

Palm Sunday: Mark 15:1-39  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **Not the Savior We Deserve, but the Savior We Need**

It was just not right. Something was off. That's what Jesus thought as he looked around the Temple. This is not how it's supposed to be. He had arrived there that afternoon, as we just heard, at the end of a kind of impromptu parade put on in his honor as he entered Jerusalem. He came in riding on a donkey colt, but was carried along by a wave of excitement and anticipation, buoyed up by the cheers and praises as parade-goers laid down their coats and palm branches on the road before him. It was like he was a celebrity or superstar with an entourage rolling out a red carpet as they went, or the MVP of a game who is carried on his teammates' shoulders.

There was more going on than just excitement at seeing someone famous, though. The whole procession had a strong undercurrent of politics, of anticipated liberation, of a long-lost king finally returning to his realm so as to kick out the pretenders, usurpers, who've been tyrannizing the people and plundering their goods. Actually, that's exactly how the Jews in Jerusalem would have seen Jesus' arrival. I mean, he couldn't have spelled it out any clearer if he had hired a pilot to write it in the sky. Just look at all the details of the story, all meant to 'say it without actually saying it' that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah.

First, you have the fact that he rode in on a colt, a juvenile donkey. The sight must have been ludicrous, Jesus riding on such a small animal, his feet dangling so far down the side of the donkey they dragged on the ground. Surely, something striking like a white stallion, or maybe a massive war horse, or even just an ordinary draught horse would have been more impressive, more fitting of a guy who would soon be leading an uprising against Israel's enemies. But no, he rides a miniature donkey. Sure, yeah, it's a sign of humility, we figure, his choosing a donkey over a war horse. But in actuality, it was just the other way around. You see, the prophet Zechariah foretold how the Jews' Deliverer would appear: "Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Look, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Such a sight would herald the defeat and destruction of enemy nations and the return and restoration for Israel.

Then there is where he was coming from, what gate he entered. There are today something like seven gates allowing entrance into the ancient walled city of Jerusalem. When I visited the Holy Land five years ago, we passed the eastern gate, the gate closest to the Mount of Olives and Bethany. We were told that this gate, known as the Golden Gate or Gate of Mercy, is the oldest of the passages into the city. It has been walled up though, since the 12<sup>th</sup> century after Muslims recaptured the city, and has remained walled up, awaiting, according to old Jewish tradition, a miraculous opening when the Messiah comes and the dead are resurrected. So the gate Jesus went through has long been associated with the Messiah, too.

Also, you have what the parade-goers themselves are saying. They shout "Hosannah," which means "Deliver us, we pray" (an appeal to the Messiah) and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! (another reference to the Messiah) and "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our

ancestor David!" which directly identifies Jesus as the son of David, the heir to the throne of Israel.

So, Jesus couldn't be making it any clearer. He's advertising his messianic identity for everyone to see, for everyone who knows enough about prophecy to read the signs. It'd be like someone today landing in a helicopter painted like Marine 1 and walking out onto the red carpet to the tune of Hail to the Chief. That person wouldn't need to say, "Hey, I'm the real president." The message would be obvious.

Jesus then rides into the city with all this expectation and anticipation, not to mention all of his followers—the twelve disciples, and his other followers, together with all those whose lives he touched—the lepers he cleansed, the sick and disabled he healed, the tax-collectors and women of dubious reputations, maybe even a Roman centurion or Samaritan or two. He's got all this behind him, carrying him along. Everything points to him being their long-awaited Messiah, their Deliverer, the one who would save them from the tyrants that oppress them and restore a new Golden Age for the Kingdom of Israel.

It all comes to a crescendo as Jesus enters the Temple, the seat of Jewish religious and political power, ready, we would expect, to formally claim the title of Messiah. But the singing abruptly dies and the party melts away, as Jesus looks around and then just up and leaves. "Getting late," he says, before heading back for the night.

What was all that about?, we wonder. Likely those who were with him wondered the same thing. If Jesus was so intent on playing into long-expected Old Testament prophecies, then why does he not go all the way? Why does he just leave? "Nope, something's not right." And he makes an Irish goodbye, leaving without saying a word.

What did he see there at the Temple? What was he expecting to find? Was he expecting some kind of special reception, some further fanfare from the Temple priests? If so, he received no such welcome. Now, they didn't kick him out. Worse, no one paid him any mind at all. So Jesus leaves. He'll come back a few days later. We heard about *that* story a few weeks ago, when Jesus came storming into the Temple and threw out all the money changers and animal traders. Maybe that's why he pulled up short that afternoon—the sight of all those wheelers and dealers blocking the entrance, getting in the way of his entering the House of God. They were preventing him, preventing Jesus, the living Tabernacle, God's-presence-made-flesh, from returning and taking up residence in the Temple. Sure, that would have been a big enough problem.

