

## **Confusion Reigns!    John 12:12-16        Isaiah 50:4-9a**

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, the disciples are described as not understanding what is going on. In fact, John's account of the event suggests that they are not even involved in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. The people hail Jesus as he walks and then it says Jesus himself finds a donkey and gets on it. John tells us that only after Jesus was glorified, after the resurrection - did the disciples realize that the events of that day: the hosanna shouting crowd and Jesus riding a young donkey- fulfill in a prophetic way the image of Psalm 118 - the Coronation Hymn of King David. What a comfort it is to know that the disciples – just like us sometimes - were confused and unaware and did not understand exactly what was going on with Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew's version of the same event tells us it is not only the disciples who are confused. It says, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil asking 'Who is this?'" This is the question we face this time of year. Who is Jesus? Why do we remember this Holy Week? Many in our world think this question is decided and clear. But, I am not sure one can come to that conclusion if we read the scriptures carefully. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, as in all the milestones in his life; his birth, his baptism, death and resurrection, is presented differently in each Gospel's versions of the events. Over the history of the church, we have closed our eyes to the differences and awkwardly harmonized them to avoid the ambiguity and the necessity to wrestle with our beliefs. But in wanting to make the story simple, we lose too much – most especially the realization that right from the start the church has had broad and varied views of who exactly Jesus was.

The differences in that First Palm Sunday in the Gospels begin with their background. Depending on which Gospel we read, Jesus has either spent a little over a year or three years in ministry in Galilee and Judea, Samaria and in John, even travelling to Gentile parts of the world. This is not surprising as the Gospel of John is the one upon

which the three year tradition is based. John has Jesus going to Jerusalem both early and late in his ministry. The other three: Matthew, Mark and Luke, say Jesus only entered Jerusalem at the end of his ministry in preparation for the Passover. The parallel today would be if Jesus preached and taught in New Jersey, Vermont and Massachusetts to hone his message and now he is going to New York City where he will find the biggest and most influential audience. If these three Gospels are right, I think Jesus coming to Jerusalem is an exhilarating and frightening event for him and for his disciples.

The three Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke; are close to the same in many details, but they have some significant differences. All have Jesus sending two disciples in to get a young donkey with a slight variation in Matthew that the colt remains tied to the Mother and Jesus rides both. I'd like to see that. This is a small variation – a more significant one comes in the description of the crowd. In Matthew it says, "A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road and others cut branches from the trees." Mark records that "many people" spread cloaks and branches on the road. Both Mark and Matthew then say a group went ahead and another behind Jesus shouting. But Luke's version is different: People kept spreading their cloaks on the road approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives and the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God..saying Hosanna... So Luke suggests only the disciples were shouting the Hosannas, the people put down some clothing, - a sign of great respect, but they only do that up on the mountain, far from the authorities and they never shout hosanna and hail Jesus - perhaps for fear of the Romans.

One of our traditions is to involve children in Palm Sunday. Matthew's Gospel is the only one that names children as part of the day, and this talks about another group who become confused by Jesus. Matthew writes, "When the chief priests and scribes heard the children crying out in the Temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,'" they

became angry. And said to Jesus, “Do you hear what they are saying?” Jesus said to them, ‘Yes, have you never read, ‘out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’ from Psalm 8. Though the children are not confused, their declaration certainly confuses and frightens the religious leaders.

The children's cry alert us to the final difference that gives us a breadth of images of that day so long ago- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all put different words in the mouths of those who are shouting. And these words can reflect very different beliefs about Jesus on this day. Mark has them say, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming Kingdom of David! Hosanna in highest heaven.” Jesus is not given a title by Mark, and in the history of Israel Prophets, not just Kings, come in the Name of the Lord. The coming Kingdom of David is a Messianic hope for the restoration of David on the throne, so Mark leaves room for Jesus ushering David back...(This reflects the Passover Tradition that the Prophet Elijah will prepare the way for the Messiah – we will hear more about this on Maundy Thursday). Mark’s Jesus could be the prophet coming to call the people back to God in preparation for David's return.

Matthew actually gives Jesus a title having the people saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David, Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the Highest.” By calling Jesus, “Son of David,” Jesus is linked directly to David and to that Messianic hope. Matthew starts his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus showing he is a child of David's line, so it is no surprise this theme comes back at the end of the Gospel. Calling Jesus “Son of David” moves Jesus toward a more significant religious and political place.

Luke is even more direct in having the disciples say, “Blessed is the king who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven - and glory in the highest heaven.” We notice language similar to Luke’s Christmas story– except then it is Peace on Earth. Now

it is Peace in Heaven. So in some ways this could be a spiritual or heavenly Kingdom that Luke is talking about. Luke, who is a Gentile, sees the Kingdom as a universal spiritual reality, perhaps not so connected to Israel itself.

Finally John's Gospel makes it clear this Jesus is the King of an earthly Realm, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel." Such a statement is very politically dangerous in terms of challenging Herod and the Roman Empire. Perhaps this is why some think Jesus was more a political revolutionary than a Rabbi.

So who is Jesus? King of Israel? Prophet?, Revolutionary? leader of a heavenly kingdom? All? Some? How do you understand Jesus? How did Jesus himself understand his mission, his role? And as approach the rest of Holy Week, the questions get more difficult. Why death on a cross? What does Easter mean? We wrestle with these questions not because there is one right answer, but because the wrestling with them will give us a stronger, more vibrant, a more intelligent faith- a Faith that takes the Scriptures seriously enough to read where they argue, where they differ and to not be threatened by the depth of the mystery of faith and God. Perhaps the best image of the struggle faith is from the Jesus Christ Superstar song of Mary Magdalene - I don't Know How to Love Him... Which ends with "What's it all about he scares me so..."

There is a poster in my office that says "We are still confused, but on a higher level and about more important things." Following Jesus is not about knowing and intellectually understanding everything. Instead it is about living life of following him. As we all spoke in preparation for our meditation, "the important question to ask is not 'what do you believe?' but "What difference does it make that you believe? Does the world come nearer to the dream of God because of what you believe?" AMEN