

ANSWERING THE CALL

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zachariah 9:9). We all know this story (John 12:12-19; Luke 19:28-48). Jesus comes into the holy city of Jerusalem, a city that is believed to be the centre of the universe by Jews, and enters on a donkey, and is welcomed into the city as a king with palms waving in the air. We should recall that while Jesus is given a king’s welcome, the folks welcoming him into the city were many who betrayed Jesus in the end. But it would be a little bit of a mistake if we blamed the crowd entirely for Jesus’ death, in fact, if we look into what was happening in this passage of scripture we are given new clues as to just how connected this story of Palm Sunday is connected to the crucifixion of Jesus, which happens just a few days later.

Part of the deal that the Jews had with their Passover celebration was that the Roman governor could enter the holy city and demand a kind of worship that acknowledges the civic religion of the state. So as long as the Jews complied with this practice, they could worship freely however they wanted. But often the conflicts between the Roman Empire and the Jews was evoked as a result of the Jews’ refusal to compromise in worshipping the idols of the empire. It’s likely that the point of the palms was that the date of the Roman procession coincided with the pagan holiday of the Festival of the Entry of the Tree, where a palm tree would have been carried through the city. So Jesus’ decision to enter into the city, following the Roman politician, was probably on purpose. What is interesting about the way that the Bible presents this story is that while this story was originally written in Greek, the word “Hosanna” is a foreign word from the Aramaic language, and it means “Save us!”

The Jews yelled this foreign word at the procession of the Empire into the city, to give the appearance that they were worshiping the state gods, while they were really insulting the state Gods. By waving the palm branches, maybe the people fanned Jesus with pagan symbols of worship, condemning the Roman ruler and the military who marched with him. Condemning them by making a mockery of the Roman religion. In other words, the treatment of the ceremony that the Empire demanded was turned into an insult, without the Romans having any idea. The cheering of the crowd made fun of the Romans and their pagan worship. And the parody continues with Jesus entering Jerusalem like a king, on a donkey, with the sick and the poor following him. But then the tone of the procession immediately changes as Jesus arrives to the heart of Jewish religious life, the centre of the universe, the Temple. Now, the crowd could tolerate mocking the Roman Emperor, but Jesus turns His attention to the religious institution and then gives His final sermon.

Note, Jesus' first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, was directed at the poor living in the countryside and its villages. Now Jesus preaches to the rich and those who are the most religious at the centre of society, that they have made the temple the opposite of anything godly. Jesus overturns the money-changers' tables and enters the Temple. And once he is inside the temple courts, the poor and the sick entered the temple and were given hope and were healed. And then the priests heard the continued the cry of the word, "Hosanna," directed at Jesus, but this time the word "Hosanna" was not a mockery, but it was genuine. For those who held power in the temple, they now realised that Jesus not only made a mockery of the Empire but he now made a mockery of the religious system. The most striking image that we have of Jesus from this whole ordeal is that the people who made a mockery of the Roman Empire were using Jesus to make a political statement, but then the mockery turned on them.

As it happens, Jesus' mockery of the priests was very serious. His procession might have entered silently and gently on a donkey, but then Jesus violently erupts against those who had financially benefitted from the temple. The Lord goes into the temple and begins a new ministry without the permission or oversight of the priests. Jesus did not replace the false gods of Rome with the mainstream religion of the Jews; rather, He walked into the empty temple, and out of the absence of God and the absence of life from the temple, Jesus brings about new life. Jesus infuses hope in a place that was stagnant and dead. Jesus overthrew the money changers who prevented real change from happening, while doing business at the foot of the temple. Jesus blasphemes the practicing religious rulers and businessmen of His time and then walks into the temple and brings about a New Creation reality. And this was before the new ritual of the physical sacrifice of Himself. Jesus began to prepare those to whom He preached at the beginning of His ministry - the poor, the meek, the mourning, the peacemakers, and those who thirst for justice - for the most radical act of his life yet, namely, His death on the cross.

But the hope in all of this is that just as Jesus walks into the tomb of the temple and brings new life and hope out of its darkness and absence, so also does Jesus enter the tomb of our own lives and bring new life and new hope out of His own death. And while there is hope for the new life that Christ brings with His crucifixion and resurrection, we have to ask whether there is hope for our friends and families, our communities, and the gravestones of a wicked and perverse society. Are we able to sing a new song (of New Creation), one that inspires the sick and the lonely and the oppressed? How can we live our lives with such ultimate joy that our children will shout "Hosanna" and proclaim new life and the power of resurrection?

How can we do justice in the world in such a way that turns the social order around, where the last truly are first and the first truly are last. Do we have faith enough to believe that the more we are persecuted by the world, the more we embody ourselves with Christ? These are the powerful questions that lay before all of us, and our society, and the church in our present day and age. Now we must choose for ourselves whether we will make a mockery of our challenge, or will we answer the call to build the Kingdom of God together?

The good news is that Easter is coming, and after Christ's death we have the Resurrection! Today, Palm Sunday, we've heard the story of Jesus' reversal of the social order and His giving of Himself in the beginning of His last days. In this story we are now beginning to see the flash of lightning of the greatest event in human history (that will soon take place). We see the beginnings of a reversal of society that happened nearly 2,000 years ago and is still not fully realised. But even while we have seen the lightning, we know that thunder sometimes requires time, just as the light of the stars require time to arrive to us.

The gloom and darkness, and silence and solitude of the coming days are looming upon us. Holy Week, when we truly experience it, is not an easy or comfortable experience. Living in our modern world with our technology, it makes it more difficult, if not nearly impossible, for us to have any conception of the importance of Christ's death and resurrection. If we are to follow the footsteps of Jesus, then we must answer the call to take up our cross and follow Him. As He was able to change society and impact on people's lives, so are we! We have to be fully committed to the cause for the call to be effective. The call has happened, and is happening, whether we choose to answer or not. Christ is shining through His church. So don't get caught up in the trap of looking in, for our call is to look out!