But I think it was more than that. You see, Jesus rode in on prophecy and messianic expectation, but when he got to the Temple, it was clear that that was not who he was. He was not *that* kind of Messiah. "Save us," they had been crying, but Jesus wasn't going to save them in a manner that they could recognize. The people wanted entertainment, but he offered them new life. They wanted a military leader, but he taught them forgiveness. They wanted a superman, but he showed them servanthood. They wanted an instant kingdom, but he heralded an eternal kingdom. They feared he was a radical, but he called the people to radical faithfulness. Jesus resisted every attempt to make his ministry a handmaiden to the culture, to the government, or to religious factions. As this realization spread, the parade-goers melted away. For, it was becoming clear to

all, to everyone who was paying attention, that Jesus wasn't who they hoped he would be, who they thought, expected him to be.

So, yeah, something was off, something was not right about the palm-waving parade. It was Jesus. He didn't fit, wasn't the guy they thought he was, wasn't the kind of savior they were looking for. Oh, he *was* the Messiah, he was the prophesied Anointed One of God. He just had a different job to do than the one they wanted him for.

At the end of Christopher Nolan's second Batman film, *The Dark Knight*, Commissioner Gordon says of Batman: "He's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now." It's precisely the reverse for Jesus. Jesus is not the hero we deserve (or want) but he is the hero we need. And that doesn't square with the expectations of his fellow Jews. So rather than let this whole farce go any further, Jesus ends the parade and heads home. He leaves, in order to come back, to try again later.

The situation reminds me of a story Lesslie Newbigin tells of a visit he paid to an Indian village one day. Newbigin, an English missionary, was set to visit a village in the Madras diocese one day as a religious dignitary. There were two entrances to the village—the north side and the south side—and the only way to get to the village was by crossing a river. The congregation collected at the south side of the village to welcome the missionary. Newbigin explains, "They had prepared a welcome such as only an Indian village can prepare. There was music and fireworks and garlands and fruit—everything you can imagine." But by accident, he arrived at the north end, where only a few goats and chickens greeted him. (I don't know what was wrong with that. Sounds like my kind of place, right?) Well, Newbigin explained, "I had to disappear while word was sent to the assembled congregation, and the entire village did a sort of U-turn so as to face the other direction. Then I duly appeared."

That's about what Jesus does. He disappears for a bit, sends word of his arrival (through the cleansing of the Temple), and then comes back into town a little later.

Only this time, he enters the Holy City not with fanfare and a public parade, but rather under the cover of darkness, arrested by the Temple guards on orders from those same Chief Priests who ignored him the first time. He enters not to hopes of deliverance but to suspicions his being a threat to those in power. And after being handed over to the secular authorities to be beaten and whipped, he is greeted by those same parade-goers. Only this time, instead of singing Hosannah, they're yelling, "Crucify him." Because something just wasn't right, something was off about this 'Messiah,' they sensed. Jesus wasn't how the Messiah was supposed to be. He refused to take up a sword and send the Romans fleeing. Instead, he went and had supper with his friends; then he went and prayed in a garden. Some Messiah!

And frankly, if we were honest, we would have likely done the same thing. For, we much prefer the rah-rah, tickertape parade Jesus of Palm Sunday to the weak, wrecked, crying for his Father Jesus of Good Friday. We want a Messiah who would come and vanquish our foes, save us from suffering, not a Messiah who would die on the cross for our sins. We don't want a savior who does a stupid thing like rising from the dead. We want one who never dies. And so we look at the

Jesus' arrest, torture, and death—and think, This is not right, not how it's supposed to be for the Messiah, God's Anointed.

But Jesus has little interest in how it's "supposed" to be. He cares only about how it *is*, or rather how *we* are, what we need. We might fancy that all we need is better education or the right people in office or more policing or economic improvement, perhaps some extensive psychological counseling or just time off for some R&R. That would fix everything, or at least improve things a lot for people. But God knows better. He knows we need a savior that will not just deliver us from our enemies, but from evil, a savior who doesn't save us from death, but promises eternal life, a savior who doesn't protect us from suffering, but who gives it meaning and hope by suffering with us.

That is why we are called to participate in Holy Week, to journey with Jesus to the cross—to experience, to witness, to ponder his suffering and death which he accepts on our behalf, and to do so knowing Jesus' death is not what we deserve nor is it the way we would go about saving ourselves. But it is what is necessary. It is the only way. Jesus, we see, is not the Savior we deserve, but he is the Savior we need. Amen.