

'Dashed Expectation Sunday'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

We are accustomed to seeing Palm Sunday as a time of great celebration as we focus on that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem with hundreds of thousands of people lining the road shouting "*Hosanna to the Son of David,*" and "*Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

The name 'Palm Sunday' comes from the thousands of branches people cut from palm trees and laid across Jesus' path or waved them in the air. As they celebrated then - so millions of Christians across the world celebrate today. Sadly, as they were totally deceived back then - so are many deceived today as we once again miss what was really happening here. In fact, I think we could rename Palm Sunday: 'Deception Sunday' or 'How Wrong Could we be Sunday.' But for the sake of this sermon I settled on 'Dashed Expectation Sunday.'

The most powerful message from that first Palm Sunday is not the one told in many sermons today. The real story tells a different tale. It tells us of the great expectations and shouts of '*Hosanna*' on Sunday, and the dashed expectations and shouts of '*Crucify Him!*' on Friday – and many of those came from the same people!

Palm Sunday is actually a sobering reminder about what happens to a group of religious people when you raise their expectations of a major triumph at the beginning of the week and by the end of the week see those expectations dashed so completely that even most of the inner circle of disciples end up denying, deserting, or betraying their Master. All this within days of this amazing celebration of the palms!

As for the crowds – well they turned very ugly very quickly and this hailed 'king' Jesus was handed over to the Romans to be executed. As we observe this incredible change of allegiance to and faith in Jesus, we need to realize from the outset that **Jesus did not come to meet our expectations - He came to meet our real need.** Jesus did not come to slay our foes and lift us high. Jesus came to serve and give His life as a ransom for all mankind because the real heart of the human dilemma is never our political problems or our social problems or our environmental problems or our personal and family problems ... our real problem is we need Jesus.

Jesus came as the Prince of Peace, not a warlord, but here's the irony - the crowds don't get it! When they read words like 'king', 'triumphant' and 'victorious' in the prophecies of Zechariah about Jesus, they interpret that the way they had for centuries. How wrong could they be!? They assume that their interpretation of those prophecies was Jesus' intention. So when everything takes a very different turn by Thursday night that week, the Palm Sunday disillusionment is profound. The truth is, Jesus did not come to be *that* kind of king - someone who would run the Romans out of town. He came to die on a cross even for the sins of the enemies of Israel.

Here's another interesting irony in the Palm Sunday story. The pilgrims coming to town with Jesus were singing the so-called Hallel psalms, those 'let's go up to Zion' songs, rather like the boy scout songs I used to sing when hiking, 'I love to go a wandering'. The Hallel psalms are full of 'Hosannas' which means *God saves*, and 'Hallelujahs' which means *praise Yahweh*. They are ancient praise songs and they would have sung these whether Jesus was coming into town with them or not. The phrase, '*blessed is he who comes (to Jerusalem) in the name of the Lord*' was what the pilgrims sang as they went up to Zion. But here it takes on a special poignancy because *this* time their king really has come to town.

This time the ultimate son of David really has arrived and the vast majority of them don't even know it, or if they did, they have a very different vision of what sort of king He will be. Jesus, from womb to tomb, from birth to death, did not come to meet our expectations of what a king should be like - He came to meet our deepest need - our need for salvation - our need for Him.

This is one reason why most of Jesus' disciples deserted, denied or betrayed Him. Some of them had hopes that Jesus, especially after cleansing the temple, would kick the Romans out of town and begin to rule as their earthly human King. Not so. In fact, Jesus actually predicted that in 40 years, the Jews who tried to establish God's Kingdom with a mad-made building at its centre, would witness the destruction of that building and be driven out of Jerusalem.

Jesus was right. In A.D. 70, exactly 40 years after His death, Jerusalem was torched and it became a pagan city! After the second Jewish revolt in the second century A.D. (which was also squashed by the Romans) no Jew was allowed anywhere near the ruined remains of their Temple until 1967.

