

4.9.06 *Remaining True to the Lord: Disciples become known as Christians*

Matthew 21:1-11, Acts 11:19-26

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“When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,

“Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs.’ And he will send them immediately.”

This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

They brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”*

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken, *“Who is this?”*

The crowds were saying, *“This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”*

Matthew 21:1-11

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except the Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists (Greeks) also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and **it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.”**

Acts 11:19-26

Have you ever been in the embarrassing situation of answering the phone and the voice on the other end begins to talk to you, and you don't know who it is? You don't want to admit you don't know or don't remember who it is so you go along, all the while trying to figure out exactly who is on the other end before your ignorance is revealed. Sometimes it doesn't help even when people say their first name. If I get a call and the voice says, "*This is Bill...*" I have to figure out, "Is it Bill Brown, Bill Carter, Bill Clark, Bill Eifert, Bill French, Bill Harwood, Bill Louth, Bill Morrow, Bill Reycroft, Bill Robertson, Bill Vincent, Bill Wordell? Or some other Bill?"

Some of you may be able to remember listening to the Lone Ranger on the radio or watching it on television with Clayton Moore and if so you know that when the Lone Ranger rode out of town, someone inevitably would ask... "*Who was that masked man?*"

On Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into town people were asking a similar question, "*Who is this?*" Like our selves with someone on the phone or the townspeople on The Lone Ranger, the people in Matthew's gospel are trying to figure out the identity of a person riding into Jerusalem. They want to know who is this person who is causing such a response?

When we read the Bible it is helpful to look at the questions being asked because often they are the questions the author wants us to answer. For example, in Matthew 8:27 the disciples ask,

"What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

In Matthew 16:13 Jesus asks the disciples,

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

In Matthew 21:10 the question is asked about Jesus, "*Who is this?*"

Throughout his Gospel Matthew is telling the story of Jesus and encouraging us to answer the question: what kind of man can say and do what Jesus says and does?

Jesus rides into Jerusalem - a city torn by divisions and power struggles frequently erupting in violence and bloodshed – acting out a parable about what God is offering to those who will believe. In Matthew chapter one, the gospel writer traced Jesus' family tree back through the kings of Israel. In chapter two we read, "In the time of Herod the king wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, '*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*'" We're told King Herod and all Jerusalem were frightened by this news. Herod was frightened because he knew the Jewish people were hoping a political and military leader, like King David, would come to deliver them from the Romans. The whole city and nation might erupt into violence if the patriots and

zealots had a true son of David to rally behind. Herod ordered the murders of children to prevent Jesus from growing up and leading such a revolt. Herod's dreadful plan failed to stop God's redemptive plan and now the child Herod sought to eliminate has come to Jerusalem as a mature man.

Jesus doesn't ride into Jerusalem on a warhorse at the head of troops armed for battle. He comes humbly on a donkey or colt. His followers are grasping tree branches, not spears; they shout "*Hosanna!*" not, "*Attack!*" This is a strange sort of gathering.

Many people and the media are fascinated by trials – it is interesting to note how much of the news is about trials and how many television programs involve them. A fascinating aspect of trials is how various people witnessing or participating in the same event see different things and reach very different conclusions. We could even say that, in truth, it isn't the same event. A hopeful disciple witnessing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem makes it seem like it was a huge group of people making a great impact, shaking up the whole city. A Roman centurion may have observed a small group of pilgrims making some sort of minor demonstration, but nothing significant enough to break it up or arrest the leaders or even to report to his superiors that someone of consequence arrived in town. The crowds were saying, "*This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.*"

People wondered and thought - Is he a prophet? A trouble maker? An imposter? A rebel? A teacher? Is he going to help us overthrow our oppressors?

Many of those who first followed Jesus probably did so in the hope that he would be the one to rally the people to overthrow the Romans. One of the disciples was openly known as Simon the zealot, referring to his political views not his passion for following Jesus. James and John were nicknamed Sons of Thunder, a title just as fitting for revolutionaries as fishermen. John 6:15 says, "*When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*" In Acts 1:6, even after the crucifixion and resurrection and the risen Christ is with the disciples they ask him, "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*" They are still thinking about Jesus' purpose first and foremost from a political point of view.

Jesus' leadership is transforming in many ways, but as Leighton Ford says, "*Jesus saw the heart of the human problem as the problem of the human heart. A*

*radical change from the inside out was at the core of his strategy.*¹ Jesus' strategy was not a political one in which transformed earthly governments subsequently changed individual lives. Overthrowing the Romans and putting the Jewish people back in charge of their nation would provide some freedom, but it would not bring the change Jesus is after.

Jesus' approach is a radical change in the hearts and lives of people altered by following him under the power of the Spirit of God. Jesus' message is aimed at the transformation of the heart. Truly living out the gospel Jesus preached impacts every aspect of our lives including our relationships, our economics, and our politics. Anything less falls short of the faith of Jesus.

The Son of David enters David's city, but the only throne this king finds is a cross. The only crown he receives is made of thorns. The city that should have welcomed him with fullest worship and obedience – refuses to accept or is too busy to care about this humble leader or prophet or whoever he is.

It is easy for us to think by celebrating Palm Sunday, coming to worship, maybe taking a palm home, that we are acknowledging Jesus as king in a way that many in Jerusalem failed to do so. We do well to remember Matthew 7:21-24 and the thought that it is not those who call Jesus Lord on Sunday who shall enter the kingdom of heaven but only those who do God's will throughout the week. It is not enough to shout, "*Hosanna, Hallelujah*" on Sunday. We are to live out our faith in Jesus on Monday. We are to live as if his entering into our lives and riding into our hearts makes a difference.

