**The Journey to the Cross**

**Palm Sunday**

**“Hosanna in the Highest” (Mark 11:1-11)**

**1. Introduction: *Celebrity Sightings***

I couldn’t imagine being a celebrity. Just going out for milk or bread would be an ordeal. Photographers would be snapping your picture and adoring fans would be asking for your autograph or having their picture taken with you. You’d always have to make sure that your hair was combed, your clothes were presentable, and you were on your best behavior – no going outdoors with bad hair or wearing track pants. Most celebrities manage to keep up this act quite well but sometimes photographers catch them in an unguarded moment and the humiliating pictures are circulated widely in print and on the internet.

I haven’t had that many brushes with famous people, but I vividly remember the time that I met the famous John Stott. The publisher’s blurb on his most famous book, *The Cross of Christ,* gives a good summary of the man: “John R.W. Stott is known worldwide as a gifted evangelist, preacher, scholar and Christian statesman. For many years he served as rector of All Souls Church in London where he carried out a strong and innovative pastoral ministry.” The book jacket summary goes on to describe him as “a leader among British evangelicals and in world-wide Christian mission.” When I was a student in Bible College John Stott had the reputation as a solid evangelical theologian whose writings were thoughtful, academically informed, and yet very practical. He was a positive role model for evangelical students and scholars throughout the world. So, it was with great excitement that my friend Howard and I drove to Toronto to hear him speak. The event was held at Good Shepherd Community Church in Scarborough to a capacity crowd. Stott was in top form, thoughtfully analyzing the book of Acts and applying its message to the contemporary church. When the day ended we made our way to Howard’s car. As we stood in the parking lot I glanced back and saw Rev. Stott exiting the church. I looked at him for a second and he glanced at me, nodded and smiled. The great John Stott acknowledged my existence! When I got to the car I told Howard about my celebrity encounter and he lampooned my enthusiasm, saying, “The master has smiled upon thee!”

When I think back on this episode I chuckle a bit because even in Christian circles, we can elevate people to celebrity status. John Stott was one of the most important figures in 20th century Christianity and I was privileged to hear him speak. His writing, preaching, social action, mission work and Christian example impacted a generation of Christians. But I’m pretty certain that he wouldn’t have wanted the adulation of the crowds. I get the strong impression from what has been written about him that he viewed himself as a humble servant of God. He sought neither fame nor fortune, but desired only to serve God and others.

All this makes me wonder about that celebrity sighting on that first Palm Sunday so long ago. When the crowd caught sight of Jesus, I wonder what was going on in their minds as they threw their cloaks on the ground and waved the palm branches? Who did they think he was? A prophet? A miracle worker? The Messiah? What thoughts and feelings were his disciples experiencing that day? Were they pleased that Jesus was finally getting the recognition that he deserved? Were they hoping that this would be the moment that he would establish the Kingdom of God? When I think about Palm Sunday, an event that is recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19), I wonder if anyone in that crowd *really* understood what was going on? Yet amidst the clamour of the crowd, Jesus rode on, knowing that this week would end in a way that no one in the crowd had expected.

**1. The Preparations for the Journey**

Jesus and his disciples had travelled to Jerusalem from Jericho (10:46-52), a city about 29 km to the east. As they neared the city they came to Bethphage and Bethany, two towns on the Mount of Olives (11:1). The Mount of Olives was about two thousand six hundred feet high and stretched north to south on the east side of Jerusalem. This high hill offered Jesus and his disciples a panoramic view of Jerusalem as they looked across the Kidron Valley to the Jewish Temple. It also had strategic importance for Jerusalem since it offered a natural defense against invasion. The Old Testament prophet Zechariah speaks of a future time when the Lord himself will fight against Israel’s oppressors and free Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:3). “On that day,” the prophet declared, “the Lord’s feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives will split apart, making a wide valley running from east to west” (Zech. 14:4). Leading a military conquest, the Lord will retake the city and “be king over all the earth” (Zech. 14:9).

