

Palm Sunday
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Faces in the Crowd

Matthew 21

Pastor Bryan Clark

Wherever you land in terms of your feelings about the war in Iraq, one thing we could all agree on is that the faces in the crowd currently in Baghdad are very complex and very diverse. There are some who are celebrating what they believe to be liberation. There are others who have fear and anger in their eyes. Out of the shadows might come somebody ready to give the soldier an embrace, or somebody with explosives strapped to them ready to kill. The reactions are complex and diverse.

If you think about that and go back 2000 years ago, it wasn't that much different in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday when Jesus entered into the city. There were those people who erupted into celebration because they believed their liberation was at hand. There were others who had hatred in their eyes, and all they could think of was how to get rid of Jesus. The situation would have been very chaotic. This would have been the time of the Jewish annual Passover, which meant people would have come from all over into Jerusalem—probably in the neighborhood of two million people packing their way into Jerusalem and the outskirts. It would have been literally wall-to-wall people, so this would have been a very chaotic event as Jesus entered into the city.

As we study how the people responded, there are questions that come to my mind. For example, what did these people think was going to happen? What was really motivating their celebration—their praise and their worship? What did they think Jesus was going to do? And then, what was it that caused many of the same people who were crying out, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” to cry out less than a week later, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”? That was a dramatic change in just a matter of a few days. And what about those in the crowd who had literally seen the very miracles of Jesus and yet responded with anger, wanting nothing more than to somehow eliminate Jesus from the scene?

I want to take a look at some of the faces in the crowd. I think the faces that were in that crowd 2000 years ago are some of the same faces that are in the crowd today, and we can learn from them.

The events of Palm Sunday are fairly familiar to us as we look at Matthew 21. In verse 4, Matthew reminds us this was a fulfillment of the prophecy from Zechariah the prophet (Zechariah 9:9). Matthew says, “This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet, ‘Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’” ’ ”

Now, we don't tend to think of a donkey as being a terribly noble creature. But *they* did. This was a very kingly entrance into the city. Also, the idea of taking their coats, their jackets, their cloaks, and putting them on the ground and on the donkey, and taking the palm branches and waving them—all those things were symbolic of their belief that this was a king who was entering the city. Those were things that were appropriate to do for the entrance of a king.

But it still raises the question: What did these people think Jesus was going to do? What did they expect to happen? What was this the beginning of, in their mind? You find a clue to that starting in verse 9. The crowd was going ahead of Jesus, and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD; Hosanna in the highest!” The word *Hosanna* means “Save now” or what we might think of as “Deliver us.”

And then they quoted, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD.” Where did they get that phrase? Was that just something they made up on the spur of the moment? No, it actually comes from Psalm 118, which we know was a psalm that was very familiar to the Hebrew people. It was a psalm that was often used at the various festivals, and we know that it was used at Passover. It had been used for generations, for decades, for hundreds of years, during the time of the Passover. It was often sung antiphonally—which means one group would have sung one paragraph, then it would have been echoed by another group, and back and forth it would have gone. Some even think Jesus may have sung this Himself in the Upper Room as they celebrated Passover together. So the people would have been very familiar with this psalm. The psalm would have connected with the celebration of Passover, in that it is a psalm of deliverance and hope. It's a psalm of victory. It's a very positive, hope-filled psalm.

It's important to read Psalm 118 and listen for the messages of hope and victory and deliverance, because that is what was in the minds of the people as Jesus entered into the city.

Psalm 118:

Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Oh let Israel say, “His lovingkindness is everlasting.” Oh let the house of Aaron say, “His lovingkindness is everlasting.” Oh let those who fear the LORD say, “His lovingkindness is everlasting.”

From my distress I called upon the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a large place. The LORD is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me? The LORD is for me among those who help me; therefore I will look with satisfaction on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.

All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off. They surrounded me, yes, they surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off. They surrounded me like bees; they were extinguished as a fire of thorns; in the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off. You pushed me violently so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation.

The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly. The right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly. I will not die, but live, and tell of the works of the LORD. The LORD has disciplined me severely, but He has not given me over to death.

Open to me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous will enter through it. I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me; and You have become my salvation.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. This is the LORD'S doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O LORD, do save, we beseech You; O LORD, we beseech You, do send prosperity!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD; we have blessed you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and He has given us light; bind the festival sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I give thanks to You; You are my God, I extol You. Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Verse 26, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD” is, of course, the verse that these people quoted; but what they had in their mind was the entire psalm. Psalm 118 is a psalm of victory and a psalm of deliverance. They were remembering back to the Passover as being the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt. Now they believed that *finally* after decades of oppression—after 400 years of the Jewish people being oppressed by one nation after another—it was time that the King would enter into Jerusalem and He would set them free. And they were absolutely ecstatic!

But as the days passed, nothing happened. What they thought would happen wasn't happening. And in less than a week, Jesus was arrested and it became obvious to them: *Jesus will not deliver us; Jesus will not set us free from the oppression of Rome.* Everything that they thought was going to happen, they now believed would *not* happen. They went on this emotional roller coaster from absolute jubilation...to their anger and bitterness from decades of opposition being vented at Jesus like poisonous venom. They went from “Hosanna!”...to “Crucify Him!”

Just imagine what it would be like for those people in Baghdad today, if they believe with all their heart that they are being set free, and suddenly Saddam and his army would come in and take out the coalition and once again establish themselves as power. Just imagine the emotional roller coaster of that, and you have some idea of where these Jewish people were at. They thought their hour of liberation had come. And they were so disappointed, that their celebration turned to anger.

This next week there will be hundreds of thousands of people who will not set foot in a church for the same reason. And there will be hundreds of thousands of people who will attend a church on Easter Sunday, but what will be in their heart is anger and bitterness at God. Somewhere along the way they were convinced that if they attend church, if they give their money, if they serve somewhere, if they allow God to come in and be a part of their lives, then the deal is that God will turn around and make everything okay. They have the idea that, *He's going to make my marriage okay; He's going to make sure that I always have money in the bank; He's going to make sure that my kids don't die; He's going to make sure that my wife doesn't get cancer—He's going to just take care of everything.* They believe that's the deal if they allow God into their life. It's kind of a trade-off. It's approaching God from the standpoint of a consumer, deciding if this looks like a good deal. Maybe they heard the message from a preacher that was preaching health, wealth and prosperity, saying that if you come to God that's what it is going to be.

But now the years have passed, and that's *not* what it's been. It's been very hard and it's been one trial after another. And finally something pushed them over the edge and they find themselves feeling like God ripped them off. They think God didn't keep His end of the deal, and right now they want nothing to do with God.

The problem in the first century was that those people didn't understand what they really needed. What they *wanted* was to be delivered from the oppression of Rome. But what they *needed* was to be delivered from the condemnation of sin. What Jesus needed to do to set them free was different than what they expected.

Think of it now 2000 years later. Had Jesus merely set them free from the oppression of Rome, that would have lasted for a couple of decades, only to be eternally lost. Instead, Jesus went to the cross to die for their sins, so that while they remained under the oppression of Rome they might be set free *forever*.

There is no doubt that in my heart what I want when I enter into a relationship with God is for everything to work out. I want some guarantees: I want to know my kids aren't going to get sick; I want to know my wife isn't going to die; I want to know there's going to be money in the bank. I want to know that everything's going to be fine. But that isn't really what I *need*; that's just what I *want*. My greatest need is that I need my sins forgiven, because apart from Christ I am condemned to hell forever. So rather than God just slapping a Band-Aid over the struggles and trials of this world, He paid the ultimate price that I might experience paradise forever.

You need to understand there is no place in the Bible that we're promised when we come to faith in Christ, that we will have health, wealth and prosperity. There's no place where the Bible promises that your children won't die. It doesn't promise that you won't get sick. It doesn't promise that things are going to be easy. As a matter of fact, Jesus was very honest. He said just the opposite: "You follow Me and it's going to be hard; it's going to be tough." This world isn't an easy place to live—this is a battle zone—and Jesus said you might as well know that. The only thing harder is trying to do it without Him.

When Jesus died on that cross, He paid the price for our sin. Those who by faith trust in Jesus' death as payment for their sin will experience the forgiveness of sin. When we make that commitment of faith, Jesus comes to live within us and fill that void, that emptiness. But more than that, there is the promise of eternal paradise. That is our hope. That is yet to come.

But there was another face in the crowd that day, a face that responded very unusually to what Jesus did. Looking back to Matthew 21, not only were there those who misunderstood what Jesus came to do and were very disappointed, but there was the religious crowd. Look at verses 14-15: "And the blind and the lame came to Him [*to Jesus*] in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant." They became angry. But notice how carefully Matthew words that: "...when they saw the wonderful things that he [*Jesus*] had done." In other words, anyone with the slightest degree of common sense would have said, "That's wonderful! The blind were made to see; the lame were made to walk. That's wonderful!" And yet, those words spoken to this religious crowd just made them angry.

Just shortly before this, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. These people all knew that, because that story had spread like wildfire into Jerusalem. How could they see something so obvious, so evident, so wonderful...and instead of responding with jubilation simply respond with anger? It's because they were so steeped, so entrenched in their religion that no longer did it matter to them what was true. It just mattered to them to hold ground; it mattered to them to hold power. And Jesus was a competitor!