Who is this gentle man riding humbly and peacefully into the political and religious powder keg that is still Jerusalem? At the beginning of the week that changed the history of the world, Matthew is asking us to make a decision about who Jesus is. A few are praising him; fewer truly understand who he is and what this journey represents.

Others will cry, "Crucify him!" when he disappoints their political and religious aspirations. Others will be very afraid of everything that unfolds and wonder if they can find the courage to speak.

Rather than a joyous festival, Palm Sunday is a sober reminder of human blindness and our "What have you done for me lately?" mentality. Many people have some vague idea about the events of Holy Week, but we all must make up our own minds about what those events mean for us.

¹ Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership*, (InterVarsity Press: Downer's Grove, 1991), p. 62

Is Jesus a prophet and teacher or is he the Messiah, the leader who would change our hearts, our lives, our destiny, our eternity? Is he the Son of God who died on the cross that we might be reconciled with God?

Joe Shapiro has been my best friend since we met in fourth grade more than 30 years ago. Late on Tuesday afternoon I felt moved to call him and when I asked what was going on he told me with great anguish in his voice that his 17 year old nephew Kyle had died on Monday evening by his own hand. His family was unsure if he was engaged in a terribly risky practice that some young people are doing trying to get an, "asphyxiation high" or if he intended to commit suicide but the result was tragically the same. On Thursday evening I drove up to Kyle's house to be with Joe, Kyle's parents Andy and Ruth, and many of their family and friends. Ruth grew up Catholic and their family attends a Roman Catholic Church, certainly one of the few "Shapiro" families on the rolls of the Archdiocese. Kyle was baptized, confirmed, and worshiped at the church. Andy and Ruth showed remarkable grace and courage throughout this week as they opened their home to Kyle's friends from Needham High School which is located right behind their home. All week long students came to sit in the basement or in Kyle's room, writing their memories of Kyle. Kyle was a star on the baseball team and the whole team came and presented his parents with his varsity letter, and an autographed hat.

Thursday night after most of the people had left well after 10:00 o'clock, Andy looked at me and said, "*So what's it all mean?*" How would you have answered that question? I looked at him and said, "*It means you're life will never be the same again and at the same time, you need to continue living your life.*"

I sat on the couch and shared some resources I brought for them and then I helped Ruth to plan the memorial mass, picking out songs and scriptures. Before I left Thursday night I went up to Kyle's room with Joe and prayed for Kyle, the Shapiro family, and for that physical space. On Friday I drove back to Needham for the visiting hours at the funeral home. 1,200 people came to visit the family until 10:00 at night, some folks waiting for up to three hours. Yesterday, Jill and I drove back up again for the service that I participated in. Over 700 people packed the church, so many of them heartbroken, confused, shocked young people.

As we drove from the church to the cemetery the procession went by their house, past Needham High School and the baseball field Kyle played on and at his position of shortstop someone had placed a bouquet of flowers. Back at the church for the

reception, my friend Joe said to me, *“I’ve been thinking, barring a catastrophe, this is the worse I’m ever going to feel in my life.”*

Through it all Ruth and Andy were gracious, caring, and thoughtful, concerned for everyone else and I couldn’t help thinking of today’s passage from Acts 11. In Acts 11 the new followers of Jesus in the city of Antioch are encouraged by Barnabas to **remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion**. What would that look like in your life? What areas are you doing well at being true to the Lord? In what areas do you need the Lord’s help in being more faithful?

Acts 11:26 tells us it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians, a term that, although eventually the accepted name for the followers of Jesus the Christ, occurs only three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28). The third reference is 1 Peter 4:16, *“Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.”*

Watching Andy and Ruth in the depth of their suffering I thought, *“If they can remain true to the Lord through an experience as crushing as this, if they can hold on to and give thanks for their faith in the midst of this tragedy, how much more should I be able to remain faithful with the small challenges in my life that shrink to utter insignificance compared to this devastating event?”*

As we begin Holy Week, I hope we will take a few moments in these days to ponder what Jesus endured in remaining faithful and true to God for our sake. By presenting Jesus as the long awaited fulfillment of scripture and the true son of David, Matthew hopes that by next Sunday we will answer the question, *“Who is this?”* by saying what the centurion who witnessed the crucifixion said,

“Truly this man was God’s Son!”

No matter what heartache or challenges you are facing today, I pray the Spirit of God will give us the courage, faith, and strength to live as if we believe Jesus is God’s son and may we follow him faithfully wherever he leads us.

Palm Sunday: Remaining True to the Lord Matthew 21:1-11, Acts 11:19-26

When we read the Bible it is helpful to look at the questions being asked because often they are the questions the author wants us to answer. For example, in Matthew 8:27 the disciples ask, *“What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?”* In Matthew 16:13 Jesus asks the disciples, *“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”* On Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem people were asking the question, *“Who is this?”* How we answer this question is incredibly important. Who is Jesus to you, who do you think he really is?

Throughout his Gospel Matthew is telling the story of Jesus and encouraging us to answer the question: what kind of man can say and do what Jesus says and does?

In Antioch, Barnabas encouraged the followers of Jesus to remain faithful or true to the Lord with steadfast devotion. How does that look in your life? What areas are you doing well at being true to the Lord? In what areas do you need the Lord’s help in being more faithful?