In Missing The Point

Today is Palm Sunday. It's the day we celebrate the coming of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem before he was arrested, put on trial, and then crucified. What we usually do on Palm Sunday is focus on the celebration of Jesus as Messiah. After all, that's what most of the story is about. Disciples praising God. The crowds shouting out "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" We who believe that Jesus is the Son of God should celebrate him as our Messiah and Saviour. But that's not the whole of the Palm Sunday story. There is something else in this story that is even more profound than a whole bunch of people getting excited about Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, stripping branches off the palm trees, waving them about, and throwing their cloaks on the road in front of him. So we will come to that dimension of the story soon. But let's look at the first part first.

Hints Of The Messiah

In the months and weeks leading up to this parade, Jesus is determinedly making his way to Jerusalem. He knows that what faces him is the Cross, where he will suffer an agonising death, to die as God's sacrificial lamb for the sins of the whole world. Over the months leading up to this final trip to Jerusalem, he's been dropping hints that he is the Messiah, the one sent by God to be the Saviour of Israel. As the months and weeks have gone on, the hints have become more explicit. Some of his closest followers are beginning to believe that he is Messiah. The word is getting around, and large numbers of people are following him, and excitement about Messiah is rising to fever pitch. Of course, the sort of Messiah many of them were hoping for was a Messiah who would lead a revolt against the occupying Roman army.

The Match That Set Off The Explosion

The events of what we call Palm Sunday was the match that lit the firecracker. And Jesus was the one who deliberately lit it. He carefully staged a bit of dramatic theatre that sent a very clear message that he was the Messiah. This piece of theatre centred around a young donkey that had never been ridden before. Jesus borrowed this donkey to ride into Jerusalem. Now to us, Jesus riding a donkey may not seem like a big deal, but to those who were there, it was an explosive act that either set people wildly rejoicing, or it made them grind their teeth with anger. Here's how Luke describes it in Luke chapter 19.

"After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.'" Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They replied, "The Lord needs it." They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19:28-40)

The Declaration

Jesus knew that when the people saw him riding on a young donkey that had never been ridden before, that would immediately trigger a reaction. For the people watching knew that to ride a donkey into the holiest city of Israel, the city of David, the way Jesus did, was a declaration. It was a declaration that you were a king. When King Jehu was anointed King of Israel, the people took off their cloaks and laid them for him to walk on. When Solomon was anointed king over Israel, he rode a donkey. Kings going to war rode

horses. Anointed kings rode donkeys. In the writings of the prophet Zechariah, there was a reference to this very event. ***"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey". (Zechariah 9:9)*** People knew that scripture to be a reference to the coming Messiah. The ride on the donkey was no coincidence. It was an explicit declaration by Jesus that he was the Messiah.

People responded to this event in different ways.

The Bystanders

There would have been some who dismissed it as a joke. A grown man riding a little donkey. How ridiculous. Some would have simply dismissed this as a publicity stunt.

The Romans

The Roman authorities would have seen it quite differently. They had found the Jews to be some of the most difficult of all peoples to govern. And they had experience of this before, where a Jew was pretending to be King. It was a volatile situation that could easily turn into a riot. The Romans were expecting trouble, and this Jesus looked as though he was asking for trouble.

The Pharisees

The Jewish leaders were in no doubt about the message Jesus was sending, and they didn't like it one bit. The man was claiming to be Messiah, and under Jewish law, that was blasphemy. They were so angry they demanded that Jesus shut his disciples up. They knew they were being provoked, and the situation with the crowds was getting out of control.

The Disciples

For the disciples, this was the culmination of three years of following Jesus. This was the beginning of the Kingdom he had been speaking about. This was reason for real celebration. This was a time to cut loose. They weren't going to let anyone rain on their parade. At last, Jesus had made it clear that he was Messiah. The disciples were over the moon. For them, this was the high point of an amazing three years of following Jesus, and they weren't going to miss this celebration for anything.

But there is another dimension to this story. Listen as I read it.
"As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." (Luke 19:41-44)

For Jesus, there is something much more important going on here. All around him people are shouting and waving palm branches. His followers are delirious with joy. But Jesus isn't. He's weeping. He's overcome with grief. On only two occasions do the gospel writers describe Jesus in tears. One is at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. And Jesus wasn't in tears then because he was desolate about the loss of a friend, for he knew that he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. The thing that moved Jesus to tears on that day was the destructive effect of sin that had brought death into the world. Jesus could see the devastating effect that death has on people that love one another. Death is so contrary to the original purposes of God. God gave us life. God's intention was that we live life with joy. But rebelliousness and stubbornness of heart of the first man and a woman had resulted in death. That's what broke the heart of Jesus on that day and caused him to weep.

