

Palm Sunday – April 5, 2020 Cycle A

As I was reading through the Gospel for today, I was struck by the similarity to things that have been going on in our society over the last year or so. We are in a presidential election cycle, and many women and men have bravely put themselves forward as candidates for the office. For all but a few the experience has gone something like this: 1) the candidate's campaign announcement is accompanied by excitement, applause, and feelings of optimism, 2) skepticism quickly follows as platform proposals are scrutinized and opponents "lay on" personal attacks, 3) things get "ugly" as the candidate responds "in kind", 4) the candidacy ends ignominiously, as once excited crowds realize that the person is not "who they thought he or she was", and that various campaign promises are unrealistic, fall short of expectations, or are unlikely to solve the "identified problems". The truth is that running for any national office, these days, takes either a very brave or very foolish person – or some combination of the two. We ask the impossible of our candidates, especially those who run for president. To survive the "gauntlet" they must be perfect, promise to give us everything "we want" regardless of reality, and fix every problem without raising taxes – at least taxes that affect us! Small wonder that most campaigns "go down in flames"! What is perhaps most surprising is that, cycle after cycle, people are still willing to "run" for office. Are they brave, foolish, or just that dedicated to doing the "right" thing? It's hard to say anymore... except for that last part. Who anymore believes that politicians really run so they can do the "right" thing! Perhaps that's why we're so merciless when a candidate's campaign "falls apart"? We gloat over their demise. After all, "They're just getting what they deserve" for disappointing us!

Looking at the events leading up to and following the first Palm Sunday it's obvious that human nature has changed little in 2000 years. We really "hate" people who disappoint us – when they turn out to be different than we "expected". That's particularly ironic, for in reality, we care far less about who are leaders truly are, than whether they provide us with the things we think they promised. The crowds who cheered Jesus and waved palm branches as he rode into Jerusalem had all sorts of expectations, about who Jesus was – a great prophet, a great teacher, the Messiah, a revolutionary leader... Mostly, it seems, the crowds wanted someone who would put Israel back on the "right track", kick out the Romans and put Israel back "on top". If Jesus could do these things, they would back him to "the end" – regardless of what sort of person he was. In its history, Israel had backed all sorts of kings who promised them what they wanted – men like King Saul, of often very dubious character. Just look in Chronicles or Kings and you will find plenty of examples. Messiah or not, prophet or not... if Jesus could fulfill expectations and "restore" Israel, the crowds would back him. If not, then "heaven help" the man. It wouldn't be just the priests, Pharisees, and Romans who would be "gunning" for him.

Curiously, just before Jesus got to Jerusalem, while he was on the road from Jericho and with large crowds "in tow", Jesus encountered "two blind men". They seemed to know exactly who Jesus was, and asked plainly for what they wanted... "Have mercy on us Lord, Son of David!" Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him." (Matthew 20:31b-34) Despite having no physical sight, the men called Jesus "Lord" and "Son of David" and trusted that

Jesus could do for them what they asked: show them mercy! In response, Jesus did show them mercy, and they were healed! What “mercy” did the crowds in Jerusalem ask for? Why did “healing” they expect? Most had very clear expectations – that the Messiah would come with the power to do for them “what they wanted”. What they wanted, what they expected, however, was not mercy, healing, or forgiveness, but justification – vengeance upon their Roman adversaries! This was the only “campaign promise” they cared about – ironically, something Jesus never said or promised.

Instead, Jesus spoke about love, the need for forgiveness and reconciliation with neighbor – even with enemies! If he had been running for “office”, Jesus would have had a hard time garnering campaign funds. “Popular” candidates don’t advocate that we make changes “within ourselves”; they lay blame on “others”. Campaign “donations” – especially large ones – are given with “expectations”, the promise of “favors... down the road”. Jesus made no such promises. The rich man who came to Jesus asking for special insight into gaining “eternal life” went away very disappointed. It’s not that Jesus didn’t give him an answer, but only that his answer didn’t fit the man’s expectations. Eternal life is not for a special few; it is God’s gift to God’s assembled people! “Be restored to your neighbor and life is yours, in this world and the next!” This is the essential core of Jesus’ instruction to him. The crowds around Jesus on Palm Sunday wanted Israel restored to its former “glory”, forgetting about the history of “what actually was” – Israel’s failure to be God’s people. They had forgotten the nature of the Covenant: God’s promise that they would be God’s “treasured possession”, and theirs, that they would be a people reflecting God’s “holiness”, God’s Holy Character!

In his life, Jesus showed all who encountered him exactly what our “holiness” is supposed to look like. This was his purpose, his mission. Jesus hadn’t come to be the local representative of the “great candy machine in the sky”, where you deposit your coins, pull the lever, and get “whatever you want”! Instead, Jesus came to offer and embody God’s mercy; to reveal God’s True Character to us and remind us of who we are to be! It’s true, God had done this many times before – in the Law and the prophets, in the rescue of the people from slavery, in their purification during the 40 years in the desert. But somehow, we never quite “got it right”; understood exactly what God expected! And so Jesus came, the “Word become flesh”, that we might finally understand. Unfortunately, we didn’t. Our expectations blinded us to the presence of God’s Messiah and the mercy God had indeed offered in him! Blind to the truth, it didn’t take long for the crowd’s excitement to dissipate. Many who had shouted “Hosanna in the highest” on Sunday, would be screaming “Crucify him” by Friday...

Who is Jesus? Perhaps more to the point, “Who do we expect Jesus to be?” If we expect Jesus to fulfill our expectations, we are bound for disappointment. If, on the other hand, we are open to learning the true purpose of God’s Messiah, that he came to offer everyone hope and life and forgiveness, then our lives will be filled with joy! For Jesus came to show us how to be God’s treasured people; and it is as such that hopes beyond our wildest expectations will be fulfilled! Amen