

## “LEAVING BEFORE THE GAME IS OVER”

Date: April 1, 2007

Test: Luke 19:28-40

Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on a donkey while people waved palm branches. Later that day or the next he angrily chased the moneychangers out of the temple. Tuesday and Wednesday were spent teaching the disciples so they could pick up the ball after he was gone. Thursday a very precious last meal was celebrated with his closest friends. Then he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and the soldiers came with Judas to arrest him. The trial and his death on a cross took place on Friday.

That's the story of Holy Week. It's one that is familiar to most of us but there are some questions lurking in the background. One question is old, the other new; one comes from the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the other from 2007.

Here's the question regarding the original story. Have you ever wondered what happened between Palm Sunday and Friday to turn the crowd against Jesus? On Sunday it seemed as though all of Jerusalem was cheering. It wasn't quite like that but the pilgrims who were entering the city for the Passover celebration did join the disciples in waving palm branches and shouting praises. On Friday, another crowd had a choice to spare either Jesus or Barabbas from crucifixion. They inexplicably chose the thief Barabbas.

How could there be such a turn of events? Actually there is a simple answer: there were two very different groups. The crowd on Sunday was primarily pilgrims in a festive mood; the crowd on Friday was handpicked supporters of the religious leaders of the day. It was a done deal even before Pilate gave the crowd the choice. We know something about nasty politics, don't we, given all that is going on in Washington right now?

That may be the plausible answer but perhaps it is a little too simple. The Sunday crowd could have followed up. They could have asked questions, sought Jesus out, found their way to the temple on Friday. They did none of that and why not? I suspect that if we could ask them they would say that they got involved in the festivities, with family doings, etc. and just forgot. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, tells a story of an onlooker at the scene of the crucifixion who scarcely paid any attention to Jesus hanging on the cross because he had a toothache! Too busy to follow through, other things more important so Jesus slips into the background. Does that have a contemporary ring to it?

Actually that leads us to our 2<sup>nd</sup> and 2007 question. Why do so many people show up for worship on Easter and so few on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday? It's not true in other countries as we discovered one year when we were in Mexico where Good Friday is the major religious holiday of the year. Statistics indicate that if 20 people will be in worship on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday then about 100 will be present on Easter Sunday! I am pleased that those figures may not hold true for Batavia but still this is a matter of concern.

Now as with our first question, there is a reasonable explanation for the gap in numbers. People have other plans for Friday; they are on vacation; the kids have commitments, etc. All valid reasons but could it be that we, like the original Palm Sunday crowd, haven't really put Christ at the center of our lives? Thus, it is so very easy for other things to get in the way. We probably are just as guilty of neglecting our Lord as were those in the cheering multitude.

A more disturbing element, however, than just neglect may lie beneath the surface. William Barclay says that Jesus rode into the city with a price already on his head and his action only escalated the feeling against him. Hence, Palm Sunday, rather than a joyous celebration, at least for those in the know, actually was the beginning of the end. Jesus "rode on" to challenge, confrontation and then death.

Who wants to deal with the reality that the life that God called His Son to be about and which God bids us follow is the way of the cross? In a world of great stress, who wants to hear that there is “no crown without a cross?” Indeed, one of the great theological concerns of our day is what is referred to as “triumphalism.” American Christians are tempted to assume that the promises of scripture are easily acquired. “Just show up at a time convenient to your schedule, sing some praise songs and you’ve got it.” It’s what’s called “a feel good religion”. It’s a little bit like all those ads that declare “lose 20 pounds and eat all the chocolate from Oliver’s that you want.”

Could it be that sub-consciously people shy away from Good Friday and its meaning as part of the American tendency to look for a quick and easy fix to everything? It feels so good to come on Easter Sunday and hear the glorious words “Christ is risen” and that new life is a possibility. But to come on Thursday or Friday and see the cross shadowed in darkness and to be aware of all the ramifications that might just be a different matter.

One may have to question this line of thinking in light of the success of the film “The Passion”, which depicts the last 12 hours of Christ’s life in graphic gory detail. Maybe people aren’t just looking for something that will make them feel good. I hope that is the case because such an approach doesn’t work with weight loss and it doesn’t work that way with Christian living. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned, Christians have to be wary of “cheap grace.” There has to be a commitment for the long haul and a willingness to give of one’s self if one is to move toward what Jesus called “abundant living”. In other words, one has to be a disciple! Jesus made it very clear when he declared in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Servanthood needs to become a way of life for those who are serious about following Christ.

Christian discipleship might be compared to what happened to me one time at a Bills football game. Obviously Sunday games don’t fit in with a pastor’s schedule normally but a couple of guys in the Gates church convinced me to leave immediately after worship so we could make a 4 pm kick off. I really had been looking forward to this game since with Sunday commitments it was my first opportunity to get to Rich Stadium. Just my luck, the Bills were awful. The score was 26-0 by half time. It was getting colder and I wondered to myself if the men with whom I came ever left the game early as some others clearly were doing. Then to the surprise of everyone, probably including the players, a tremendous rally ensued and the Bills ended up winning.

Lots of people leave the stadium when their team is getting beaten and plan to come back when things are better next week or next year but think what they may miss in the meantime. The same is true for our faith. On one hand, we can be “Easter people”, meaning we show up on good days when victory is assured. Or we can be “Easter people” who have made our way through the pitfalls of daily Christian living, who have tried to be loving and serving and know what forgiveness is all about and who long for the resurrection that begins this very day. For those who have “walked the walk”, I can assure you that Easter takes on a whole new meaning, both in this life and that which is to come.