

Do We Understand?

Today is the final Sunday in that season we call Lent. It is the day which marks the beginning of what we term Holy Week. It is the Sunday before Easter. It is the Sunday when our scriptures are selected to retell a story that we know like the back of our hands; that story of Jesus entering the capital city of Jerusalem which is packed to overflowing with crowds from all the known world who have come to celebrate their religious heritage through the observance of Passover. As Jesus enters the city we are told that these crowds greet his arrival with enthusiasm. In their enthusiasm many throw their cloaks down on the road while others cut branches from palm trees and wave them as they shouted: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Sometimes since we know the story so well especially since the synoptic gospels give us so many details about what happened. These details tell us how Jesus sets the scene, the conversations about acquiring the donkey, so that we mainly actually look past the glaring fact that Jesus sets this whole scene very carefully. We also look past the fact that neither Jesus nor the narrators of the scene tell us why this is being done. We fail to seek the reason for this careful entry; to understand the message Jesus was trying to convey. Sometimes, this scene setting is taken to be proof of Jesus' divinity—he knows where to send disciples to find a colt, knowing what exchange will happen between donkey's owner and those requisitioning it for his entry. Even the gospel of John which presents a more concise account of this entry, clearly states that Jesus "found" a donkey, sat on it to enter the city to essentially the same cries that are recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This entrance's importance to the early church is clear in the evidence that all the gospel accounts report it. But why was it important? We often echo the shouts of those people, but do we understand why they were shouting? Do we see in their behavior what they expected of this man entering the city on a donkey? The people's shouts we often take as being shouts of praise—yet the word Hosanna more traditionally in the Hebrew is a greeting that is a plea for rescue—Save Us! Rescue is what they are pleading for. There were many witnesses to the power that this man had which healed and which fed thousands from little, so the crowd was ready to give him a crown. Many in the crowds have come to celebrate a long ago deliverance by God—Passover commemorates the deliverance of their ancestors from the power of the mighty Pharaoh so surely this man of God is there to do the same thing for them. Salvation does seem to have been the expectation or the hope of the crowds who followed Jesus; but the crowd who shouted was seeking rescue from Roman oppression, restoration of the kingdom of David—not spiritual salvation. The rescue that crowd was seeking was not found in message that Jesus has been proclaiming as he wandered the countryside. His message was about the kingdom of God coming near, not the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. So the people who formed the crowd, many of whom seemed to have followed Jesus as he approached Jerusalem had expectations that did not match Jesus' purpose. The question is: does our understanding of Jesus' purpose come closer to matching the message Jesus was proclaiming in his entry? Because the entry was indeed staged very carefully to make a point but the narratives seem to omit giving us the explanation. A procession or parade accompanied by waving and shouting crowds was not an unusual site; it usually signaled the arrival of a conquering army and its leader returning with spoils of war. It could just result from the entry of a powerful figure entering Jerusalem. The Roman governor

Pontius Pilate was also present in Jerusalem for this Passover. The procession into Jerusalem by Pilate would have been quite different from the one Jesus staged. Jesus entered by a little used gate coming from Bethany while Pilate would have entered at the main gate. Pilate's entry would have been an expression of empire and military occupation whose goal was to make sure oppressed people did not find deliverance. There would have been many from the Roman legion upon horses brandishing weapons to demonstrate the power of empire. Jesus' entry provided quite a contrast. Using a donkey and people laying down cloaks and branches along the road, no weapons in sight, Jesus came and announced the coming near of the kingdom of God. Jesus intention entry into the kingdom was done in the name of the LORD and did profoundly proclaim the peaceful reign of God. Within John's briefer account of Jesus' entry reference is made to the prophet Zechariah's words calling upon Zion to rejoice upon the entrance of her king, who triumphantly but humbly rides on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Jesus has again acted in order to fulfill what is seen as a reference to the coming Messiah. But John's gospel tells us that even "the disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him." It is in looking back that John tells us that the disciples understood Jesus; actions as a demonstration of his role as the Messiah. Is that the explanation for this carefully planned entry? So that later the disciples will understand that Jesus is indeed God's son? Mark's narration does not provide clarity on this point. In Mark's narrative there is no reference to later understanding by the disciples about this procession. In fact, in Mark it seems that this entry was pointless. "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." Did Jesus stage this entry just to go and look around the temple courtyard? There is no encounter with anyone, no teaching done. He just goes in, looks around and leaves. Why bother to come into town this way at all? Is it just so later the disciples will connect the entry to the words of Zechariah? Mark's version of this story is notable in the very anti-climatic nature of the description. He presents extensive details which demonstrate the careful staging of the event, then relates the excitement of the parade, the crowds chanting, the road strewn with cloaks and branches—it all leads up to, well, nothing. Jesus looks around and then turns around and returns to Bethany. Whatever the disciples expected to happen and whatever the crowds expected to happen—just didn't happen. Their expectations and Jesus' agenda are worlds apart. Their agenda, crowd and disciples, is a coup d'etat. They are looking for a national savior. Jesus' immediate agenda is to scope the place out for at teach-in the next day. Their agenda is a revolution that will sweep away one empire and replace it with a new empire. Jesus' agenda is a revolution also, but one that will replace human empires altogether with a humanity in which everyone is included. Their agenda is to co-opt God to legitimate their vision of utopia where the power is theirs. Jesus' agenda is to realize the divine vision so that the divine image that lives in every person is seen and expressed. So, at the end of the day, after all the excitement nothing happens. The expectations of the crowd are utterly unmet. This is indeed the beginning of the end, where those unmet expectations turn the crowd's adulation into disappointment and then to bloodthirsty anger. It's fine to have great expectations, but what happens when our expectations go unmet. Do we just become angry or do we begin to consider whether those expectations were what they should have been to begin with? Do we

understand Jesus' agenda for our lives or do we buy into the power of the empire and join those giving adulation to the things which are oppressive, which fail to give justice to all? Do we understand that Jesus' humble entry on a donkey that day was to declare that real power rested not in the elaborate, impressive power shown by the Roman army but in the message of the one who entered humbly on a donkey? Jesus' message was about the eternal, everlasting love of God which would indeed rescue humanity. Do we understand that Jesus' purpose in his entry, his agenda was to critique the worldly power and its use to oppress and take advantage of others? What are our expectations as we imagine those events? And, maybe more to the point, what are Jesus' expectations for us and how we wield the power we have? Do we understand Jesus' message about power? Do we understand the agenda that Jesus came to deliver? Do we understand his critique of empire and his call for us to challenge its power? Do we understand? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.