

With the passage from Matthew we embark on the last act in the drama of the life of Jesus. It was Passover time, and Jerusalem and the surrounding area was crowded with pilgrims. Thirty years later a Roman governor took a census of the lambs slain in Jerusalem for the Passover and found that the number was nearly a quarter of a million. It was a Passover regulation that there must be a minimum of ten people for each lamb which means that at that Passover time more than two and a half million people had crowded their way into Jerusalem. Jesus could not have chosen a more dramatic moment; it was into a city surging with people keyed up with religious expectations that he rode.

In today's Scripture passage, Jesus seems to be playing a game, "Guess who I am." This story for Palm Sunday is all about the identity question. Verse 10 makes it clear, "And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this?"

Who is this?

I believe this question helps us understand the fickle reactions of the people present at that first Palm Sunday. The most obvious question from Palm Sunday is, how could the same people who yelled, 'Hosanna!' on Sunday turn around and yell 'Crucify Him!' on Friday?" The cheers turned into jeers in an alarmingly short time.

How do we solve this mystery? Perhaps by looking at how the people responded to that question, "Who is this?" Everybody was looking for something different in Jesus, and most were disappointed in who he really was.

So who was Jesus for the crowds? They wanted a Miracle Jesus. They probably loved the fact that he taught in parables that were easier to understand than the obscure reasoning they heard from the Pharisees. They liked it when he put the Pharisees in their place. But of all the qualities of Jesus that the crowds loved, they loved him best as a miracle man. They thronged around him when they saw him healing the lame, the blind and the sick. And they clamoured for more. The crowds wanted a Miracle Jesus, but he disappointed them.

Who was Jesus for the Pharisees? They wanted a Ritual Jesus. They thought the most important substance of religion was to be found, not in how they believed or prayed, but in how they dressed and washed and ate. Their greatest fear was that their whole culture would be absorbed into the culture of the Greek world. So they emphasized the thousand little details that kept them distinctly Jewish. But Jesus came preaching that the real way to God was through having faith in

God and maintaining high moral standards. In fact, Jesus often broke the rules that the Pharisees had set up. He broke the Sabbath, ate with the unclean, and defied the laws of purification. The Pharisees wanted a Ritual Jesus, but he disappointed them.

Who was Jesus for the Zealots? They wanted a Military Jesus. The Zealots were the radical nationalists who were ready to use force, even terrorism, to overthrow the oppressive hand of the Roman government. The Jewish patriots were always on the edge of rebellion. These followers expected Jesus to take up a sword and call his followers to arms at any moment. They clearly wanted Jesus to be the leader of their resistance movement. The Zealots wanted a Military Jesus, but He disappointed them.

Who was Jesus for the Disciples? They wanted a Victorious Jesus. Their heads were full of selfish dreams. They wondered aloud who would be allowed to sit at his right hand when he came into his kingdom. They were thinking of the prizes, not the costs. It must have been a heady time to be one of the chosen twelve. These men were the true believers. Simon Peter spoke for them all when he boldly proclaimed at Caesarea Philippi, "Thou art the Christ!" They expected Jesus to be accepted quickly by every Jewish person. He would be greater than David. But Jesus kept up his negative talk about his death. He kept hinting that persecution would be their lot, not glory. Jesus had no concept of the victorious Messiah; his was the picture of a Suffering Servant. And he made clear that following him meant taking up a cross. The Disciples wanted a victorious Messiah, but Jesus disappointed them.

All of these different groups were in the crowd that first Palm Sunday, each with their own private view of Jesus. As they waved the palm branches and shouted, "Hosanna," they thought they were finally getting what they wanted.

When we look closely at the dynamics of that Palm Sunday, we are not really surprised at the Friday outcome. On the surface, it seems like the Triumphal Entry was a grand celebration, but underneath we find the seeds of the crucifixion lying among the palms.

The real meaning of Palm Sunday for us can be found in that same question I asked about each of the groups, "Who is this? Perhaps this is the, most important question in life, the question the people asked in our passage, "Who is this?"

Do we want a Miracle Jesus or Ritual Jesus? Do we want a Military Jesus or a Victorious Jesus?

If we are looking for any of those, we will be disappointed too. But the reason we are disappointed is that we are looking for the wrong kind of Jesus.

There's a wonderful story about a lady who, each time she discovers someone claiming to be an atheist, she replies, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." And when they do, she usually observes, "I don't think I would like that kind of God either." Our disappointments in God usually come from a wrong view of God.

The same thing can be said of Jesus. All these people looked for the wrong thing in Jesus and were disappointed. But when we really see Jesus, we will be amazed and certainly not disappointed at what we find.

As Marcus Borg, the American New Testament scholar says, "Jesus is, for us as Christians, the decisive revelation of what a life full of God looks like. Radically centred in God and filled with the Spirit, he is the decisive disclosure and epiphany of what can be seen of God embodied in a human life. As the Word and Wisdom and Spirit of God become flesh, his life incarnates the character of God, indeed, the passion of God. In him we see God's passion. He is the decisive revelation of God for us as Christians."

Who is Jesus for us? Are we looking for a Saviour? Or are we looking for a Miracle Jesus, a Ritual Jesus, a Military Jesus or a Victorious Jesus?

The real meaning of Holy Week, indeed the meaning of his whole life and death and resurrection, is that he came and died for us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." I pray that as we journey together through Holy Week to the foot of the cross the real Jesus will manifest himself in our lives and that we will take up our cross and follow him. In Jesus name. Amen.