

“The Leader You Can Trust”

Introduction: Last week we heard the call of Jesus to be his disciple, summarized in his words: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mk. 8:34). We talked about the difference in being a disciple and being a Christian, as the word has come to be understood. That is, Christian has come to represent one who has benefitted from a transaction in which Jesus, through his death on the cross, forgives our past sin and offers us the future of eternal life. A disciple, however, represents not just a transaction but a transformation. A disciple is a student or apprentice, one who has experienced forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life to be sure, but who is also learning to live like Jesus in the present, dying to self-control and following Jesus’ will for our lives.

Now, the fact of the matter is that it’s much easier to accept the benefits of a transaction, and keep on living the way we think is best, than to pursue a life of transformation. In fact, to believe in an all-powerful supreme being and accept what this being has done for us, but to go on living our lives as if we are the ones in control doesn’t appear strange; it feels normal! What would it take for us to really trust Jesus such that we’d be willing not only to give him our past sin and our future hope, but also our present lives? What would move us not only to believe, but to follow? Maybe one huge step in this direction is to get into our heart what kind of leader Jesus really is. His leadership style comes to a head and is on display in the events of this week, the week we have come to call “holy.”

I. Everyone Loves a Parade

A. The week kicks off on this day, the day known as Palm Sunday, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the crowds who are lining the streets throw both their cloaks, and palm branches, on the road before him. What’s this all about? Well, consider for a moment the kinds of people we have parades for. We have parades for Super Bowl champions and World Series winners, we have parades for presidents and visiting heads of state, and we have parades to celebrate particular events, like Independence Day or Memorial Day. On this particular day in Jerusalem, religious pilgrims had gathered from all over the country to begin the week-long celebration of Passover, and God’s deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt.

B. I don’t think a parade was actually planned for this day; it just sort of happened. The city was in a festive mood. Streets had been swept and flags were flying. Street vendors had stocked up on pita bread and lamb subs. Inns had been booked for months and shopkeepers were anticipating a good week of business. The roads leading up to Jerusalem were crowded for miles as pilgrims who had traveled great distances were drawing near. Into this highly charged atmosphere, word had begun to spread that “he” had been seen in nearby Jericho, just 17 miles to the east, and was headed this way. In fact, he had just recently been spotted in nearby Bethphage, just two miles away. Talk was that this fellow Jesus was a revolutionary leader who was going to author a revolt against the Romans. Rumor also had it that he had just raised a man named Lazarus from the dead! Word was also out that the religious leaders were waiting for him and making plans to arrest him, believing that he had become a threat to national security. It promised to be an exciting, event-filled week!

C. And so when he began to come into view, riding on the colt of a donkey, it became an instant parade. Some in the crowd threw down their cloaks, an OT sign of royalty and

loyalty to a new king (cf. 2 Kings 9: . Others cut branches from palm trees and spread them before him. These were signs of nationalism and victory, much like we might wave an American flag. Many began to sing and shout “Hosanna” which means, “O save us!” and to proclaim that this fellow was the long-awaited king from David’s line that had been anticipated for nearly 1,000 years, the Messianic liberator of Zechariah’s prophecy who had finally come to rescue God’s people.

Illustration: In many ways, it was kind of a make-shift inauguration day parade when, after the swearing-in ceremony, a procession of bands and officials and dignitaries and members of the armed forces accompany the newly inaugurated president and his family straight down Pennsylvania Ave. from the Capital building to the White House. The only difference is that Jesus hadn’t been elected or inaugurated into anything, yet in both cases, the overriding question was (and still is), what kind of leader would this be? Can this leader, can any leader, be fully trusted?

II. Who Is This?

A. So perhaps the most compelling line in Matthew’s account of this event comes after Jesus finally arrives in Jerusalem and the residents, stirred by it all but not totally sure what Jesus was all about or what was next, ask, “Who is this?” Who is this indeed? To top it off, he didn’t come riding in on a horse but a donkey, which means he didn’t come looking forward to an “Israel First” military campaign but on a mission of peace for all nations! Who is this? Can we trust him? I suspect there was a bit of wariness underlying their question. Maybe, as we think of the leadership of Jesus and his invitation not just to remain among the crowd and cheer but to actually fall in step behind him and follow, we have some wariness as well.

