

“WHAT KING?”

Matthew 21:1-11

Today is Palm Sunday when we remember in celebration Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We wave our palms and sing our hosannas just like the people of Jerusalem did to welcome Jesus as their prophet and potentially their new king. But my hope for our parade is that it has a deeper understanding than the one that took place in Jerusalem almost 2000 years ago. Most of the people who participated in that parade projected onto Jesus their understanding of who he was. They saw him as their new hope for salvation from the Roman Empire. They were hoping that he would lead a revolt against the oppression of the occupation. Most of them were hoping for a leader who would have the courage to lead the battle against the Romans. Their shouts of hosanna sound so nice to us today. We think of them as hymns of praise sung in worship. But they were political cries for salvation, because hosanna means "Save us now." Jesus must have understood the political implications of those cries and how people perceived him. Yet, what he wanted them to get was that he was not going to resist evil with evil. He was not going to lead an army to a battle. He knew about the history of his people that in 63 B.C., Pompeii was the Roman general who conquered Israel and the Israelites found themselves in slavery. The Israelites were trying to get rid of the Romans. The Jews hated the Romans for many reasons. The Romans made the Jews eat pork, which a Jew would never do. The Romans were forcing them to worship Caesar, which a Jew would never do. The Romans forbade circumcising their children, which the Jews would never do. The Romans were seducing them out of their Judaism. The Jews hated the Romans and there was a revolution going on. Sometime about the year 6-4 B.C., the great builder, King Herod, who had rebuilt their Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, 150 feet long and 150 feet high, a magnificent temple, turned from being Herod the Builder to Herod the Killer. He ordered that all boys two and under be killed. The killer king didn't want any baby messiah being born who would grow up to be a political king. About twelve years later, Zaduk the Pharisee led a revolution in and around Jerusalem and two thousand of his followers were killed. The Romans hung them up on crosses. Two thousand dead men hanging on crosses for the entire world to see! Would that send a message to the Jewish population about what the Romans do with political revolutionaries?

The Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a deliberate attempt by Jesus to reveal himself as the peaceful Messiah. Matthew does this by quoting the prophet directly as he so often does. Matthew also alludes to it by Jesus' choice of a donkey to ride by sending two of his disciples into Bethphage to bring him the humblest of animals. Zechariah's prophecy symbolized the peaceful choice of a victorious king selecting a donkey as his ride instead of a conqueror's proud steed for his triumphal entry into his capital city. So, despite all of his teachings and his riding a humble donkey for his entry, still people misunderstood who Jesus was.

Though Jesus had no intention of being king, his disciples and others thwarted him by throwing their garments and branches before him as Jehu had been hailed as king in 2 Kings 9:13. According to the Mishnah of the 2nd century CE, the custom had precedents in the celebration of the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) when pilgrims collected twigs or branches of myrtle, willow or palm to be bound together in a festal plume, called a lulab to symbolize rejoicing. Waving these lulabs, the pilgrims paraded into the courts of the temple singing the Hallel.

The amazing thing is that this misunderstanding of Jesus' identity and role has continued on throughout the centuries. This is even true today. Who is Jesus? Who is this Jesus that we confess to believe in? How often do we ask ourselves this question? And do we all know the answer? Is there one answer to this question?

Well, in order to find an answer to this question, I thought it would be interesting to do an internet search. So I checked the ask.com web page and asked the simple question of "Who is Jesus?" My search resulted in thousands of matches and links. To give you a sample of what I found, here is a description of a Jesus' homepage: "My name is Jesus Christ. Welcome to my homepage! I work as the messiah for a major world religion - it's called Christianity. However, when I'm not at work I like to surf the net. Drop me a line at my personal e-mail box." Another catchy site was: The Miraculous Winking Jesus where as it claims thousands flock to see the Miraculous Winking Jesus Christ who winks so that God would forgive us of our sins. Don't start your day without a wink from Jesus Christ! Another website is called www.jesuspolic.com which is dedicated to correcting all the mis-information concerning the Life and Times of Jesus. Here is a list of the most common errors they try to correct.

