

What Was Jesus Thinking?

Matthew 21:1-11

You know the story, right? Palm Sunday? Jesus' triumphal entry? Does it raise any questions for you? I have three questions. Actually, the first question – “What happened?” – is not really a question. Just read the story and you'll know what was going on. The second question is “Why?” Why did there need to be a triumphal entry? Finally, the third question, and also the sermon title, is -- “What was Jesus thinking?”

What happened in the story of Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem? Well, there are clear details and some that are not quite so clear. There is that whole pre-story story of the disciples bringing two donkeys – a donkey and a foal – to Jesus who was waiting out at the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem. Then, there is the parade itself. We call the parade triumphant, but it wasn't -- not really. There was just one float in the parade, just Jesus riding on a donkey. The large crowd was, I suspect, not really that large. Maybe there were a hundred people? Maybe there were only a few dozen? And so this motley parade entered Jerusalem through the back door.

This brings up a second question – “why?” Why a parade and why this parade? What was it all about? The answer to this question lies in two generations. The first generation of meaning has to do with the gospel audience – those who first heard the good news of Jesus according to Matthew, Mark, or Luke. The gospels were written some thirty-five to fifty years after Jesus' death.

Those who heard them around the year 70CE or later would have seen in Jesus' entry reference to another more recent event. This event was the triumphant entry of Simon bar Giora, a Jewish leader in the first of the Jewish-Roman wars. Ultimately, these wars ended very badly for the Jews. In 66CE, bar Giora defeated the Roman occupying forces and entered Jerusalem triumphant. His was a parade of military triumph and success after a violent rebellion. By 70CE, however, the Romans returned and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. The gospels reminded those people that new age the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus and made visible in Jesus was not like the kingdoms of this world. It was not like Rome.

There is a grand reference in Revelation 7:9, some decades later, featuring the image of a multitude of saints from all nations surrounding heaven's throne and waving palm branches. They were singing to the risen and triumphant Christ, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

There is a second generation of meaning to Palm Sunday found at the time of the event itself. Jesus' triumphal entry proclaims that true power and victory belong not to those with military might who ride triumphantly on war horses accompanied by many soldiers. It belongs not to those who hold religious authority and cooperate, even passively, in the oppression of widows and orphans. True victory, power, and truth belong to the Lamb of God riding on a donkey and to everyday people waving palm branches and throwing cloaks on the road for Jesus.

Jesus was entering Jerusalem at the time of Passover for an assault on the city and the temple. The parade served to signal that the time had come. Jesus had arrived to attack the Temple, not with military weapons, but with symbolic actions and powerful words. He drove out the moneychangers and taught that the Temple was to be destroyed, then raised up three days later. Jesus went into the lion's den, the seat of religious power in the Temple and the center of Roman provincial control in Jerusalem. He did it at the time of a highly charged religious festival – Passover. Feelings of revolution were everywhere. Anxiety was high for just about everyone. Jesus entered into a most dangerous place in a most sensitive situation and spoke challenging words. He portrayed himself as the true representative of Yahweh and it cost him his life.

This brings us to the third question: “what was Jesus thinking?” What were you thinking, Jesus? The triumphant entry on that first Palm Sunday, gives us clear insight into Jesus' vision of the nature of the in-breaking Kingdom of God. What was Jesus envisioning? How is that vision important for us? Clearly, we don't know what Jesus was thinking. This sermon is not an effort to get inside the psyche of the man Jesus. It is an attempt to touch the vision behind his purpose for an entry parade, and beyond that to Holy week, Good Friday, and the cross.

What was Jesus thinking to enter Jerusalem this way and this time? His vocational task was to bring to Israel an understanding of the wisdom of the word of Yahweh God. I am convinced that Jesus did what he did in order to reveal the nature of the kingdom of God, what the first-century world would be like if God were king instead of Caesar.

Jesus' message was that God's reign was now being revealed in this world so long dominated by Caesar. In Caesar's world, peace came at the end of a sword. Peace meant the absence of war through domination, military might, cruel repression of dissent, and enslavement by servitude to Rome. Poverty and brutality were the marks of the peace of Rome.

Jesus saw the coming kingdom of God firmly grounded in Israel's covenant tradition with God. The prophet Zechariah wrote, “Rejoice greatly, daughter Zion. Shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem. Look, your king comes to you humble and riding on a donkey.” This is what Jesus was doing. The Kingdom comes this way, not with trappings of power or show of force. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to show clearly that God's new age had come not in the might of Rome, not in the tradition of the Temple, but in ordinary people waving palms and spreading cloaks – and in the death Jesus would accomplish on the cross.

What was Jesus thinking? He was thinking the time had come on his journey to act. It was time to bring issues to a head. To do that, it was necessary to ride into the dragon's jaws and dance. He knew that ideas and theologies don't mean much without incarnation, without them being lived out in human lives. I have an odd question to ask at this point. Are you a basketball fan? Do you like the tournament with its seedings and pairings? Who will your favorite team play? Will they win? So often, one team is clearly better on paper, but the funny thing is they still have to play the games. The winners are still determined on the court. The essence of sport is in the contest itself.

Theology finds its truest meaning only when it moves from proposition to performance. It is said that “proper theology transforms proposition into performance so that the performance is the

proper proposition.” (K. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama*) What Jesus was thinking was that all the teachings, the stories, and the healings were meaningless without action to confront power with the truth of God’s kingdom.

Jesus *performed* his theology by moving into Jerusalem, by walking his road with clear purpose, faith, and courage. Maybe he was envisioning something else as well. I believe he was thinking about you and me and others like us -- maybe not literally, but knowing that the way of his journey is also the way of ours. The path to new life goes through the valley of the shadow of death.

A memory of Kreisler once
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.
I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art’s neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.
So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercier light of the thorns’ halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still,
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.
(R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems* 1945-1990)

Holy week begins today. It is more than a remembrance of the last week of Jesus’ life or of his journey to the cross. The invitation Jesus extends to you and me is the challenge to live our theology – to transform what we believe from proposition to performance. Christ who lives in and among us today invites each of us, and challenges each on of us, to walk our journey toward *Jerusalems* of our lives. We’ll do that by discovering our passions and our calling, by using our gifts and our talents to make God’s kingdom visible and real in our lives and in the life of this community. Let us be on that journey with clarity of purpose, the journey of discovery and ministry, so that God’s reign will be seen and known here in Jesus’ name.