Illustration: Jan Hettinga, whose book Follow Me underlies some of my thinking on this topic, tells about a little girl in his congregation who told him each week that she prayed for him on Saturday nights and would always give him a big hug on Sunday mornings after worship. One Sunday, in addition to her usual hug, she also gave him a big kiss and then handed him a special offering envelope that the church was using to raise funds for a new children’s center. Block printed on the envelope was her name, and then the amount, \$5. As she pressed the envelope into his hand, she whispered into his ear with a giggle, “And Pastor, don’t spend it on pizza!” It was a cute remark to be sure, but one which had its sobering side. Even at a young age, this little girl knew that not all leaders can be trusted.

B. In point of fact, we are all deeply affected by the failures of human leaders. Whether it’s religious leaders, or government officials, or parents, or coaches, or teachers, or scout leaders, or the police, we have become careful and watchful. To get psychological on you for a moment, we can develop something called transference. If, for example, we had a bad experience when we were a child with our father, who was distant and abusive, we can transfer that experience we’ve had with one person and project it on all fathers in general. It’s then not too great a leap to understand that we can easily, and maybe even subconsciously, project the behavior of human leaders, who have disappointed us and let us down, onto Jesus. Further, if we hear that Jesus is Lord of all, then what would prevent him from being extremely selfish and egotistical and in it for himself? Maybe, I want to suggest, one of the reasons we can have such a hard time moving from believing in Jesus to actually following Jesus in our everyday life, is that we’re not sure, given our experience with other leaders, we can trust him. Like Adam and Eve, we might even have bought into the serpent-sponsored lie that God is in some way holding out on us and we simply need to take matters into our own hands.

III. Worthy of our Trust

A. What would it take to make Jesus worthy of your trust, such that you would willingly and gladly deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him? That's what I'd like you to keep asking and looking out for in the week ahead. Here is a broad question to guide you: What happens when we as human beings go ahead and take matters into our own hands, when we rebel and revolt against the One who has given us everything? In our world, when the authority of kings or emperors or presidents is challenged and their right to rule is contested, the result is usually war. The upstart rebels are confronted with all the power and authority that the challenged leaders can muster. In contrast, when the Designer and Creator of the earth found himself challenged for control of that earth by the very same people he had gifted it to, he did not use the overwhelming forces at his disposal but deliberately and patiently backed off. Well might we project that he might to do what we would do: get tough, tighten the screws, pull rank, act presidential, and with threats, force, and violence, enforce his rights as Creator!

B. What did he do instead? Certainly, at times, God has exercised discipline on his people, but always undergirded with mercy and a desire to woo them back. But as the days ahead reveal, ultimately he chose the remarkable and unthinkable way of self-sacrifice. He deliberately made himself vulnerable and, beginning with his birth and ending in his death, chose the way of humility, making himself nothing, taking on the nature of a servant, and becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5-11). Can you hear Jesus saying something like this:

I understand your wariness and your fear in following me. I know that you struggle with trusting authority. But here I am, nailed to your cross. Can you see who I am now? This is what I'm really like. I'm trying to show you that I'm self-giving and self-sacrificing in nature. I will not take advantage of you. I have your best interests at heart. In fact, I'm letting you take advantage of me, and it will turn out to be for your own good. I am the leader you can trust.

C. In this last week of his life, Jesus puts the finishing touches on his claim to be a safe leader, a trustworthy leader, a leader we can trust, a leader who will never leave us or forsake us and always have our best interests in mind. This is a leader who says meet me at the cross, take a good look, watch me, listen to me, and if you give me a chance, I will help you overcome your resistance and you will see in me the leader your heart has always longed for. Jesus is not only the leader in whom we can believe, he is not only the leader to whom we can give our past sin and our future hope, he is the leader we can, and should follow, in our life, right now.

Where is he calling you to follow? What might be holding you back? Will you trust him?