

## **Who Is This?**

### **Matthew 21:1-11**

Have you ever played “Guess Who”? You know, the game where you come up behind someone and reach around to cover their eyes, then ask “Guess Who?” Little children love to play this game, especially when they are correct in their guess, but by the time they get a little older that simple game loses some of its appeal.

In today’s Scripture reading about Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, it would appear that Jesus is playing a game of “Guess who?” We read, “When he had come into Jerusalem, all the city was stirred up, saying, ‘Who is this?’” Just who is this Jesus?

This question speaks volumes about 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?” Why did the crowd turn so quickly from welcome to condemnation?

An answer to that question might be found by looking at how the people responded to the question, “Who is this?” Everybody was looking for something different in Jesus, and most were disappointed in who he really was.

The crowd, having heard about Jesus' many miracles, the most recent being the raising of Lazarus, were looking for a miracle working Jesus. His teachings were easier to understand than the obtuse teachings from the religious leaders. People were attracted to him because he was dynamic in his teaching. It certainly didn't hurt that he put the Pharisees in their place! But of all of Jesus' qualities the crowds loved, they loved him best as a miracle worker. They had seen him healing the lame, the blind and the sick, and they wanted more. When they did not find the miracle working Jesus, they were disappointed.

The Pharisees had an entirely different take on Jesus. They wanted a ritual Jesus. They believed the most important part of religion wasn't to be found in how they believed or prayed, but in how they dressed and washed and ate. They feared that their Jewish culture would be overtaken by the Roman culture they had been subjected to for so long. So, they focused on the hundreds of little details that kept them distinctly Jewish. They believed that these rituals were what would keep them pure and unique. But Jesus came preaching that to have a true relationship with God required faith in God Himself and personally maintaining a high ethical standard. 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.

The Zealots among the crowd were looking for yet a different Jesus. They wanted a military Jesus. The Zealots were radicals who were ready to use force, even terrorism, to overthrow the oppressive hand of the Roman government. These Jewish patriots expected Jesus to take up a sword and call his followers to arms at any moment. They clearly wanted Jesus to be the military leader they believed the Messiah would be. When Jesus came to Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple by force, they must have whispered to one another that now was the time. But when Jesus responded to the question of whether or not to pay taxes to the Roman Empire by saying, “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”, he disappointed the Zealots.

Who was Jesus for the Disciples? They were looking for a victorious Jesus. Early on in his ministry, it was exciting for the disciples to see the crowds growing around him. As his popularity grew, so did their dreams of grandeur for themselves. They wondered aloud about who would sit at his right hand when he came into his kingdom. While they could see the glamor of his ministry, they were not able to see the cost. When Simon Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ they had been waiting for, the disciples expected that Jesus and his message would be accepted by all Jews. Yet for all the excitement, Jesus repeatedly spoke of his impending death. He spoke not only of his death, but he told his disciples that they, too, would suffer persecution. He modeled a life of a

suffering servant, a far cry from a victorious Messiah. Taking up a cross to follow Jesus, was a disappointment to them.

Each of these groups were in the crowd that first Palm Sunday, each with their own ideas of who this Jesus was. Waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna,” they thought they were finally getting what they wanted – more miracles, a military takeover of Jerusalem, or a Jesus rising in victory over the naysayers. Unlike the others, the Pharisees didn’t want anything from Jesus except for him to go away. They hung around hoping to catch him up in some way and so turn the crowd against him. All of these groups would eventually be disappointed by Jesus.

When we look closely at the dynamics in play on that first Palm Sunday, are we really surprised at the Friday outcome? The Triumphal Entry was a grand celebration, a parade, perhaps a protest, but underneath we find the roots of the crucifixion. Jesus was aware that what the crowd saw as a triumphal entry, was really a funeral procession – his funeral procession. Jesus knew that the shouts of “Hosanna” ringing in his ears would shortly turn to calls of “Crucify him!”

For us today, the real meaning of Palm Sunday can be found in that same question asked by each of the groups, “Who is this? Who is Jesus?” This question is just as important to us today as it was to those gathered on that Palestinian hillside as Jesus entered Jerusalem - “Who

is this?” Who is the Jesus you are looking for – a miracle worker, a keeper of rituals, a military leader, or a victorious Jesus?

