

“Who Is This?”

Introduction: Perhaps you’ve heard about the Sunday school teacher who was trying to see how much her preschool class knew about Easter? The first little fellow who raised his hand said that Easter was when all the family came to the house and ate lots of turkey and watched lots of football! A girl in the class then offered that Easter was when you came downstairs early in the morning and found lots of presents under the tree. With caution, the teacher called on a third child who said that Easter was when Jesus was crucified on the cross and buried. The teacher felt hopeful until the boy continued, “and then he came out of the grave and if he sees his shadow, it means we have six more weeks of winter!”

Well, if there can be confusion surrounding Easter, there is no less confusion surrounding Palm Sunday! There are lots of questions: Are his disciples guilty of grand theft donkey? Was Jesus kind of like a circus performer, managing to somehow ride on two beasts at a time? How did those homeowners lining the impromptu parade route feel about the crowd yanking branches off their trees?! Who did the people think Jesus was? Who did Jesus think he was? Would you have thrown down your cloak or picked up a branch? Would you have joined the procession and followed? What is this event which kicks off holy week meant to tell us?

I. Great Expectations

A. To begin, know that there were great expectations on the hearts of those who had come to Jerusalem. On a purely physical level, making your way up to the holy city involved a journey which began in Jericho, located 800 feet *below* sea level, to the top of the Mount of Olives, which stood at nearly 2,700 feet *above* sea level. When you reached the end of this over 3,000 feet in elevation gain, 6-8 hour walk, you were treated to an absolutely glorious view of the city of Jerusalem. So, on a purely physical level there would be a tremendous sense of exhilaration.

B. On top of that was the fact that you were coming into the city where the living God had chosen to put his name and his presence. There, on this journey, along with countless other pilgrims, family, and friends, you would be celebrating the Passover feast which marked the great deliverance by God of his people from slavery in Egypt. People would have been everywhere. The inns would be full. Street vendors would have stocked up on falafels and lamb subs. Joy was in the air.

C. On top of that was the anticipation, which was always present at the time of the great festivals, that God might choose to do something amazing again, that this just might be the time when the long-expected deliverer—the Messiah—would appear and God would rescue his people again from oppression, this time being experienced at the hands of the Romans. What’s more, rumor had it that this Jesus fellow had recently raised a local guy named Lazarus from the dead, fueling the hope among the people of a miraculous liberator, but fueling the fear of the religious leaders of a threat to national security. At the very least, things promised to get very interesting!

II. The Arrival of Jesus

A. To prepare for his own arrival in the city, Jesus had come up to nearby Bethany on Friday night, spent Saturday relaxing with friends, and then, the next morning, instructed his disciples to fetch him a donkey on which he would ride into town. It’s hard to be sure but it seems as if Jesus had pre-

arranged this (v. 3; cf. Mk. 14:13ff), giving the reader at least the sense that he was already sovereignly in control of the events. At the very least, Jesus understood what he was about to do as being in fulfillment of words from the prophet Zechariah, who had anticipated the coming of a rescuing king, like David of old, to fully establish God's rule on earth. This is certainly what came to the mind of the crowd as they saw him ride in. They spread cloaks on the road, a symbol of the arrival of a king, and spread and waved palm branches, a symbol of victory. This would have taken people a couple of centuries to when brothers called the Maccabees drove Israel's enemies out of Jerusalem and the Temple, and people celebrated this victory by waving palm branches. Could this be another Maccabee—a long-hoped for warrior-king who would drive out the despised Gentiles? Finally, those lining the streets shouted "Hosanna," which was both a cry of praise, as well as a cry for rescue, "Lord, save us!"

B. Who is this?! Some declared him to be a prophet, and they would have been partly right. Speaking the truth of God was certainly part of his role. And by their actions, some thought he was the messianic liberator, and they would have been partly right, for he certainly came to set people free. But, as the week unfolded, it would be apparent that Jesus was not going to liberate in the way they imagined, nor did he come to fulfill their nationalistic ambitions. There's a poignant moment in Luke's retelling of the event when, after seeing the city, Jesus weeps because he knows they do not understand what would truly bring them peace (Lk. 19:41-42). Peace would not come through military might or nationalistic fervor; it's why Jesus didn't come riding a war horse, which a conquering military General would have ridden. No, he rode a donkey, a beast indicating humility, a ride that anticipated the sacrifice he would put himself through in just a few short days when the cheers of "Hosanna!" would turn to the jeers of "crucify him, crucify him!"

C. Who is this? His entry into Jerusalem begins to tell us about him, and the sort of king he's going to be; it also begins to tell us a bit about us, and the sort of king we need. Even more, we will see that this king calls us to do more than just watch and wave with our palms from our lawn chairs by the side of the road as he and his entourage ride by, but to get up and to go with him and to receive and participate in the peace and healing he's come to bring.

Understandably, we may be a bit hesitant to follow. One reason, possibly, is that our experience with leaders, be it in the realm of politics, or in our workplace, or on the playing field, or in our communities, or even in our churches, has not been all that great. We have become careful and watchful. Like we mentioned last week with the word "Father," and how we can transfer our negative experiences with our earthly fathers onto our heavenly Father, so too can we transfer our experiences with the leaders in our world who have disappointed us or let us down in some way onto Jesus. If he is Lord of all, if he is the King of kings, what would prevent him from being extremely selfish and egotistical and in it for himself? After all, it had to feel pretty good hearing the cheers of the crowd!

But as the week would roll on, this is not the kind of leader we see in Jesus. What we see is a king who rejected the way of violence, who humbles himself, deliberately making himself vulnerable, choosing the unthinkable way of self-sacrifice. It's a vulnerability that began with his birth and would be now ending in his death (see pulpit cloth). If you are struggling with his authority, if you're wondering if he can be trusted, he invites you to get up and make your way to the cross. Here we find the one to whom we can give our past sin. Here we find the one who, as he overcomes even death, is our future hope. And so here, therefore, we also find the leader we can trust and follow, in our life, right now.