Look at Jesus on this Palm Sunday. Don't look at the crowd with all their Hallelujahs and Hosannas. Look at Jesus. He's in tears. Why is that? He's seeing two things that very few others seem to see.

1. He Sees That People Are Missing The Point

He has now dramatically declared himself as the Saviour of Israel. He is Messiah who has come to set up the rule and reign of God in the hearts of all those who will believe in him. This is the moment that the Jewish people had been wanting for hundreds of years, and most of the people didn't believe that it was the real thing. And most of those that did believe he was Messiah couldn't see past the immediate need of kicking out the Roman occupying army. They couldn't see any further than the politics of the moment. For most of the people celebrating the coming of Jesus into Jerusalem, it was an exercise in missing the point. Jesus knew what was going on in the hearts of the people who were there. He knew that most of those that were shouting their allegiance would be in a different crowd a few days later. Only this time they would be shouting "Crucify Him!" Palm Sunday was the first day in a series of events where God would reveal himself in a way that he never had before. And most of those who were there completely missed the point. They didn't see that their day of salvation had come. They didn't recognise the time of Gods coming to them. No wonder Jesus wept.

No wonder he weeps today when people hear the message of salvation, but having heard, they blithely go on their way, preoccupied with the immediate things of this world, not realising that the offer of salvation concerns where they spend the rest of eternity. They don't recognise the time of Gods coming to them.

2. He Sees What Is Coming

Jesus wept because he could see 35 years ahead. 35 years after this ride into Jerusalem, in 70 AD, a Roman army of 70,000 men surrounded the city. Inside the city were 1.1 million people. The Romans cut off their food and water supplies, attempting to starve them into submission. They built siege ramps up against the walls of the city, just as Jesus said they would. Things got so bad, that the Jewish historian Josephus records a mother killing and eating her child. And when the Romans finally broke through into the city, there was such slaughter that up to a million men women and children died. It was the first Jewish holocaust. Because of who he was, Jesus could see this. He knew what was going to happen to these people who would reject him as their Saviour. What Jesus was seeing was this massacre that was going to happen to a group of people who were all excited, waving Palm branches. But Jesus could see more than that.

As a result of the destruction of Jerusalem, there was an even greater disaster going to be visited on the Jewish people. There were a few who managed to survive the horror of 70AD. Those few were driven out from their homeland, and for nearly 2000 years, they would be spread all over the world. Their national language would nearly be lost. Their identity as a people would nearly be destroyed. 6 million of them in Europe would be brutally killed by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945. I believe Jesus could see this future unfolding as he rode into Jerusalem. It need not have happened if they had accepted him as Messiah. It distressed him so much, he wept.

Jesus knows the future. When he rode into Jerusalem, he wasn't just seeing the events of the next few days, when the crowds would call out "Crucify Him!" He wasn't just seeing the sacking of Jerusalem and the killing of over a million Jews. He wasn't just looking ahead to the scattering of the Jewish people and the holocaust to follow. I believe he was looking right ahead to the day when you and I are faced with the decision to accept him or reject him. It distresses him so much when people reject him. He weeps.

There are consequences to missing the point. When Jesus chooses to reveal himself to us, and we just dismiss him as a joke, there are consequences. When he comes offering to save us from our sins, and we reject him, there are consequences. Jesus weeps when we are so short-sighted, we don't see the consequences of rejecting him as our Saviour. The teachings of Jesus in the Gospels are full of warnings about the future of those who reject

him as Messiah. I don't have time today to read it, but read the warnings in Chapter 24 of Matthews Gospel. It's a chilling account of the day when he will come back for those who have accepted him as Saviour.

There is a day when God comes to each of us. There is a time when we hear the Spirit of God speaking truth to us. There is a time when we read the scriptures or we hear them explained, and the truth dawns on us. There is a time when Jesus rides into the centre of our lives with an unmistakable message about who he is. If we miss that message, we do so at our peril. To miss the point is to miss Jesus and his significance for all eternity. He rides into the centre of our lives with an offer of salvation. His offer is to join his Kingdom, and to have eternal life with him. It's an invitation to make him our Messiah. Do you recognise the time of Gods coming to you? Don't miss the point.

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland