

There is a time-honored story about a little boy who was sick. It was Palm Sunday and the children waved palm branches to open the service. But this young man stayed home from church with his mother.

His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked, "Why do we wave palm branches on Palm Sunday, Dad, and why do we call it Palm Sunday?"

"You see," his Dad explained, "when Jesus came into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him, so we got palm branches in the worship service today."

The little boy replied, "Aw, Shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up."

Well, I'm confident that Jesus will show up today, even though we will not be able to welcome him with quite the excitement with which the crowd in Jerusalem welcomed him 2,000 years ago. Someone has compared the reception Jesus received to a ticker-tape parade in New York City honoring heroes and celebrities.

Some of our young people might wonder what ticker-tape is. For those who may never have seen the stuff, ticker-tape refers to long, narrow strands of paper, with holes punched in them. These strands of paper once carried information about the performance of the New York Stock Exchange.

As the information was entered by machines, holes were punched in the tape as it fed through, and other machines would read the information for the benefit of brokers and investors. It was sort of an early computer all very modern in the first half of the twentieth century. But there was a problem what do you do with the tape once it had gone through the reader and was no longer useful?

One cynic says since all that ticker-tape was waste paper and, even then, expensive to get rid of, some enterprising person had the bright idea of staging a parade for some hero and dumping the whole mess out the window. (1)

This is not quite true. Actually, the greatest honor that the city of New York can bestow upon an individual or a collection of individuals, say a championship sports team, is to throw a ticker-tape parade. Since the first parade in 1886, 204 of these celebrations have taken place. Since then thousands of tons of paper have descended on the heads of various kinds of heroes.

In 1951, 3,249 tons of paper showered on Gen. Douglas MacArthur as his motorcade wended its way through streets of Manhattan. And 3,474 tons drifted down on the first astronaut to orbit the earth, John Glenn in 1962. (2)

By the late 1960s, the stock exchange upgraded to electronic boards, leaving them with little use for ticker tape. So enterprising office workers resorted to shredding regular computer paper and throwing it out the window.

Somehow this didn't work quite as well. One year an overzealous office worker neglected to tear the pages out of a phone book. Instead, he or she threw the whole thing out the window; it struck a passerby and knocked him unconscious. Maybe that's one reason ticker tape parades are less common nowadays. Another reason might be that now many office buildings are built with sealed windows which are not intended to be opened.

Nevertheless, for a few moments, I want you to imagine the exhilaration of a ticker tape parade on a much smaller scale in Jerusalem in about 30 A.D. Imagine the excitement and merriment that surrounds this occasion. Jesus is coming to town. Some say he's a great teacher. Others, a great healer. Still others say he's the Messiah, come to lead the people of Judea against the awesome might of Rome.

In your mind's eye visualize that scene. Let your ears be filled with the beautiful synchronized sound of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Our minds will become encumbered with many somber and disturbing events if we let them wander beyond this day to the events of Holy Week. For a few moments, though, let's bask in this time of victory and glorious expectation that is Palm Sunday.

The writers of the four gospels allowed themselves that luxury. The account of Palm Sunday is one of the few events in the New Testament that is recorded in all four gospels. Details vary slightly, as they always do when eye-witness accounts are the basis for reporting, but the major details remain intact. As we visualize this great event I want you to focus on three things: the manner Jesus entered the Holy City, the reaction of the crowds to his coming and finally its meaning for us.

First, of all, notice how he came. It was time for the Passover celebration. The Passover was one of the three feasts that Jews were supposed to attend in Jerusalem. As a result, the population of Jerusalem swelled immensely. As a good Jew, Jesus was coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover with his disciples. In preparation Jesus did something quite unusual. He instructed his disciples to borrow a young donkey upon which no one had ever ridden for him to ride as he entered the city. He also equipped them with a response in the event that they were questioned about taking the animal. They were to say, "The Lord needs it and will send it back shortly."

It's interesting. Jesus and his followers had probably come by foot all the way from Galilee. But now for the last two miles Jesus decided to ride a donkey. This was obviously to fulfill the prophecy found in Zachariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

So without questioning the Master's request, the disciples did as they were instructed. They procured the young donkey just as the Master had said. In John 14:12, Jesus said to them, "If you love me, you will obey my commands," and this they did. How can you tell someone is a disciple of Jesus? They heed his commands.

After borrowing the colt the disciples placed their cloaks on it as a saddle for their master to commence his journey. This method of transportation is significant, of course. Jesus didn't ride in an ornate chariot or on a large and imposing horse. He rode a young donkey, a small donkey, an insignificant animal generally thought of as a beast of burden. This was a metaphor, perhaps. In five days he would take on an even greater burden the sins of the entire world. He would be spat on, beaten, mocked, jeered and nailed to a cross. All of that may be symbolized by this lowly beast of burden, a donkey.

On the other side of town, Pontius Pilate was entering Jerusalem about the same time on a horse, the symbol of war and power. Jesus rode a young donkey as a symbol of peace and humility. In Luke 14:11, Christ taught, "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble

themselves will be exalted." Jesus only practiced that which he preached. So, notice the manner in which he came.

In the second place, notice the reaction of the crowd. Mark notes that, as Jesus entered the Holy City, many people spread their cloaks on the road while others spread branches they had cut in the fields (John is the only Gospel that describes the type of branch as being palm). Victorious kings were honored in this fashion in biblical times. Many in the crowd were welcoming a king. They anticipated that he would lead an insurrection against the established order. They did not realize his kingdom was not of this world.

