

“Fickle Fans and Fair-weather Friends”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
March 24, 2024 - Sixth Sunday in Lent/Palm Sunday

[Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; John 12:12-16](#)

Those who gathered for Passover celebration came in to Jerusalem from near and from far. They streamed in from towns and villages that dotted the hillsides around Jerusalem, from all over the region of Judea, from Galilee, from Syria and lands to the east, from Asia Minor and lands to the north, and from Egypt and lands to the west and to the south. Thousands upon thousands of Jewish people and gentiles known as God-fearers came into Jerusalem from the many diverse places across the Roman Empire in which they lived. But though they were vastly different from one another in many ways, they were united in their desire to worship the God of Israel at the Temple in Jerusalem on the holiest of holidays, they were united in singing psalms of praise as they came, and they were united in coming in, not only to remember the miracles that God worked on behalf of their ancestors as they broke free from the oppression of slavery in Egypt, but to pray for God to work a new miracle in their time, to set them free from the domineering hand of Rome, whose peace allowed them to travel in from diverse and distant lands, but only at the great price of being subjugated, oppressed people.

Word that Jesus, the miracle-worker from Nazareth in Galilee, was also on his way in to Jerusalem for the celebration spread among those who were gathering for the festival, and so when he came in, he was greeted by a great crowd, waving branches of palm trees and lying down branches and their own cloaks upon the road before him, which was a common practice there for royal processions. Heightening the anticipation that Jesus was coming in to Jerusalem that Passover, not just as a healer, teacher, and fellow worshipper, but as a king, he came in riding on a donkey, which, though humble, was the expected mode of travel for an incoming Messiah, who would establish a truly peaceful realm. Surely, many hoped that this son of Mary, who for most of his life worked as a humble craftsman in the lowly outpost of Nazareth, would work a miracle among them by setting them free from the tyranny of their overlords Rome and their puppet

kings the Herods, just as Moses had led their ancestors away from Egypt and to freedom long before.

Though Jesus has accomplished no military feats of any kind, many of those who gathered to greet him offered one of their beloved psalms that they would have sung for a victorious military commander if he were to come in to Jerusalem after accomplishing some success on the battlefield, singing, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” While Jesus had no triumph for the people to cheer, they welcomed him in anticipation of him establishing a new realm as King of Israel, and as they shouted “Hosanna!” they fervently cried out their prayer for God to save them through his reign.

Perhaps there were some in the hopeful crowd that had experienced Jesus’ saving work already. Maybe present that day were those he had already healed from some illness, infirmity, or possession by an unclean spirit. Perhaps the cheering throngs included those whose eyes had been opened or ears had been restored by his transformative teaching. Maybe some of the many he had already miraculously fed were there, hoping he would satisfy their hunger once more.

Certainly, many in the crowd were those who had been Jesus’ followers. Some of them may have only learned from him and practiced his teachings for a while; others were disciples who had been with him since the beginning of his ministry and had given up their lives to follow him as he traveled from place to place. These followers knew already of his ability to change lives as they had already witnessed him change so many, and as they had been active participants in miraculous works.

Others gathered in the crowd not because they themselves were followers of Jesus or had personally been blessed by him in some way, but because they heard stories about this Jesus and what he had done. Surely word about his work would have gone viral in the various communities he visited, and so it is likely that many who greeted him as he came into Jerusalem were curious about him and wanted to see what he would do in their presence.

Without a doubt, some gathering outside Jerusalem that day were there to ensure that order was kept and that none of the festal processions got out of line. As was always the case during festival times, and especially during Passover, which celebrated God’s overthrowing of an imperial power, the city would have

had a strong military presence. Keeping the peace that day would have been Roman soldiers, some of whom had recently arrived from the coastal city of Caesarea with Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who worked with King Herod to control the city, its Temple, and the activities that took place there. As an ever-present reminder of Rome's controlling power over the people and their worship, overlooking the Temple was a Roman fortress, in which the high priest's garments were kept. And as pilgrims would be coming in from afar, throughout their journeys they would have seen Roman forts and fortresses and soldiers moving to and fro. And a powerful symbol of Rome's power over the people, Roman crosses would have been perched atop the hill called Golgotha, or the place of the skull, where those who were deemed criminals would be tortured to death and whose crucified bodies were often left upon them as grisly public display of what could happen if you defied the Empire.

Also present as the pilgrims came into the city would have been the Temple authorities and religious leadership as they kept eyes on the people, seeking to keep religious order.

Surely, all of these different people who witnessed a donkey-riding Jesus as he came into Jerusalem would have reacted differently to the event. Some saw it as a sign of God's imminent work of deliverance, and they had high hopes that Jesus was about to establish a new political and religious order. Others would have been furious about the crowds hailing Jesus as Israel's King. Some would have seen the event as a threat to peace and order. Others would have just shrugged and moved on.

For those who expected Jesus to come as the Messiah who would set the people free from their Roman oppressors to establish a new just and peaceful realm, they would have been terribly disappointed after his arrival, as Jesus taught that he did not come to conquer this way, but that his reign would be a spiritual reign of love, and that he would not struggle against the political and religious authorities through physical force. His disciples would have been especially disappointed as he taught them that he would not be setting up a new kingdom in which they would be given positions of power over people, but that his spiritual realm would be established by him giving his very life in love for them, and that were to follow him and his way of selfless, loving sacrifice.

All of those who cried out “Hosanna!” on that first Palm Sunday would end up being disappointed because Jesus came to save them, but not in the way they wanted or expected, and those who offered hopeful “hosannas” soon offered instead angry shouts of “crucify!”

What about us? Are we fickle fans or fair-weather friends? Or will we continue to welcome in Jesus as he comes to show us how to carry our own crosses and to give our own lives in selfless love? Knowing the kind of Messiah he is and what he asks of us, are we eager to cry, “hosanna,” and be saved in this way? Or are we only willing to accept salvation as we desire it to be, not only as freedom from spiritual oppression, but as the gaining or maintenance of real power to have religious and/or political dominion over the lives of others? Sadly, this is what too many of us who have the name Christian seek on this Palm Sunday. Let us not be numbered among them, but let us follow instead the humble savior and welcome him into our own lives to be our guide in giving ourselves in love for the good of others, for this is how we are being saved and this is how we share the gift of salvation with others. May we welcome in Christ’s saving reign of love today and always. Amen.