

“Giving Up Popularity” - Matthew 21:1-11 – Rev. Jeff Childs

What a welcome Jesus got as he entered Jerusalem. “Hosanna!” the people cried out, hailing him as an honored king. The crowd loved Jesus on Palm Sunday, but just a few days later a different crowd was calling for his death and the release of the murderer Barabbas. We have seen popularity rise and fall. There have been sports figures, TV evangelists, politicians and Hollywood celebrities. If you think for a moment even among your family, friends, classmates, etc. we all know some who have epitomized the idiom, “The bigger they are...the harder they fall.” These fell out of favor because of scandals causing us to see they were human and they did not do right. What was so scandalous that caused Jesus to lose his popularity? I think it was the exact opposite! He did what was right and called his followers to do what was right rather than what was popular or expected.

Have you ever wondered how the people moved from the high of Palm Sunday and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the shouts of “Crucify him!” by that Friday? Some think they are different crowds, like a star athlete being cheered by the home crowd and jeered by the opposing fans. But I believe that many might have been in both crowds and in a matter of days changed from excitement to anger.

My first glimpse of this actually comes three years earlier at Jesus’ first sermon in Luke 4. In verse 22 everyone was raving about him but by verse 28 they were ranting and raving, and even tried to kill him. (That must have been quite the sermon!) But now walk with me through the stories and the events of Holy Week following his entry into Jerusalem in Matthew’s gospel. The very first story following the one we read today is about Jesus cleansing the Temple and driving out the ones who were making money from the exchange of coins or sale of animals. Some might see similar distractions in the church with fundraisers or bake sales distracting worshippers. But I see deeper than that. Jesus is changing the way worshippers worshipped. His sacrifice would figuratively turn the tables and do away with all the animal sacrifices that had been done there for a thousand years since the time King Solomon built the Temple. And forty years after Jesus turned the tables, in 70AD, the Romans destroyed the Temple, the ancient religious ritual of animal sacrifices would be ended.

Then there is the odd story of Jesus cursing a fig tree which withers and dies! But is it perhaps another symbolic story of Jesus finishing the old ways of the priests, scribes and Pharisees? The old tree dies out and a new belief in Jesus as the True Vine now branches out. Remember, too, Jesus said that we are the branches. There are a couple chapters of parables and Q&A sessions which end with a lengthy section of condemnation of the legal experts in Chapter 23. All of these actions and words must have had a very negative effect on the religious leaders and some of their faithful followers. In the next chapter Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple. “Them’s fightin’ words!” Maybe I should talk about changing the ways we do worship, or the hours of the service, or even tearing down this old church and building a new one with reclining theater seats with cup holders and see how popular that idea is today?!

In Chapter 25 we find one of my favorite parables about the sheep and the goats coming before Jesus on his majestic judgment seat. This would have made those who were grumbling about Jesus grumble even more. They thought they were the ones blessed by God for obeying the rules and being religious - not by helping the poor! By the next chapter the plot to kill Jesus is finally hatched by the religious authorities. And in the dialogue with Peter about denying him three times before the rooster crows in the morning, it says this, *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Tonight you will all fall away because of me."* (Matthew 26.31a) Jesus knew what he was doing and what would happen, and though he prayed that God might take the cup of suffering away from him, but nevertheless he prayed - God's will be done.

Jesus knew that it was not because the disciples were weak or sleepy that they ran away, it was because of what he chose to do to honor God and what he had to do alone. Oh, he could enter the city with the crowds, but he could only go to the cross and the tomb alone. Jesus gave up popularity, which I think ties in with the third temptation in the wilderness to worship Satan and have the popularity and loyalty of the whole world. But Jesus will worship only God. Popularity and acclaim in the eyes of others is fleeting, and if we put our faith in it, we will be very disappointed. Instead, put your faith in God's unending love and grace, something that will never go away, and will sustain us through the difficult times when others have abandoned us. For Lent, and always, give up popularity and take up faithfulness. Alleluia and Amen.

(This week rather than answering a few questions read the stories often missed when we jump from Palm Sunday to Easter morning. Read chapters 21-27 in the Gospel of Matthew one chapter each day during Holy Week. See what questions you may have, and what you may discover for the first time in the readings.)

Into Jerusalem Jesus Rode

Jeffrey B. Childs 4/5/25

Into Jerusalem Jesus rode,
Among a cheering crowd.
They waved palm branches along the road,
as they shouted aloud.

What a day for us to celebrate,
and wave palm branches high.
But take some time to contemplate,
by Friday Christ would die.

The crowd would call for the Lord's death,
for him to be crucified.
On the cross he gave his last breath,
and for our sins he died.