

The Wisdom of Crowds

Palm Sunday and the revealing of God

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Palm Sunday A
Matthew 21:1-11
March 26, 2017

Hear the excitement in the air, crackling with power and uncertainty, with the anticipatory cries of “Hosanna!” For here is the new king, anointed, blessed successor, and reuniter! The one who would bring the glory of the one kingdom back with its conquering power! He is here and we will be saved!

Excitement and confusion and nervous anticipation, no doubt.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, the opening act in a profound story of God’s love. A story which will have exuberant highs and despairing lows. And it will be told over the course of one week. A whole week. A week filled with action and quiet, hope and devastation, support and betrayal.

We will tell this story in parts, daily moving ourselves through a sequence which is at times too familiar. And our story begins in Matthew 21 and won’t end until we get to chapter 28. So read along. Pray. Listen. That we might hear that small voice. Quietly below the radar.

Listen. For today, it begins.

The Opening Scene

This is our opening scene to a big story. It is also the beginning of the climax to a much bigger story. One which began with the Holy Family and a strange birth, becoming refugees in Egypt, growing up on the outskirts of empire and finally Jesus, the central figure, takes the stage as a young man, around 30 years old.

He called disciples, taught, led them to better understand what God has made in creation and their profound role in it.

He healed people all over the region and became known as a healer. And a prophet. And then other things. Lord, messiah, anointed, king, the chosen one. And along the way, when it was time, perhaps after 3 years of ministry, Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. Warned his followers of the danger they face, the certainty of their deaths. That he will be confronting the most powerful and will suffer and die for it.

In Jerusalem.

Here, where they now stand.

And most of us have heard how countercultural this moment is. How at the very same time, Pontius Pilate is arriving in Jerusalem himself with the frightening pageantry Rome is known for. Astride tall warhorses surrounded by a mighty army with attendants bearing poles reaching even higher toward the sky, topped with flags. All the might, power, strength of an army that knows they could slaughter the crowds in seconds and make their last moments agonizing.

Here, Jesus, the mockingly humble king, on a donkey, attended by fishermen and country folk. These poor, dirty, confused men and women, awestruck by the size of the holy city, then soon enough the Temple.

This is how the savior arrives at the climax of the story, in his own mock triumphal entry.

And still there are Hosannas! and tree branches: the depictions of a true king. This is a moment of strange turning. Where kings and peasants trade places, and the true king, not the one given by Rome, but the one given the seat by God comes to reveal how backward our priorities really are.

But not just those priorities in that moment. Ours in the reading. In the celebrating. In our palm branches and expectation. And our excitement at this moment as if a new king has arrived to conquer the world.

The Crowds, the City, the Leaders, the Disciples, and the Lord

We relive this moment each year, hearing the words of Jesus orchestrating this Triumphal Entry, receiving our branches, and walking with Jesus in procession, marking our own entry into Jerusalem. It is a bit like transference, that we might feel and know the anticipation and solemnity of this moment. For unlike the disciples, we know what is going to happen when we come inside.

But there are elements of the story which sort of twist in our minds and prevent us from seeing this scene for what it is.

We notice that there are three groups attending to this moment: the disciples, the crowds, and the city. For in Matthew, there are great crowds which excitedly prepare the way for Jesus and cries with great anticipation. And there is the whole city, the masses beyond the crowds, who are confused. They're asking the crowds "who is this?" And the crowds call him prophet.

One of the great turns in our walking with Jesus, the disciples, the crowds, and even the city into this moment of revelation comes in that question.

Who is this? Our Lord?

That it would come to this moment in this way? That we would see in the coming days the changing of the words shouted from *Hosannah!* to *crucify*. A juxtaposition usually attended in our gathering today. We often kick off Holy Week seeing the crowds excited to see Jesus, only to turn on him in the end.

But this radical transformation isn't born out in the story itself. What is seen is multiple

crowds of supporters excited to see Jesus as Messiah. And what will be found in the coming days is another crowd made up of the leaders and their followers, who will orchestrate the killing of the new king. The Lord who is mistaken for a peasant, a nothing man, a vagrant, a false prophet.

Because he looks the part.

The Reveal

This is the attendant danger of proclaiming the way of the world is wrong. That our priorities are backward and loyalties divided between church and state. And often siding with the state. Attending to the comfort of security to the deeper responsibility to the truth.

That it will be easy to dismiss us with our crackpot thinking and utopian worldview. With the call to nonviolence actually accompanied with nonviolent resistance and the demand to see true justice from those without the hypocrisy of wealth. That our mighty king would come to Jerusalem, the seat of power, to claim the crown without a single sword. Without a mighty army to rain terror from the sky and sea and overwhelm them with land forces.

That a king would come to start a coup on a donkey. Surrounded by nobodies.

A king, come to reveal the way of God to people who can't quite see and can't quite hear and yet long to merely touch the cloak of the Messiah, that we might be healed. One who would gather all the outcasts and the undesirables together, not to take up arms but to proclaim the beauty and mercy of God.

To reveal to all the world that what God wants for us is not power, vengeance, and control over the forces of the world, but to be the kingdom come.

To be a people marked by love, revealing the true character of God is not power, but Shalom. And we praise God for that difference.