

What Did We See in Jesus?

Mark 11:1-11

The prophets of ancient Israel were very creative as they tried to make their message more visible in the community around them. When words seemed to have had little effect - when the people of the day closed their ears to the spoken word - the prophets resorted to dramatic actions, by attempting to put their message into a visible form, so that the people could not fail to grasp – not fail to see. The prophet Jeremiah, for instance, walked the city of Jerusalem with a wooden yoke on his neck, calling upon the people to submit to the ways of God. Jeremiah warned those who promise an easy peace, a peace without submission, that they would only find the wooden yoke replaced by an iron yoke. The prophet Amos used the vision of a plumb line as a standard against which the people will be measured and judged. And Hosea married Gomer, a prostitute, and although she leaves him after bearing three children probably not his own, Hosea publicly takes her back, portraying for all to see the incredible depths of God's forgiving and redeeming love...A visual message.

It is in this same way, in this same prophetic tradition that Jesus chooses to enter the city of Jerusalem on the day we call "Palm Sunday". It is a very dramatic action... with Jesus carefully planning his entry into the city to convey a spiritual truth. Jesus could have stayed away. In fact, the disciples urged Jesus to avoid the city, convinced that entering Jerusalem was extremely dangerous. At the very least, they most likely advised Jesus to enter the city by night - quietly and unnoticed.

And yet Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem during the day while the city was packed with extremely enthusiastic Jewish pilgrims who journeyed to the Temple for the celebration of the Passover. So, Jesus chooses to enter the city in a way that makes a statement – a visual statement - about the nature of his ministry.

While the crowds yearn for a messiah, a savior, who would overthrow the hated Romans and restore Jerusalem to a position of glory and honor...the entry of Jesus

asserts/demonstrates that he would rule in peace. Rather than riding a stallion, symbol of military might and conquest, Jesus rides a donkey, symbol of a leader who comes peacefully.

Even so, the crowd goes wild. Rumors spread wildly...could this Jesus really be the Messiah? Their distant hope becomes an expectation with the crowds lining the roadside roaring their jubilation.

Some begin to spread their garments on the road before Jesus, a gesture of respect - appropriate for a king or a mighty prophet. The waving of branches, the shouts of joy - these further demonstrate the frantic/frenzied hope that a new day is dawning for the people of Israel...

Yet, how quickly things changed. Within days, that same crowd has now had time to ponder their actions...and many begin to question, "What did we ever see in this Jesus?" Surely the first act of our coming Messiah would be to openly and boldly confront the despised Roman oppressors. But Jesus saves his confrontation for...the religious leaders of his own people.

Jesus comes speaking not of rebellion, but of love - love even for the enemy. The crowd is ready for action - and Jesus speaks of a prayerful life. While the crowd thirsts for vengeance - Jesus proclaims forgiveness and the possibility of new life. The crowd is eager to lift the sword against oppression - but Jesus instead speaks of compassion and mercy and grace, even suggesting that those very qualities might well be shared with the hated Romans..."What did we see in Jesus?" This is the question reeling in the hearts and minds of many, in the aftermath of the Palm Sunday events...

The people recognized something special, something unique, about Jesus - but Jesus didn't fit their preconceived notions of how the Messiah ought to act. "What did we see in Jesus"? They didn't know what to make of one who, in spite of his commanding

presence, didn't talk of power through force, but instead talked of power that comes through emptying oneself; taking the form of a servant; dying to self in order to find genuine life. The crowd didn't know what to make of one who embraces a different kind of peace...peace that comes from a recognition that love, and love alone, can meet and master greed and lust and hatred.

Well, the crowd hardly knew what to make of one who challenges them...who challenges us to embrace a love so potent that...in place of vengeance, we can turn the other cheek and go the extra mile in relationships. Jesus speaks of a love so powerful that it can lead us to face the full fury of hatred, alienation, bitterness, and loathing with the prayer, "God, forgive them, for they do not understand what they are doing." It is a love so transforming that it empowers us to confront life - and death - with a spirit of trust: "Gracious God, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Jesus not only challenges his followers to put on this new way of living. Even more, Jesus models this lifestyle himself. Jesus meant what he taught, and he put into practice that which he preached, even when he understood that many would turn away, convinced that too much was being demanded of them.

"It's just not the way things are done!" Many in the Palm Sunday crowd said it, as they pondered the teachings and example of Jesus...And who among us has not said or thought something similar, as we have considered the call of Christ to follow in paths of peace and self-giving love? We fear that too much is being required of us. All this talk of loving enemies and praying for those who would persecute us - it just doesn't make sense in our kind of world. And, at one level, it's true, for Jesus is talking about - and modeling - a life that in many ways is shocking. It's a lifestyle so different from the one we are accustomed to that we can only dimly imagine it in its rough outline.

Jesus came, that our world - and individuals within it - might experience healing. But the kind of healing Jesus offers is far from superficial. It's not simply a matter of appeasing us, of calming us, of suggesting that things will somehow turn out all right if only we make a few minor adjustments in how we live. No, Jesus comes to usher in a whole new way of living, an utterly new perspective towards life, an entirely new way of seeing and experiencing life.

What do we see in Jesus? During these weeks of Lent, as we consider anew the One who serves as the guide for our journey of faith, the One who comes among us as suffering servant, prince of peace, source of compassion, and finally as crucified savior - what have we seen? Have we encountered afresh/anew the One who would turn our customary patterns of living - our perspective towards life upside down - or, more accurately, right side up? Are we prepared to embrace a love and a peace so transforming that never again will we be satisfied with business as usual? As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews implores us, shall we not run the race for which we are entered, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends on from start to finish? Amen.