

# "Those Who Cheered Him on"

Matthew 21:9-11

April 7, 2014

Palm Sunday

What a day that must have been on the first Palm Sunday! Jesus' popularity was at its peak! There were thousands of Passover pilgrims and thousands of residents of Jerusalem cheering Jesus on as He entered into Jerusalem. Jesus was riding a donkey in fulfillment of a Messianic prophecy from Zechariah. The people, in their exuberance, spread their cloaks on the ground. They cut down palm branches from the trees and spread them on the ground. All this was a 1<sup>st</sup> century kind of "red carpet" treatment to welcome him. They shouted their expectations of Jesus, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" They expected the Son of David – the Messiah – to save them by establishing His Kingdom among them! They were really excited about this.

As we know, the week didn't turn out as these pilgrims planned. It ended with Jesus dead on a cross and then buried in a tomb. Some think that the crowds became angry and turned against Jesus because they didn't see the kingdom coming and were at Pontius Pilate's house, crying for Jesus crucifixion five days after they hailed Him as their Messiah. Dr. Paul Maier, among others, disputes this. The crowds at Pilate's house were different people. They were lackeys for the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Palm Sunday crowds were the ones following after Jesus on the road to Golgotha, weeping and crying. There were not so much angry, as sad and disappointed. They figured they had missed out on the Kingdom of God.

But why? What were their expectations of the Kingdom of God? What are our expectations? First, the people of Jesus' time expected the prophet, Jesus (as they called him) to usher in the Kingdom with His power. A short time before Palm Sunday, as we read last week, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after he had been dead and buried for four days. The crowds figured Jesus had the power to do anything and expected Him to use that power.

Aren't we the same? We know of the stories of Jesus' power over disease, demons, nature, and even death itself. Don't we expect to see Jesus use that power here on earth in our time for our benefit in visible and tangible ways?

Secondly, the people of Jesus' time expected Jesus to use His power in a political way. He was to kick out the Roman government and re-establish the glory days of Israel when David and Solomon were on the throne. Israel would be restored to a mighty political kingdom.

Many today expect the Kingdom of God to be a political entity, if not as a whole, at least in part. We would like the political enemies of God's Word to be vanquished. While many wouldn't want a theocracy – the direct rule of God – as the Israelites had, I think many would like our laws to be extensions of the Word of God to some extent or another.

Third, the people of Jesus' time expected the Kingdom of God to be characterized by earthly wealth. David and Solomon were no slouches. Israel was quite prosperous and wealthy under kings like these. Shouldn't life under Jesus' rule be at least as prosperous as old Israel had been?

It's no different for people today. Some people who follow Jesus expect life in the Kingdom of God to be filled with wealth and material blessings. They will tell you that God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous. They have a "name it and claim it" theology which says that you can have anything and everything you want if you just name it and then claim it in faith.

Fourth, and finally, the people of Jesus' time expected a good life now in the Kingdom of God. That's why they were so excited on that first Palm Sunday. They were finally going to "get theirs". Life would be smooth sailing now with the Kingdom of God established and Jesus ruling from Jerusalem.

I think many Christians today have that same idea. Following Jesus means a good life now. (In fact, one famous evangelist wrote a book entitled, "Your Best Life Now.") You should be happy as a Christian. You should expect a life without suffering or problems in the Kingdom of God. Everything should be smooth sailing for people in the Kingdom of God.

It is no wonder that the crowds of Palm Sunday were sad and disappointed when they saw Jesus carrying a cross out to Golgotha to be crucified. It didn't make any sense. Where was the Kingdom of God which they had so clearly seen coming on Palm Sunday? What was wrong?

These expectations for the Kingdom of God failed because both people at Jesus' time and people of our time fail to recognize two important realities. First of all, we live in a world that is broken by sin. It cannot be fixed. Any and every kingdom established in this world will eventually fall.