Phillip Yancey begins his book entitled, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, by saying, “I first got acquainted with Jesus when I was a child, singing ‘Jesus Loves Me’ in Sunday school, addressing bedtime prayers to ‘Dear Lord Jesus,’ watching Bible club teachers move cutout figures across a flannel graph board. I associated Jesus with Kool-Aid and sugar cookies and gold stars for good attendance.” This Jesus, he said, was a lot like Mr. Rogers.

When Yancey began to watch films about Jesus, he found that the actors often portrayed Him in stereotypical, serene fashion. Yancey says, “In older Hollywood films about Jesus, he recites his lines evenly and without emotion. He strides through life as the one calm character among a cast of flustered extras. Nothing rattles him. He dispenses wisdom in flat, measured tones. He is, in short, the Prozac Jesus”.

There is a song from the 1960’s movie, *Cool Hand Luke* about a plastic Jesus:

“Well, I don’t care if it rains or freezes,  
Long as I have my plastic Jesus  
Riding on the dashboard of my car  
I could go a hundred miles an hour

Long as I got the Almighty Power  
Glued up there with my fuzzy dice.”

Who is this? Do we worship the plastic Jesus or the Prozac Jesus? Do we want our Jesus to be a Mr. Rogers kind of Jesus so that he will not be a threat to us? The problem with all these versions of Jesus is that he is so much more. If we are looking for any of those, we will be disappointed too. But note that the reason we are disappointed is that we are looking for the wrong kind of Jesus.

There is a story about a woman who each time she meets someone claiming to be an atheist, she asks, “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 is true of Jesus. All these people looked for the wrong thing in Jesus and were disappointed. But when we really see Jesus, the real deal Jesus, we will be amazed and certainly not disappointed at what we find.

Jesus had already played the Guess Who before with the Disciples at Caesarea Philippi when he asked, “Who do men say that I am?” They responded that some folks think he is John the Baptist. Others say Elijah the prophet. Some say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Then Jesus asks

the most pertinent question, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter blurts out, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

Written after the Resurrection, the writers of the New Testament could not say enough positive things about Jesus. Hear what these writers had to say about Who this Jesus is:

The writer of Colossians says,

He “is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation.  
For by him all things were created,  
in the heavens and on the earth,  
things visible and things invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers;  
all things have been created through him, and for him.  
He is before all things, and in him all things are held together.  
He is the head of the body, the assembly,  
who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead;  
that in all things he might have the preeminence.  
For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in him;  
and through him to reconcile all things to himself,  
by him, whether things on the earth, or things in the heavens,  
having made peace through the blood of his cross.”

(Colossians 1:15-20).

The writer of Hebrews says,

“God, having in the past spoken to the fathers through the prophets  
at many times and in various ways,  
has at the end of these days spoken to us by his Son,  
whom he appointed heir of all things,  
through whom also he made the worlds.  
His Son is the radiance of his glory,  
the very image of his substance,  
and upholding all things by the word of his power.”

(Hebrews 1:1-3).

From those early days until now the Christian community has affirmed that, “We have found in this person the light in our darkness, the way that has led us from death to life, the bread of life that nourishes us even now; we have found in this person the word and wisdom of God; we have found in this person the son of God, the promised Messiah; he is one with God, and we address him as “My Lord and my God.”

For us today, Jesus is the revelation of what life with God looks like. We are to be centered in God and filled with His Spirit, just as Jesus was in His earthly life. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, was and is the revelation of God to us.



Who is Jesus for us? Are we looking for a Savior? The true meaning of Holy Week, is that Jesus 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.” It really doesn’t matter what the crowds were looking for. It doesn’t matter what the Pharisees or the Zealots or the Disciples were looking for. The real meaning of Palm Sunday is between us and our God. What kind of Jesus are *we* looking for? The question is still asked today, “Who is this?” Our answer makes all the difference.

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Based on a sermon by Dr. Mickey Anders

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