While he rode into the city the crowd was singing, "Hosanna in the highest." Songwriters have done more to capture the beauty of this day than any preacher could possibly do. For many in the crowd that day, this was a moment of splendid adoration.

Of course, there were cynics, just as there are today. A donkey? Peasants throwing down branches? He may as well have driven up in a banged up VW van from the 1960s. We prefer our royalty in a Rolls Royce, or at least a Mercedes. The values of this world are not the values of Christ's kingdom.

This ecstatic type of worship reminds us of the fickleness of human beings and how often we straddle the fence. We see Jesus being worshipped here by the crowds, but in a few days these same people who are singing, "Hosanna" will be shouting for him to be crucified. Not everyone who sings praises to Christ can be counted on when the going gets rough. They were in a celebratory mood here but when tough decisions were being made, such as choosing Jesus or Barabbas, the crowd would forget that just a few days prior they were hailing Jesus as their King.

Not even those who seemed to be close to Christ remained faithful when the crowd turned against him. One of his disciples denied him and another betrayed him with a kiss. But then Jesus said the tares and the wheat grow together and at the harvest they will be separated. I hope that on the day when that separation comes, we will be counted as wheat, don't you?

Of course some persons were there just out of mere curiosity. They were just following the crowd. They saw the excitement and wondered what was going on and just started shouting like the others. Writer Eric Hoffer once commented wryly, "When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other." We know that's true.

I read somewhere a story about a man in Utah who put this "follow the crowd" phenomenon to good use. He had bought a store but it was not doing well. No one came into his store to see his merchandise, so he had almost no business. He was on a main road so that wasn't the problem. People just didn't stop!

One day he got an idea. Knowing that most people do follow the crowd, he went out and bought several used cars and parked them in front of his store. Sure enough, now people stopped at his store and all kinds of people began to buy his stuff. They assumed that all the cars out front meant that this must be a great place to shop!

The same thing happens with churches. Some people are attracted to church because their friends are there. Nothing wrong with that it's a great first step. We come into worship for a variety of reasons. Some of us come into this room with a sincere desire to know God's will for our life. Others are still seeking a workable faith. Still others come because their family expects it. If I were to ask you today why are you here, what would your answer be?

In Matthew 16:15-17, Jesus questioned his disciples. He said to them, "And who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven!"

Jesus did not want Peter and his other disciples to believe he was the Son of God just because he said so. He wanted God to bring them to this conclusion, based on their experience with him.

If you are still uncertain about who Jesus is, this is a great place for you to be. Walk with Christ for a while and see for yourself who he is.

That brings us to the last thing we need to see: What Palm Sunday means for us.

More than four decades ago, Beatle superstar John Lennon caused a worldwide storm. Some of you know what I'm referring to. In an interview with the press, Lennon claimed that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. It was obvious at the time that the Beatles certainly weren't singing, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Though, led by Paul McCartney, they were singing, "In my times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, whispering words of wisdom, "Let it be."

Now, more than four decades later, the Beatles former drummer Ringo Starr says he has found God after taking a long and winding road.

He admitted he lost his way when he was younger, both as a Beatle experimenting with marijuana and LSD and afterwards when he suffered alcohol and cocaine problems in the late 1970s. But the musician, who has since become a teetotaler swearing off of alcohol, drugs and quitting his 60-a-day cigarette habit says that religion now plays an important role in his life.

Starr, recently turned 70, said: "I feel the older I get, the more I'm learning to handle life. Being on this quest for a long time, it's all about finding yourself. For me, God is in my life. I don't hide from that. I think the search has been on since the 1960s. I stepped off the path there for many years and found my way back onto it, thank God." Yes, thank God. By the way, Starr wasn't speaking at a church when he made this confession. He was speaking at the Grammy Awards Museum in Los Angeles. (3)

I'm glad that as Ringo Starr has gotten older, he's also gotten smarter. It's a shame that sometimes people have to get in such a bad way before they realize there is a better way.

The Bible teaches us that there will come a time when God will reign in every heart. There will come a time when ever knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God. Palm Sunday prefigures that grand event.

Looking at the four Gospel accounts together, it becomes clear that the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was a significant event, not only to those people who were there to witness it, but to Christians throughout history. We celebrate Palm Sunday to remember that momentous occasion.

Over 1,000 years ago, an Italian bishop named Theodulph, was a prisoner in France. From his jail cell, he wrote a poem that Christians have been singing ever since to remember the day Jesus entered Jerusalem. Maybe you will recognize it. It goes like this:

"All glory, laud, and honor, to Thee, Redeemer King!

To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring!

Thou art the king of Israel, Thou David's royal Son,

Who in the Lord's name comest, the King and blessed One." (4)

He is our Redeemer King. He deserves our allegiance. He deserves our all.

[As we stand to sing this great hymn, I hope that in your mind's eye you will put yourself in that crowd welcoming him into Jerusalem. I hope that as you sing, you will also welcome him into your heart.]

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1. Michael W. Dominowski, *Staten Island Advance*.

2. *New York Times*, October 29, 1986.

3. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1248085/Why-Ive-turned-God-70-reformed-Ringo-Starr.html#ixzz36tvR9MKJ>.

4. Timothy Hart-Andersen, <http://www.ewestminster.org/sermon.asp?id=520>.

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