

Looking down the road

Matthew 21: 1-11 – March 13, 2008

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This is Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter. We remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. We remember that this road took him to the cross and to the tomb and to Easter morning.

What do we make of this story? Again we hear the words about Jesus on a donkey. We hear the shouts of "hosanna". We see the coats spread out ahead of Jesus. What kind of parade are we watching? It is a parade with mixed messages.

All too often people gather on an overpass on the 401 highway somewhere between Trenton and Toronto. They stand there, some with flags, as a procession passes beneath them. They watch as one or more victims of the war in Afghanistan are brought home. There are feelings of sadness and loss as the bodies pass by, perhaps frustration. There is some sense of awe that these young people have become sacrifices in the strife amongst people.

Or what about a Santa Claus parade. There is the excitement from children filling the air with anticipation. The floats and bands and even some treats make for a good time for everyone. But, maybe not everyone. What about someone standing on the sidelines without a home, or without out any food in the refrigerator. The joy of some can make the pain of others even worse.

When we watch the Palm Sunday parade we soon realize that there are mixed emotions. Perhaps we can see this because we are not in the front line, but shoved to the back by enthusiastic people. The OT symbolism tells the watchers that a king is coming on a donkey, a king arriving in peace. We know, from where we stand, that Jesus is looking farther down the road to what is likely to happen next. It is not a very long journey from the shouts of "hosanna" to shouts of "crucify him".

Let us think about some of the events that happened on the road to Good Friday and Easter. The road leads us into Jerusalem. Matthew describes this journey. The route involved Jesus and those with him traveling about 25 km from Jericho to Jerusalem. The trip to Jerusalem would remind people that there were some good memories from past grand days. For Jesus it was a road to his death.

Near Jerusalem Jesus sends two disciples for the animals. The writer of this gospel would prefer that we not think that this was pre-arranged by Jesus, but that it was the unfolding of OT stories about the king and the donkey coming in peace. The messianic king would approach the city *humbly and riding on a donkey*. The garments of the disciples served as a saddle. The garments of others plus tree branches served as a carpet on the road.

From the sounds of *hosanna*, "save now" to the chorus of *crucify him*, *life* changed quickly and dramatically for Jesus and for those who followed along. In spite of the future I think that Jesus enjoyed this fleeting moment. The crowds shouted their hosannas and threw down their leafy branches to welcome him into Jerusalem. There was enormous adulation in that scene, and human praise has a seductive power, almost irresistible to most human beings, including most public figures. But Jesus knew himself. His head was not turned, his being not compromised, even by the praise of people. He knew what he was about and where he was going.

We can't stop here and 'fast-forward' to Easter Sunday. There are other key events to consider as we journey with our Lord.

There is the plot to kill Jesus. He explains to his disciples that the end is near. While this conversation continues, others are making plans to kill him.

Jesus could see farther down the road than those who were cheering him on. Jerusalem was affected by Jesus. It scared some of them. Jerusalem like any city, or town, today was resistant to the radical change of values and relationships, of priorities and commitments that Jesus taught and modeled with his life. Jesus' integrity and authenticity destabilized the city.

Next we learn that Judas has agreed to betray Jesus. Judas, perhaps well-meaning – didn't understand what he was doing. In pushing the confrontation, he may have hoped that Jesus would become forceful and aggressive against his enemies.

The journey continues to the Last-Supper. The gathering identifies Judas as "betrayed". It also leaves us with the rich memory of "bread and wine" the love and sacrifice in a symbolic act that can be repeated. And Jesus says, "Do this is remembrance of me".

We soon move to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was very sad and troubled and said, "*Stay here and keep awake with me.*" He walked on away and prayed. He came back and found them sleeping, so he said, "*Can't any of you stay awake even one hour?*" Again Jesus prayed. He returned and found them sleeping again. He said it was time to go.

Judas betrays him. Jesus is then arrested. He is taken away. The disciples run away. He is tried and convicted and taken out to be crucified.

This is why Palm Sunday is such a mixture of feeling. There is no reason to think that those who shouted "hosanna" were the same people who shouted "crucify him". But it is all mixed up with human feelings.

Disciples flee; Peter denied his Lord, and gradually the women gather around the cross.

I conclude this morning with some words written by Bishop John Spong in his book, Saving Jesus. "When they were wanting to make him their king in the story we call Palm Sunday, his head was not turned by the sweet narcotic of human praise. He simply had his eye on who he was and never turned to the right or to the left to be destroyed by the praise of people. And when he was being killed on Good Friday he never changed, never became resentful. Most people when they are being killed unjustly do whatever they can to survive one moment longer. They cuss, they fight, they scream, they bite, they plead, they weep, they whine. But Jesus is portrayed as accepting whatever people did to him and loving in return. His being was never distorted either by the praise of people or by the hostility of people."

To the end he was faithful to who he was - "a life so whole and full and so free that even when he was dying, he was concerned to speak a word of forgiveness to the soldiers. a word of consolation to the penitent thief, a word of comfort to his grieving mother, a word of hope to the women who were weeping for him, a word of compassion for the crowds that were distorted. Here is life dying and yet he is so completely whole that he is giving his life away."

"Hosanna in the highest." That ancient song we sing,
for Christ is our redeemer, earth let your anthem ring.
O may we ever praise him with heart and life and voice,
And in his humble presence eternally rejoice (#123)