Jesus stood there on the Mount that day preparing to enter the city. Ironically, his mission was to liberate people, but his method was not military conquest. There was no catastrophic rupture of the Mount that day to make way for the Lord’s visitation. Instead, Jesus, along with the other pilgrims, took the road that stretched from Bethany across the Kidron Valley to the city gates. The King of Kings had arrived, yet his royal way involved humility and suffering. So, Jesus looked to another passage from the prophet Zechariah to characterize his arrival:

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!  
    Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!  
See, your king comes to you,  
    righteous and victorious,  
lowly and riding on a donkey,  
    on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech. 9:9)

In his preparations to enter the city, Jesus gave precise instructions to two disciples to go into a nearby village and procure a young donkey (11:2-3). By taking this initiative, Jesus was able to mark his entrance into Jerusalem with profound symbolic significance. Like the prophets of old, his actions presented a sort of object lesson to the people. His actions that day were filled with *tiny Scriptural clues* that may or may not have been picked up by the audience. By riding on a donkey, he was pointing to Zechariah 9:9 and its affirmation that the king would arrive in a humble manner, riding on a donkey. When he told these two disciples that they would find “a young donkey *tied* there” (11:2), he was drawing attention to the oracle of Judah in Genesis 49:8-12, a text with heavy messianic significance. This Old Testament passage notes:

“The scepter will not depart from Judah,  
    nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,  
until he to whom it belongsshall come  
    and the obedience of the nations shall be his.  
He will *tether* his donkey to a vine,  
    his colt to the choicest branch.”

Finally, Jesus specified that the young donkey was one “that no one has ever ridden” (11:2). Again this tiny detail directs our eyes to the Old Testament idea that animals devoted to a *sacred purpose* were not to be used for ordinary tasks (Numbers 19:2). This young donkey was set apart for the very sacred act of bearing the Messiah to Jerusalem.

The two disciples obeyed the Master’s instructions and found the young donkey just as he had said (11:4-6). And bringing it back to Jesus, the disciples fashioned a saddle out of their garments and he sat upon it and took the pilgrim road into the city. His actions, then, sent a subtle message that the King had arrived; yet the manner of his entrance conformed to God’s plan and not the people’s expectations. He rode into town in a humble manner on a young donkey and in so doing, he defied the popular messianic expectations of the crowd. He neither looked nor acted like the conquering hero that everyone expected. But the people did not yet know that he would conquer, not with a sword, but with a cross.

**2.The Crowd of Pilgrims**

Since it was the beginning of Passover week, the road was filled with pilgrims who were making their way to the city for this important holiday. When they caught sight of Jesus, they broke into spontaneous homage to him. Their actions indicated that they had a certain degree of insight into his importance. When they spread their garments on the road, they were honouring him as a king (2 Kings 9:12-13). Yet the reason for the presence of the leafy or palm branches seems a little bit ambiguous. On the one hand, the waving of palm branches was typical behaviour for the final stage of pilgrimage to the holy city. Yet, it was also part of celebrations of national liberation and military victory. For instance, when Simon Maccabeus, a member of the Jewish family that led a revolt against a foreign oppressor (167-160 B.C.), reclaimed and entered Jerusalem, a crowd of Jews “entered (Jerusalem) with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel” (1 Maccabees 13:51). So, were the people’s actions on that first Palm Sunday indicative of a pilgrimage celebration or a royal enthronement?

Along with these actions, the crowd of pilgrims surrounding Jesus were also chanting antiphonally:

“Hosanna!  
    Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (11:9-10).

This too was normal for Jewish worshippers making their way to Jerusalem. A group of Psalms (113-118) are called the *Hallel Psalms* and were chanted during the Jewish festivals of Tabernacles and Passover. In this case, the crowd was chanting a portion of Psalm 118 as they made their way up through the valley to the gates of the city.

“Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!  
    O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.  
    We bless you from the house of the Lord.” (Psalm 118:25-26).

*Hosanna* literally means *save us*. It is the prayer of God’s people, asking God to rescue them. In the context of worship during religious festivals, it became a shout of acclamation, like *hallelujah,* spoken by pilgrims as they entered the city. The phrase, “Blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” was a *blessing*, which the pilgrims pronounced to one another as they took their last steps of the journey. Yet as the crowd chanted these words in the presence of Jesus, a much deeper meaning can be seen. Their cry for God to *save* them would be answered in Jesus’ saving sacrifice for all people. At the same time, Jesus is the One who comes in the name of the Lord, so he is worthy of all praise and blessing.

The crowd’s chants also referred to the “coming Kingdom of our ancestor David.” In this context this makes sense since the Jewish rabbis interpreted Psalm 118:25-26 as a reference to King David and the glorious restoration of Israel. The return of the glory days of David’s kingdom was a deep longing for all Jews. It was something that they frequently prayed and hoped for. This can be seen in a set of Jewish prayers from the first century AD known as the *Shemoneh Esreh* or the *18 Blessings.* Observant Jews still recite these prayers at each of their prayer times in the morning, the afternoon and the evening. Prayer number 14 is a petition to God to restore the kingdom of David:

“Return in compassion to Your city, Jerusalem, and rest within it as You have said. Rebuilt it speedily, and in our days, a structure forever. And may you establish the throne of David within Jerusalem speedily. Blessed are You, Lord, the Builder of Jerusalem.” (<http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Prayers/Daily_Prayers/Shemoneh_Esrei/Jerusalem/jerusalem.html>)

Did the people know that day that their hopes and prayers were answered in the One who stood among them? Did they realize that the Lord was returning to the city full of compassion for them? Did they realize the God was building his kingdom in and through Jesus the Messiah? Did they realize that Jesus was the *cornerstone* of this new house that God was building? As the events of holy week unfolded, it became very clear that “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22; Mark 12:10-11; Acts 4:11).

**3. The Aftermath**

Mark’s conclusion to this story is a bit of an anti-climax. Nothing much happens at the end of this eventful day. After Jesus enters Jerusalem, he goes into the Temple and looks around at everything. Since it was late in the day, so he departs for Bethany, a nearby suburb of Jerusalem (11:11). It was a quiet end to this day of frantic activity. This clearly was not the way that the world works. A revolutionary hero would have whipped up the frenzy of the crowd in order to kick off his revolution. An impassioned speech on the steps of the Temple would have been a good political move. His closest advisors would have put a positive political spin on the event by stressing the size and enthusiasm of the crowd. But this was not the way of Jesus. Throughout that final week Jesus made the daily journey between Bethany and Jerusalem, but there was no revolution or royal coronation. Only a purple robe, a crown of thorns, and a cross with a nameplate calling Jesus “The King of the Jews.”

One of the enduring lessons that we can learn from the events of Palm Sunday concerns our expectations of God. Now, we have the advantage of knowing how this incredible story of Jesus ends, but those pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem did not know. They longed for a return to the good old days of the Davidic Kingdom when their nation wielded great power in the world. Maybe they even expected Jesus the Messiah to deliver on this. Ironically, when Jesus was arrested the cry of the masses was to free Barabbas, the real revolutionary (11:7, 11).

What do we expect God to do in our midst? Are we longing for the good old days when Christianity played a more prominent role in our society? As Christians we may feel a bit powerless and marginalized in our society. But remember the only power that we wield in our world is the power of the Spirit and his power is manifested in “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Those Spirit-produced characteristics have nothing to do with dominating our world; rather they are all about serving our world. Remember, Jesus entered Jerusalem in *humility*, riding on a donkey. He did not ride in on a warhorse with a sword in his hand, establishing his kingdom by force. The way of Jesus is the way of service. Jesus said to his disciples, “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else.*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (10:42-45).