

9 April 2017

Cross-Section of Palm Sunday
Matthew 21:1-17

On this Palm Sunday, we read Matthew's account of the Triumphal Entry, beginning with Matthew 21, verses 1-9:

²¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'⁴This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*⁵'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'*

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

*'Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

The thing about a church is that it's a mixed bag. Faith isn't a static, but a living thing, and as such it is always in process. That means that none of us have exactly the same faith; we're all at different points in that process. Moreover, each person's faith is unique to his or her personality. An introvert's faith will not look like an extrovert's. A task-oriented person's faith will express itself differently than an relationship-oriented person's. The thing that is meaningful to you may leave me cold, and the thing that excites me may just make you want to roll your eyes. But another thing about church is that, in theory at least, we are a place where such differences are accepted. We don't demand that everyone's faith be identical. If we do, we aren't a church, but a cult. Now obviously we can always do better at accepting difference, but I do believe that those who try to follow Christ have a better record in this regard than society as a whole. The best that even the most open-minded society can offer is tolerance of all sorts; the church loves all sorts.

But anyway, I was thinking about this as I tried to imagine how to approach yet another sermon on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and it struck me, as I read Matthew 21, that I recognized the different people who are described along that procession. I've been in church with all of them. Let's start with the person in the streets, waving palm branches and shouting messianic slogans at the miracle-worker from Galilee. Who is this person? I picture an inherently religious person who has been turned off by the religious establishment, which is a very likely scenario in the Jerusalem of Jesus' day. The temple at that time was firmly under the control of a hereditary priesthood. The priests had important positions in society, got the seats of honor at every meal, and somehow always seemed to have money. They kept the temple worship running smoothly, according to traditional patterns, and spent the rest of their time in complex

theological arguments. The rabbis studied for years to earn the right to be a part of those symposia. But all this made the temple establishment feel irrelevant to anyone who wasn't from a priestly family or who wasn't excited by intellectual pursuits. Working people felt excluded by the elite, like second-class Jews.

Then those people heard about Jesus, the prophet and healer with the common touch. He preached in fields and on beaches, not just in synagogues, and until this week nobody'd even seen him in the temple. He healed everybody, not just important people. There was a story about one time when he made a synagogue ruler wait while he healed a poor widow. Best of all, the scribes and Pharisees hated him. At last, a religious leader for people like *me!* Besides, it's just fun to be part of loud, cheering crowd, all waving their arms in time to the *hosheanna* psalm. The priests and rabbis never did anything fun, never fed the emotional side of faith. This must be the messiah!

True, the stuff that I've just described is a little shallow: Jesus is fun, he feels more approachable, he irritates the elites. If people had paid attention to his teaching, they might have noticed that it was, if anything, even more demanding than that of the rabbis, but none of that was in the minds of the crowds along the street, shouting "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" That may be why Jesus himself showed very little excitement at the cheering; he knew it was about an inch deep. But before we dismiss the cheering crowds, we should recognize that if they were responding to a sense that their "church" had never really included them, then they had a legitimate grievance and a real reason to rejoice at someone different.

All this should sound familiar. We went through a similar arc in the American church in the 80s and 90s. To many, the church then had become a fusty, crusty, ultra-traditional institution, run by people over 50, meeting in worship services that followed a dreary, predictable pattern in which people sang songs from the 1930s and listened to seminary-trained pastors in robes talk about Karl Barth, whoever he was. That local church was tied to a denominational with a corporate structure and massive bureaucracy, whose main office was in a distant city. The whole thing was stodgy and conventional and as a result alienated the entire Baby Boom generation, most of whom left the church. But then, in the 80s, along came the "contemporary church," designed by and for Boomers, where they had rock music and the latest computer and audio-visual technology in "worship centers" that looked nothing at all like churches, where Sunday School was replaced by "small groups" and pastors ditched the robes in favor of khakis with polo shirts and loafers without socks. *At last!* many Boomers said, *A church just for me! With lattes!* Again, mostly superficial stuff, about style rather than substance, but that doesn't change the fact that we needed the contemporary church to show us how stodgy and smug and inward-directed and self-serving we had become.

That's how I picture that Jerusalemite waving palms and singing "Our God is an Awesome God!" Not a deep faith, maybe, but a sincere one looking for something better than the current option.

God, give us a living faith, one that grows as we do,
One that allows you to grow in our understanding,
One that is not constricted by our childhood beliefs,

Or the teachings of our infancy..
Give us a faith that can be re-imagined as we encounter new truth,
And can be adapted to new experience.
So that we never have to choose between thinking and believing,
And are never led by rigid beliefs to behave differently than you would.

