

“Rolling Out the Green Carpet”

There is something strange about the original Palm Sunday celebration in Jerusalem. Think about it. A crowd estimated to be between 100,000 and 200,000 lines the roadsides to cheer a preacher from Nazareth named Jesus; But they are not really sure why they are cheering. Jesus didn't spend a lot of his time in Jerusalem. They are not even sure who Jesus is. They just know it's a person that people have been talking about.

What if a ticker-tape parade were held down New York's 5th Avenue for an unidentified celebrity, and a half-million people showed up? That is about what happened on the first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was bursting at the seams with religious pilgrims there for the annual Passover Feast. It has been estimated that some 2.5 million people were in or around Jerusalem. The crowds were enthusiastic but, as the politicians would say, Jesus' support was broad but shallow. The big money, the power structure, hated him. Many in the crowds were not really yelling "Hurrah for Jesus." They were using his parade as a way of saying, "Down with Rome!"

We are in the middle of a Political contest between the old established government and the hopes of something new. One of the candidates was quoted as saying something that is very similar to the crowd. They simply said there will be a sigh of relief when the present President leaves the White House. Not a “Hurrah for the new President” but rather “Down with the present President!”

So what kind of event was this Palm Sunday Parade? I can imagine a nervous Roman officer on horseback, watching this parade from a hilltop, ready to stop this demonstration with brute force if it got out of hand. He must have just smirked at them. I can imagine him thinking: "Back in Rome they know how to stage parades to honor someone great. There, the conquering general sits in a chariot of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. Behind him, officers in polished armor display the banners captured from defeated armies. At the rear comes the beaten procession of prisoners in chains, hanging their heads in humiliation, living proof of what happens to those who defy Rome.

"But look at this ragtag parade in Jerusalem: the lame, blind, the children, the peasants from Galilee. And who is the hero of the parade? Some forlorn figure, riding on no stallion or chariot, but mounted on a little donkey, with his feet practically dragging the ground. What a sorry sight!"

Even Jesus' mood did not seem victorious. Scripture reports that just before entering Jerusalem he was lamenting, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'”

And now here he is at that point and hearing the people shout: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” Perhaps he sensed that many of the folks cheering for him that day would be shouting "Crucify him" before the end of the week. He was deliberately presenting himself as a king, but not the kind the world knew. As much as the world kept trying to push Jesus into our type of person we expected him to be, Jesus kept doing things differently.

Just our Gospel lessons from the past few weeks point this out. The man who was born blind, obviously as a

punishment from God, for either what he or his parents did wrong. Jesus heals him and said this was not punishment from God, like you thought. And if that wasn't enough, he healed him on the Sabbath. Then he met a woman at the well and talked to her when it was not proper for a man to talk to a woman in public, let alone a divorced woman, or a woman divorced five times! And now, once again, he's going against expectations. Not only does he talk to her, but he tells her that her sins are forgiven!

The people wanted him to be their King to save them from the Roman authority. But Jesus knew his Kingdom wasn't in this world. The Kings (and movie stars) of this world walk the Red Carpet. Here comes Jesus going down the Green Carpet of Palm Branches. He would wield no worldly, political power. Instead, he was fulfilling precisely the prediction made about him by the prophet Zechariah in the Old Testament. He would rule from a cross. Once again, this is different from the way we expect a King to rule!

According to an ancient legend, a man became lost in his travels and wandered into a bed of quicksand. Confucius saw the man's predicament and said, "It is evident that men should stay out of places such as this." Next, Buddha observed the situation and said, "Let that man's plight be a lesson to the rest of the world." Then Mohammed came by and said to the sinking man, "Alas, it is the will of God." Finally, Jesus appeared on the scene and said, "Take my hand. I will save you."

That is why Jesus is riding a humble Donkey and not an impressive war Horse. He's not coming to do battle. He's coming to say, "Take my hand. I will save you." He won't be wearing a gold crown with jewels, instead he'll be wearing a crown of thorns. He won't be sitting High on a Regal Throne. He will be the one hanging High from the cross. Because he's not the type of King expecting us to serve him. He's the type of King that is saying, "Take my hand. I will save you."