- His name was Jesus Christ
- Born on December 25th
- Born in Bethlehem
- Lived in Nazareth
- Joseph was a carpenter
- Jesus was a carpenter
- Jesus was an only child
- Jesus Had a small following
- Jesus' Family was not Supportive
- Jesus' Family was poor
- Jesus had long hair and a beard

Interesting answers about the identity of Jesus!!! As simple as it may seem, this question has been the center of attention for many people since the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The early church had major councils over the nature of Jesus Christ. Is he fully human? Or is he fully divine? Is he God or Man? These debates resulted in some of our confessions which we recite such as the Nicene Creed. There is a serious debate among Middle Eastern biblical scholars about Islam being another Christian sect that defined Jesus as another prophet. This debate is based on evidence that the founder of Islam, the prophet Muhammad, was a Christian from Arabia.

In the West, a similar struggle continues. Since the 18th century scholars began to use advanced methods for studying the Bible, new waves of thinking began such as the search for the historical Jesus and today's Jesus Seminar. On the most basic level, Jesus is what sets Christians apart from the rest of the world's religions. But even among Christians today, there is a wide variety of views about the identity of Jesus. Now, according to some Christians, we have a Jesus who is involved in a project not to redeem the creation, but rather to take as many of us as he can out of it before it is destroyed. Today we have a Jesus who supports military might and helps nations to stick it to other nations. Today we have a Jesus who wants us to vote for the next candidate for emperor or president. Now we have a Jesus who rewards the righteous with wealth, power and position, and punishes the poor, who wouldn't be so downtrodden had they made better choices. The story of Palm Sunday shows the misunderstanding of the identity of Jesus even then because one week later, most of the people who greeted Jesus were ready to have him crucified. They wanted him to be strong and powerful. They wanted him to fight against oppression the way they knew how to fight, with armies, swords and men. They didn't understand the value of non-violent resistance or the power of a leader suffering with their people. They probably didn't even like it. We, in the same way, like to think of Jesus being the son of God, as most powerful. Our image of God tends to be that of control, power and might. This is expressed well by Weber and Rice's rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar." "Hey sanna, ho sanna, sanna, sanna, hey sanna, ho sanna sanna sanna , ho sanna, hey sanna, Hey, hey JC, JC won't you smile at me. Jesus Christ, if you're divine, turn my water into wine. Prove to me that you're no fool. Walk across my swimming pool. " But Palm Sunday and the stories of Holy Week reveal to us a different kind of God, a God who suffers with us, a God who is vulnerable and open to our pain.

The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams tells the story about a young man in one of her congregations, an advertising executive on the rise in his profession. Every Tuesday night he volunteered at the foot clinic for the homeless people who made their home in the church gymnasium. Robert was his name. He was the best dresser she had ever seen. She says, "I can picture him now in my mind's eye, wearing a crisp shirt, red suspenders. I see him sitting on a stool before the chair on which one of our homeless guests is sitting. He takes the guest's feet and places them in a basin of warm water. He takes a towel and dries the feet. He applies ointment to their sores. The ritual ends with the gift of a clean, white pair of socks. I see the man in the chair, as he slips his socks on, brush a tear from his own cheek-a tough guy whom no one has touched with tenderness in a very long time. I once asked Robert, the advertising executive on the move, why he came to the foot clinic every week. He brushed me aside, saying, 'I figure I have a better chance of running into Jesus here than most places. That's all.' I watched him week after week. I realized as I watched him that I was developing my own sort of double vision. I was seeing Christ in the stranger that he served. I was also seeing Christ in the one who was finding deep meaning in his life through serving others."

It is Palm Sunday today, where is Jesus parading in your life? Where is Jesus parading in our world? Are we ready to see him as the Messiah of peace who walks the journey of suffering with us? Are we ready to allow him to walk with us in our suffering? Are we ready to walk with him through the suffering of others?