

## The Meaning of Jesus

Series: The Meaning of Jesus; Philippians 2: 5-11

With apologies to Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright, whose new book bears the title I am using for this sermon, the bottom line question of Christian faith is “What did Jesus Mean?” This is our question.

Today is Palm Sunday, the first day of what we call Holy Week. The festival of the Christian Church commemorates the events of Jesus’ passion and death in preparation for celebrating his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Probably the earliest Christian writing that became scripture was the passion narrative, beginning with Palm Sunday and moving through the crucifixion. What better time to ask our question, “What did Jesus Mean?” anew than today?

The hymn (sacred poem) Paul quotes in Philippians 2 probably represents a very early Christian understanding of the meaning of the Christ event. As we consider this text in the context of worship, what better place to ask our question?

We’ll examine Palm Sunday first, then study the ancient hymn text from Philippians. Through this, we’ll begin to touch the meaning of the passion narratives. Our guide in this will be the words uttered by John the Baptist when Jesus came to him for baptism, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”.

That first Palm Sunday. What was going on? What was Jesus doing? As the gospel writers retell this event from the perspective of 40-60 years of history, did they offer an additional understanding of what was happening. What does Palm Sunday have to teach us?

Set just before the start of the Jewish Passover festival, Palm Sunday was Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Realistically, this entry was not all that triumphant. Jesus was not coming with power and glory. It was probably Roman governor Pilate, who was entering the city from the other side accompanied by Roman guard and riding a war horse, who had a triumphant entry. Jesus was coming in the back door, riding a young donkey, with a motley crew of followers and peasants waving grass at him. The shouts of *Hosanna* might well have been perceived by an outsider as incredibly ironic if not satirical. Here comes the new king of Israel, the son of David, as the focal point of a comic parade.

What was Jesus doing? Clearly, Jesus knew the words of the Hebrew prophets including Zechariah who had written

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
Triumphant and victorious is he,  
Humble and riding on a donkey,  
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Among other roles, Jesus saw himself in the line of those prophets of Israel. They were visionaries who claimed to speak to the people and their leaders a Word from God. Sometimes, they spoke through parables that were acted out. This happened several times in Jewish history. Palm Sunday seems to be such an acted out parable on the part of Jesus. He is indeed saying, I am the one who is coming, but coming in humility and lowliness – not power, not triumphant in the way of this world.

The point of this story is not lost on us today. The new age of God, the kingdom, is not one of Roman power. It is not one of religious coercion. The new creation of God comes in surprising honesty, humility, and grace. It came at the painful end of a Roman cross and it comes for all of us through the valley of the shadow of death. That's what Jesus was doing that first Palm Sunday.

The biblical gospels, even before being translated into all sorts of languages over many centuries, were the product of forty years of oral and written development. Remembered events from Jesus' life and remembered teachings were told and retold among believers at the same time they were trying to understand the nature of Jesus' post-Easter presence with them. During that time, some of the teachings and remembered events were written down and circulated among churches. These written stories were retold and shared among believers in very different cultures and languages. Finally, the anonymous gospel writers pulled together the sayings and remembrances into a cohesive format, in a new literary form called *gospel*.

During that first century of Christian faith, there was tremendous change taking place. Originally, Jesus' followers were all Jewish or what are called God-fearers – non-Jews who admired and followed many of the Jewish teachings and practices. For two generations after Jesus' death, there was conflict and tension within Judaism about the meaning of Jesus. In the year 70, the city of Jerusalem and its Temple were utterly destroyed by the Roman army.

The fallout from that event forever changed the nature of the Jewish faith and led swiftly to the absolute break, and ultimate hostility, between Jews and Christians. It just so happens that the earliest of the four biblical gospels, Mark, was being pulled together right around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. As that gospel writer retold the story of Palm Sunday, he had another layer of meaning to add.

In the year 66, just four years earlier, a Jewish messiah had succeeded in leading Jewish forces to throw Rome out of Jerusalem. In celebration of that event, this Messiah led a triumphant procession into Jerusalem. Complete with war horses and all the equipment of battle and victory, the people lined the streets and celebrated "God's Messiah". They may well have waved branches and shouted "Hosanna to the new king, the son of David".

By the writing of Mark's gospel, which served as the basis for much of the other gospels' material, the contrast between this messiah and Jesus was stark, challenging, and powerful. The Christian message, post-70, was in synch with Jesus' original message: God's kingdom is not one of earthly power and victory. It is a kingdom of transformation and new life.

What does Palm Sunday say to us today – to us who live in a Rome-like land of power and influence. The message is the same. God's new creation still comes by transformation. It still comes in surprising humility. The extent to which we place our ultimate trust in the trappings of power, success, money, status, and weapons of security is the extent to which we miss the quiet little parade taking place on the other side of the tracks.

The early Christians probably had several worship songs. The text of one of them is: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus". The transformation God's Spirit brings leads to new patterns of thinking and acting. We become more like Jesus. We learn to face the world with the mind of Christ because the presence of Christ lives within us. It's not just Jesus' example or following the teachings. We think and act differently because there has been a fundamental change inside us.

"Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited," something to be grasped and clung to. It was not Christ's equality with God that seemed amazing in this song. It was that he did not cling to it. He did not clutch it. That

was out of keeping for the gods of that time who jealously clung to the God status. That was completely out of character for the Caesars of that time who clutched at god status. Jesus turned it loose. He “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness”.

Jesus, as a man, did not wear his intimate closeness to God as a badge of pride. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross, the most shameful and painful death known in that day. As a result of Jesus walking the path of obedience and humility, through the darkness of death, he found the way of resurrected life.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

The image portrayed here comes from ancient Israel’s annual New Year’s celebration when Yahweh was ceremonially installed as the true king of Israel. Jesus is pictured in that role, placed there by God (Yahweh), to receive blessing, honor, glory and power. Our New Testament hymn is saying that the risen Jesus now lives intimately in God. He has shown us the pathway to follow. Jesus lives in us and we, too, live intimately in God.

This is the meaning of Jesus -- that, through Jesus, we are in intimate relationship with God. So, what about this *sin* thing? What is sin and how does Jesus take it away?

What is sin? Judging by a quick trip through Google, sin has something to do with sex and is a very popular way to sell movies. I’m not sure how Jesus would take that away.

Actually, sin stands for anything that moves us away from intimate relationship with God. We are in “sin” when we are not one with God. The basis of our faith is that Jesus showed us the way to oneness with God. Jesus gives us the ability to be in that oneness. Jesus actually helps us draw more and more into that oneness.

When we say, “Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world,” we mean he draws us closer to God. We have come to know God more intimately through Jesus’ life, through his ministry of teaching and healing, through his dying and his rising at Easter, and through his abiding presence with us and in us. Through Christ, God makes it possible for all of us to be “at one” with God. As we move through Holy Week and enter into the passion of Jesus, let us give thanks for the love of God made startlingly clear in Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.