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). Only Jesus has the power and the authority under heaven to forgive us for our sins and to give us eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" That's what we need to remember on this Palm Sunday. God gave his Son.

This month we are hearing a lot about "March Madness" - the National Basketball Playoffs. It reminded me of a Basketball story I read, which is based on actual facts. Many people who were there, called it the best basketball game they'd ever seen: Westwood High versus Valley Center, to determine who would advance to the state basketball championship. From the opening whistle the contest was a nail-biter. Players from both schools played the game of their lives, running, dribbling, passing, rebounding, shooting, and playing defense with an intensity that their fans had never seen before. The momentum of the game seesawed back and forth, with the lead changing hands more than a dozen times. With only ten seconds to go, Westwood scored a basket that put them ahead by a single point. Valley Center called timeout.

The team huddled with their coach, who drew up what would certainly be the final play. The plan was to work the clock down to two seconds, set a few screens to get their best shooter a good look at the basket, and let him try to win the game with a last-second shot. When the whistle blew, the crowd rose to its feet. Their cheers were deafening. Westwood positioned its defense, and Valley Center brought the ball up. As the clock ticked down to its final seconds, the Westwood fans chanted along, "FIVE...FOUR...THREE...TWO..." The Valley Center players executed the play exactly as the coach had drawn it up. With only two seconds remaining, Valley Center's star player took his shot. The ball bounced off the rim and ricocheted off the backboard, right to a Valley Center player, who tipped it in!

The Valley Center fans went wild. Their team was going to the state finals! Or so they thought. While the players and fans celebrated, the referees ran to the official scorer's table to make sure that the time on the clock

had not expired when the ball was tipped in. With all of the noise, the referees had been unable to hear the buzzer to determine whether or not the shot was good. The official scorer, an older man who had held the position for many years, suddenly had the game in his hands. He hesitated for a moment, but finally leaned over the table and said, "Tell the Valley Center coach I'm very sorry, but the shot was no good. Time on the clock had expired ." That news changed everything for both teams. The Westwood players and fans started celebrating their victory, while those from Valley Center were left to deal with the agony of defeat.

The stunned Valley Center coach sat down on the bench with his head in his hands. The official scorer left his table, walked over, and sat down on the bench beside him. With a tear in his eye, the older man embraced the distraught young coach on the bench and said, "Son... your mother and I are so proud of you."

This story is a powerful example of the cost of living with integrity. It would have been very easy for the official scorer to give the game to his son's team. Instead, he chose to preserve his integrity. He did the right thing. This story is also a powerful illustration of what God did when he allowed Jesus to ride into Jerusalem, knowing it was a road leading to the cross. God could have thrown the game, but he took the loss of his Son in order to preserve his integrity and to provide salvation for the whole world. So his Son, Jesus Christ, with that same integrity, is going to ride down that Green Carpet and do God's Will - not Ours!

On Palm Sunday we shout "Hosanna!" Hosanna means - "Save us" or "Deliver Us." Surprisingly enough - Jesus Does! Not because we asked him to. But because God meant him too. "Blessed *IS* he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna!" Amen

Prayers -- Palm Sunday - March 16, 2008

Lord Jesus, as you heard the shouts of Hosanna, you answered our cry to save us. You entered Jerusalem knowing it was a path leading you to the cross. Help us to have the courage to enter into difficult situations for your sake. Inspire us to accept tough challenges for the sake of the Gospel. And let us always feel your presence with us.

Lord, in your mercy.....

Eternal God, as we prepare to observe Holy Week, help us be mindful to carry our faith into our homes and work places. Make us diligent in daily prayer and not just Sunday prayers. At a time when the world meditates on your life, let what we do be a reflection of your life.

Lord, in your mercy.....

All Powerful God, you sent your Son so we could receive forgiveness for our sins and overcome the power of death. Let the palm branches we carry be a reminder that we can be shouting Hosannas in one breath, while disappointing you in the next. Help us to be as willing to live with integrity and give forgiveness as eagerly as we are willing to accept it. Let us be blessed as we go in the name of the Lord.

Lord, in your mercy.....

Into your hands O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, thrusting in your mercy, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray saying....