In our church, in our community of faith,
Give us patience with the faith of others.
As our faith grows,
Open our eyes to the possibility that others' faith may grow as well,
Or, perhaps, that their faith has already grown beyond our own.
We are yours as we are,
And as we have been
And as we are becoming.

And as your children, we pray . . . *Lord's Prayer*

* * *

We continue our reading from Matthew 21, with verses 10-14:

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' ¹¹The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' ¹²Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³He said to them, 'It is written,

*"My house shall be called a house of prayer";
but you are making it a den of robbers.'*

¹⁴The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.

It's easy to be critical of the moneychangers in the temple, and you've probably heard explanations of just how corrupt it was, with the priests taking kickbacks on sales and so on. (By the way, I don't know if that's true. I've never read it in any actual history, only heard it in sermons. Be skeptical. We preachers are on deadlines and aren't always the most diligent fact-checkers.) But even if all that's true – after all, Jesus does seem miffed with these money-changers – I just want to be careful about blanket condemnations of the whole thing.

Because I recognize the people behind this market thing, too, and they're good people. You see, some people live out their faith in very concrete terms, focusing attention on things like paying the bills and taking care of the church building. We couldn't function without those people. I can easily imagine the process by which the temple court was opened to commerce. You see, temple worship required sacrificial animals, and the Book of Deuteronomy specifically says that if you're travelling a long way, you don't have to bring the animal with you but can sell it at home, then bring the cash to buy a new one in Jerusalem. So there are *going* to be animals sold in Jerusalem for sacrifice somewhere. I imagine a temple finance committee meeting where one of these competent financial sorts suggests a win-win scenario: "Look, we can sell licenses

to reputable livestock dealers. We can oversee the shops to make sure they're selling clean, unblemished animals, and it'll be way more convenient for worshippers. Plus we can use the license income to support the temple renovation project."

What's wrong with that? Is that worse than selling scrip to supplement offerings as many churches do? Holding church-wide auctions, car washes with brat sales? Church buildings and professional clergy don't come cheap, and both need to be touched up occasionally. Money may be the root of all evil, but it's also the root of all capital improvements, so it's a good thing that there are those who express their faith by supporting the church in this very practical way. Of course, there are dangers. Any time you bring commerce into a religious institution, you open the door to corruption and greed. In our day, we've seen millionaire mega-church pastors, creepy and manipulative fund-raising techniques, and the attitude that church success is measured in dollar signs. All these are wrong, so we do have to be careful that we reflect Christ in the methods we use to support the church, but we can't just hold up our noses at people whose faith leads them to serve in practical ways. We'd be in serious trouble without them.

* * *

We conclude the story of the Triumphal Entry with Matthew 21, verses 15-17:

¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry ¹⁶and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read,

*"Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise for yourself"?"*

¹⁷He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

Can we at least unreservedly condemn the "chief priests and the scribes"? If anyone counts as a villain in the story, isn't it them? Maybe not. Yes, these were defenders of the institution, knee-jerk reactionaries opposed to any change or even minor disruption of the status quo. Yes, we can assume that they profited by maintaining the status quo, but let's be honest here: stability is not a bad thing. These priests had managed to keep the temple functioning, even thriving, while the nation was occupied by Rome. They had negotiated treaties by which the emperor had granted Jews an exemption from worshipping the emperor as a god, and they had worked with King Herod to do a major temple project.

And it doesn't have to have been all self-serving. There are simply people who live their faith lives in the service of tradition. It's how they think. I know and respect people like this. My father is one. I'm not, but I know my father is a man of integrity and deep faith. I know people in the Wisconsin Conference who revere the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* and devote their lives to memorizing, interpreting, and applying that book's instructions to the church, so as to maintain stability and uphold our great tradition. I will never invite any of those people out for a beer, but I recognize their sincerity and acknowledge that much of what they do is valuable. And as I say, this is just who they are. They *couldn't* express their faith any other way.

So it's possible to see these priests and scribes in a positive light. When they express consternation at the raucous crowds, maybe they're concerned about repercussions from Rome. A few years earlier, Pilate had crucified several hundred Jews and set them up along the roads as an object lesson: nobody wanted to see that again. So even these stodgy old guardians of the status quo might have been trying to live their faith according to their own lights.

We tend to read the triumphal entry account in terms of the good guys and bad guys. Jesus and the cheering crowds are the good guys; the money-changers and priests are the bad guys. But it's not that simple. There are people in this congregation who fit each of the three profiles I've talked about today. There are traditionalists who are suspicious of all my talk about the church's need to change, there are the practical souls who just want to make sure that our building and congregation are still around for the next generation, and there are those who are looking for something different, a new way to express and live faith. And all of these are valid and necessary, and it is the glory of the church that we can all exist in the same fellowship. Thanks be to God. Or, as some might say, *hosanna*.