

“The Absurdity of Palm Sunday”

Ralph Waldo Emerson said the needs of life are much fewer than most people realize. We need someone to love and someone to love us, so we may share our joys and sorrows. We need something worth doing so we can purposefully fill time rather than kill time. And we need faith in God ... a faith that makes sense out of life, because so much of life seems absurd. We need faith in God to give meaning and purpose to our life; a faith that gives direction to the journey of our life. However, when we ponder the event of Palm Sunday, we are confronted with some of the most absurd set of circumstances.

From the Seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and on through Lent, we have followed this carpenter from Nazareth on a winding course of events. There was the time of withdrawal for prayer around Caesarea Philippi in the far north. There was the time in Galilee of feeding and teaching the multitude. There was the stay in the hill-country of Judea and in the regions beyond Jordan. There was the road trip through Jericho. Now today we arrive at Jerusalem. This is the last stage of the journey, and yet, the real journey, the journey from the entrance into Jerusalem and then on to the Cross, that journey for Jesus has just begun! Yes, we may need a faith in God that makes sense out of life. But how much sense does Jesus' ride into Jerusalem give to our belief in him?

Consider that Jesus is first given a hero's welcome ... then soon the excited shouts of “Hosanna” --- loosely translated “save us now” --- the shouts of “Hosanna” soon give way to vengeful cries of “Crucify him! Crucify him!” We can assume that the people cheering Jesus and his entourage were expecting a military deliverer, a priestly king who would restore Israel's religious fervor; that they were expecting a mystical figure who would usher in a new age. Whoever they thought Jesus was it is likely that many in the Jerusalem crowd expected him to march into the city and lead an attack on the Roman garrison. But instead of riding in as a Davidic warrior astride a majestic white steed fit for a conqueror, Jesus presents the absurd figure of a humble person as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey --- actually on the colt of a donkey. In fact, the gospel writer Mark emphasizes the lowly pathway of the Son of Man to his death, a path still not fully understood either by the disciples or the people. The lack of understanding in and of itself seems absurd, since the disciples have been with Jesus for over three years. They have seen his works ... heard his teachings -- - and yet, they still don't understand? That's absurd!

Further, there is Jesus' means of travel --- the donkey ... one of the key symbols of Palm Sunday. Look at a donkey from any angle and you will not find what is called “presence.” Donkeys are not blessed with lots of panache, style, or grace! A donkey is an awkward, stubborn beast whose reputation has passed into proverbs. Also, consider the fact that nobody supposes when he or she is called a “donkey” that the term is one of endearment or respect. The donkey in the Palm Sunday episode truly makes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem look preposterous ... a messiah ... a savior ... a king --- riding a donkey? It is beyond amusement! It is absurd!

And that is precisely the point of Palm Sunday --- the absurdity of it all. But then isn't that the world's assessment of Jesus' teachings --- their absurdity? Isn't it absurd that rough, ignorant fisherman, tax collectors of questionable practices, and others of similar status became disciples? Isn't it absurd that prostitutes became models of faith? Isn't it absurd a prodigal son is honored above a faithful brother? Or 5,000 people are fed from scant rations? Or the lame walk, the blind see, and the dead come alive? Isn't it absurd that the gentle inherit the earth, and that the poor have better prospects for entering the Kingdom of God than the self-sufficient rich? Absurd? The world may chuckle and scoff, but our faith holds that God's way is anything BUT absurd. It is the world's ways that are incongruous. The trick is to recognize what is truly absurd and not what appears absurd!

For example, people are most absurd when they say absurd things about what they consider to be absurdities. Here are some classic quotes from yesteryear: In 1806, Lt. Pike after failing to climb a towering mountain in Colorado declared for all eternity: “Pike's Peak will never be climbed!” In 1895, Lord Kelvin, a noted British physicist said, “Heavier than air flying machines are impossible.” President Grover Cleveland in 1905 said with all seriousness, “Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote.” In 1921, Tris Speaker said of a fellow baseball star: “Babe Ruth made a big mistake when he gave up pitching.” And finally my favorite, in Business Week, 1979: “With over 50

foreign cars on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn't likely to carve out a big slice of the U.S. Market." The trick is to recognize what is truly absurd, not what appears absurd. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a donkey may have seemed at the time like "the journey of the absurd," but the verdict of history is that it was Jesus' accusers and scoffers who turned out to be the absurd ones.