Look at Matthew 21: 42-46. Jesus Himself quotes Psalm 118:

Jesus said to them [*the religious leaders*], "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; this came about from the LORD, and it is marvelous in our eyes' [*that's a quote again from Psalm 118*]? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a people producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. And when they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.

Jesus was the fulfillment of Psalm 118. He was the Cornerstone that they rejected. Yet He became the Chief Cornerstone of the Kingdom of God. Now in those days a cornerstone wasn't a nice little stone that had a date in it. It was a massive stone that was the anchor of the building, and everything else came down and settled into this cornerstone. You didn't have multiple cornerstones. You had one. And Jesus was it!

Religious people don't like that. They've got their religious thing in place; they've got their system. And that's what they believe. We live in a very interesting world right now. It's very religious; it's very spiritual. One of the words of the day is "tolerance." Yet, in my opinion, there has never been a time in the history of the United States that has been more intolerant to the message of Jesus Christ than right now. People can gather together from the religions of the world and they can talk religion and everybody's fine—until the gospel of Jesus Christ comes up. Then it all changes, and people get very upset and very angry. You see their faces getting red and they're offended. They're very intolerant of the message of Jesus Christ.

It's because of a belief called pluralism. Pluralism is the belief that everyone has their own religion and their own religious system, and everyone has their own way to God but eventually all roads lead to God. And the belief is that Christians need to learn how to "play with the other kids on the playground." The problem is, that isn't the message of Christianity. Christianity is not an all-inclusive religion; it is an *exclusive* belief in a Savior.

Jesus said it Himself just a matter of days after the Triumphal Entry. When He stood before the disciples in the Upper Room, He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). You cannot find one place in the New Testament where Jesus said, "I am one of many ways to God."

In Acts chapter 4, when Peter was preaching to the religious leaders, he quoted Psalm 118 as well. Acts 4:8-12:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."

That is as clear as it gets. Peter goes back to Psalm 118 and he reminds them, "This is the Stone that you rejected. But the Stone that you rejected is the Stone that became the Cornerstone for the building of the Kingdom of God. And there is no other name by which people can be saved."

It's a very unpopular message in our culture today. Religious people get so entrenched in their religion that they no longer care what's true and they no longer pursue what's true. They reach a point where all they care about is defending their religion. All they care about is digging in.

You wonder, *How could these religious leaders have seen such wonderful things and it didn't phase them?* They were so determined to defend their religion that they no longer could see what was *obviously* true.

This isn't about whether you're a Berean or a Methodist or a Lutheran or a Catholic or a Protestant or a Muslim or a Buddhist. It's just about what's true. And it is an absolute tragedy when religion prohibits us from seeing what's true. One day when we stand before God, He's not going to pull out a card and say, "Let's see, were you a Methodist? Were you a Catholic? Were you a Muslim?" He's going to ask you one question, "What did you do with My Son?" That's all that's going to matter to Him: *What did you do with My Son?*

Yesterday morning we had a funeral here at the church for Julie Meyer. Matt and Julie Meyer have been leaders in the college ministry for years—both of them significant Kingdom builders. If I was God, I would not have taken Julie off the field—we don't have enough people like her. We need players like that. She was getting the job done. But God decided to take her home...34 years old...a three-year-old son. There are a lot of things about that we can't explain.

What if Matt and Julie had believed that the deal was, if they serve in the college ministry and if they pursue God, then God is going to turn around and make everything okay? If they believed that, then they got ripped off big time. But you know, Matt and Julie didn't believe that. If that was the case, today Matt would be filled with anger and bitterness, just like these people were in the first century—disappointed that God didn't keep His end of the bargain. But Matt knows the truth. Matt's a godly man and he knows that the promise was never that everything is going to be okay. The promise was never that your wife won't die of cancer. The promise was, "I will forgive your sin...I will prepare a place for you in heaven...I will give you what you need to go through whatever I take you through on this earth...and I promise you one day you'll be together forever."

That was the promise. And that's still the promise. Everything that God promised in Psalm 118 He will keep in His way and in His time. Ultimately what really matters is: What do we do with God's Son, who died on a cross that we might know forgiveness of sin, that we might dwell with Him forever in paradise?

Our Father, we're thankful that You gave Your Son to die on a cross that we might have life. Lord, it's a tough life, a life filled with struggles and pain and sorrow on this earth. But more than that, it's a life filled and energized with the very presence of Jesus Christ and a life that will last forever in paradise in Your presence.

Lord, I pray that You would give each one of us what we need to cut through the religious barriers to just understand what is really true. In Jesus' name, Amen.