Secondly, this world broken by sin is populated only with people broken by sin. What we think the Kingdom of God should be like and what we desire of it is always tainted by sin. Because of our sinful nature, we are enamored with material goods and creature comforts. Had Jesus established the Kingdom as the Palm Sunday pilgrims had desired, it would have eventually fallen. We would be reminiscing about that Kingdom as those pilgrims were reminiscing about the Kingdoms of David and Solomon. We'd be waiting for something else to come along.

The people of Jesus' time did not miss out on the Kingdom. It was there, being established. They simply overlooked it because it wasn't something they desired. I read a story about a father who desired his daughter to have the best doll to play with. So he visited a toy store and picked out one of those expensive American Girl dolls and had it set aside. Later, he brought his daughter to the store, promising her a doll. As soon as they got into the store, the girl saw a cheap plastic doll and just had to have it. Her father tried to dissuade her from having that doll, but the daughter wouldn't listen. He told her that he had a better doll picked out, but she started crying loudly. So the father bought her the cheap plastic doll and she missed out on having the expensive American Girl doll.

We are like that daughter sometime. We are certain that we know what we want and what is best, even when our Father in Heaven has picked out something better for us. The truth of the matter is not that Jesus failed to establish His Kingdom, beginning on that Palm Sunday, but that he established a Kingdom better than we expected. The problem is not that God fails to give us what we want. He wants to give us more than we ask for.

Jesus came to establish His Kingdom, not as a mere prophet, but as the very Son of God. Yet He did not come with the power of God, but with the humility of a servant. As we read in our Epistle lesson for today, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) The events of Holy Week were not to bring about a political kingdom through military means but a kingdom of righteousness through dealing with sin.

The Kingdom of God is not about politics and might. It is about love and forgiveness. Jesus went to the cross at the end of Holy Week, not because He had failed to establish the Kingdom, but in order to establish the Kingdom by His death there. Rather than claiming power and glory as an earthly king for Himself, Jesus offered up His body and life as the sacrifice to pay for our sin. Jesus died for you and me that our sin would be forgiven and we would be granted admittance to His Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is not about earthly wealth and pleasure. Everything which we desire, strive for, and think we must have in order to be happy will eventually die, break, or fade away. Nothing in this world will last. Life in the Kingdom of God is about much more. It is about heavenly wealth and pleasure, something so good and so beyond our experience that we can't even imagine it. Scripture says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Cor. 2:9) Not only is the heavenly wealth in the Kingdom of God qualitatively better than anything we have now, but it will last forever.

The Kingdom of God is not about a good life now. Life as a Christian in this world is often difficult, disappointing and full of suffering. Yet even when it is good, it does not and cannot continue. We will all die. Yet life in the Kingdom is about something better. We have to remember that Holy Week began on a great high note of celebration on Palm Sunday but ended in the great sadness of

death on Good Friday. But the next week began even better when Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the next Sunday, Easter. That changes everything, not only for Jesus, but for us as well. As we heard Jesus say in last Sunday's Gospel, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." (1 Corinthians 11:25-26) The life we have transcends death. The life we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ lasts forever.

Now, I know some people think Christians have too many "pie in the sky" unrealistic ideas about what is important. This life and the things in it seem pretty good. There is no doubt that this world has some nice things to offer. But think about this: do you want the things of this world which seem so good and important but which ultimately have no value and will be destroyed or do you want the really good stuff which God has chosen for you in His Kingdom which will last forever?

Someone once said, "Be careful of what you ask for. You might just get it." Thankfully, God does not give us what we want in a Kingdom – the things which appear to be nice but are really fleeting. He gives us more. He gives us better. He gives us heaven and all the things which are beyond our imagination and last forever. So wave your palm branches. The King has come. He died to set up the Kingdom for us. He rose from death to guarantee the Kingdom to us. He is coming again to bring us to the fulfillment of that Kingdom for all eternity. That's something to celebrate and cheer on. Amen.