The picture of Palm Sunday is not one of an absurd person, but one of a humble, gentle person, who fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures in order that people may believe he is the Messiah. Like those who witnessed Jesus' entry into Jerusalem ... and didn't have their expectations met ... and were made to redefine their idea of the Messiah, we, too, are forced to rethink just what is *real* human strength. Does strength come from being a rough, tough cowboy with the attitude of "bring them on!" Or does real strength draw its power from humility, love, and peace? Does strength come from intimidation with a bully mentality, or does it come from the willingness to serve others?

In all honesty, Jesus had the right to be angry given his fatal destination. Jesus had been loyal to God, and now he is faced with an awesome price to pay. However, anger only saps strength ... love gives strength. Jesus is ready for the world and he will conquer it with love. He will bring peace to all people who find themselves at war with themselves. Jesus will be quiet in the face of the storm. He will not speak. He will be faithful to God's will. He is not defensive. He submits to what must be. It is the way of the new covenant. It is the way of the Cross!

Jesus' journey into Jerusalem is not absurd however, it does speak to *how* we are to conduct our own life given over to faith. In other words, the event of Palm Sunday itself is not absurd, but speaks to the absurdities of our lives. For example, it is easy to be caught up in the storm of life's conflicts. We not only battle the storm with our attitudes, we fuel the storm with our reactions. We fan the flames of heated situations with judgmental rhetoric. We add to the confusion by denying the problem. We allow the storm to consume us by ignoring it. Jesus shows us an alternative to living and dealing with our conflicts.

Jesus demonstrates how to bring love and peace to the most miserable of situations. He shows us how we must die to self and live according to God's will. He shows us how we must empty ourselves of this world, and make room for God to fill us with the power of the Spirit. In Jesus, we see a prime example of how to be a human being in the face of life's turmoil. Amidst the storms of life, we are to be quiet and to listen ... listen to what is being said without being defensive ... listen to the need being expressed ... allowing God's will to work through us instead of us trying to control the situation. Instead of wrestling with the storm ... instead of trying to bring the storm under our control ... instead of trying to resolve the conflict thinking there must be a right answer ... we have Jesus ... a model of peace and love ... a model that tells us to "let go and let God!"

Lest we forget, we are not placed on this earth to save the world. Jesus Christ has done that. We are called to complete Christ's work by proclaiming his good news. When faced with situations that are consuming us, as well as destroying the quality of our life, we simply have to give them up ... we have to let them go ... we have to pray to God: "God make me an instrument of Thy peace in this situation. Use me, O God, for Thy glory." In order to be filled with Christ, we must first empty ourselves of this world ... empty ourselves of preconceived notions on how the world *ought* to be. All life is in God's hands and we must let God be God in our life. I know how simplistic this sounds and that it is not easy to empty ourselves of this troubled life and be filled with faith in God. Indeed, it takes the practice of discipleship, the spiritual discipline of seeking God, and the continual pursuit of trusting God with our life to bring the conflicts of our life under control.

The absurd truth is that we need Jesus on the donkey. We need Jesus gentle and lowly, but majestic and powerful. We need Jesus humble and weak, but dignified and unyielding. We need Jesus riding with grace and truth that we may truly be free from our own personal slavery --- slaves to the sense of our unworthiness --- slaves to the belief we are unlovable and unforgiven --- and far too often, slaves to the habits of our sins and the good intentions to change. We are captives within vicious circles --- as if living a slow death. There is no need for this type of living. Palm Sunday, as well as the week ahead, brings to us a fresh message of hope. Gazing at the entrance that leads to life's eternal hope, there comes to us one who rides for you and for me. And as absurd as he looks or it all seems, there comes to us one who saves us from the real absurdities of this world! God comes to us and even the stones will echo loud "hosannas!" Thank God for the vision of Palm Sunday. Hosanna! Hosanna! Save us, now! Lord Jesus, save us now!