When our expectations are wrong, we can be bitterly disappointed and for some of us, we cannot come back from there. Jesus bitterly disappointed both the hopeful crowd of pilgrims on Palm Sunday and His own disciples during what we now call Holy Week. When you dash peoples' highest hopes that severely it's no surprise that you end up on a cross by the end of the week!

Can you see those crowds worshipping our Lord? Can you hear them crying out, *"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! . . . Blessed is the King of Israel."* Jesus was asked to keep the crowd quiet but He said, *"If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."* It's a moment frozen in rapturous worship and praise. Some historians estimate that over a million people came to Jerusalem at that time. But something went horribly wrong. In just a few days, the tide of public opinion turned against Jesus. How could that be? Did Jesus take off with the Rabbi's wife? Did He steal from the coffers in the Temple? Did He assassinate the mayor or the emperor of Rome? Did He lie? No. He did nothing like that.

Was it a massive public propaganda campaign to sway the uneducated public away from this man on the donkey? No, they tried but the Scribes and Pharisees were silenced. Something went horribly wrong. They believed He was the King! They believed He had come to establish His earthly kingdom. Salvation was at hand. Brothers and sisters, **Jesus is never what we make Him. We are what Jesus makes us.**

What went wrong? Quite simply, we wanted Jesus to be Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy all wrapped up in one. Instead He was Jesus, the Christ, the suffering servant, the Lamb Who was slain. No longer just a prophet or a good guy, Jesus was and He is God incarnate and He came to fulfill the Kingdom purposes of God - not make life socially or politically comfortable for the people. The disciples and thousands of adoring palm branch wavers got it completely wrong that day all those years ago.

The Jesus they were supposedly following was a product of their own expectations, their own hopes, their skewed worldview and their flawed understanding of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. The real Jesus was still right in front their eyes, desperately desiring to enter their hearts and change those expectations. But they continued to worship a king they would never have – a king God refuses to be.

Their true King, their Lord, their Saviour, their Redeemer, their Deliverer was about to fulfill His mission as Messiah in a way nobody saw coming – but they should have. This was predicted many times over many years. But they still missed it!

I wonder how many times you and I miss Jesus when He's right in front of our faces; when He is right in the middle of our circumstances; when He is poised, ready to bring victory – but we are looking for something or someone different. More often than not, victory comes to us the same way it was secured by Jesus – through brokenness, submission, surrender and death. Death to our expectations, death to our hopes and desires, death to our vision of how Jesus *should* behave. When those flawed expectations finally die, then and only then can we accept how Jesus wants to be in our lives and the lives of those around us.

So on this 'Dashed Expectation Sunday' we need to ask God to give us the courage to accept that His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are far higher than our thoughts. We need the Holy Spirit to reveal to us afresh that the Jesus who started a global movement by getting Himself killed, is the same Jesus Who will turn up in unexpected ways in your life and mine and do things and say things we never anticipated and often never wanted. But will we trust Him? Will we even recognize His hand at work?

Well, if we follow the original Palm Sunday script – the answer is no. We will miss Him entirely and continue worshipping a Jesus of our own making – which is no Jesus at all. But if we embrace Jesus as He truly is, here and now, we will never be the same again. Our spiritual lives will be refreshed beyond measure. Our love for Him will be renewed. His Spirit will explode from deep within us where He has been quenched by all those expectations we pile on one another – most of which never came from God.

So at this unprecedented time in human history, during this global pandemic, what does our Jesus look like? Where is our Saviour today? What are our expectations of Him? Are we naively thinking we are somehow immune from this virus because of our faith? Some are thinking that. A prominent Christian in our nation said so only last week.

Perhaps we are thinking that Jesus has brought this pandemic upon us in judgement for our sin. Many are preaching that - in spite of us only being a week away from Easter where we are reminded that all judgement for all sin fell on Jesus and by God's grace we are set free in Christ from the penalty and power of sin. But we are still broken, fallible but forgiven pilgrims on a journey to our promised land – the fullness of the eternal kingdom of God. So where is Jesus in the midst of the mayhem today?

I saw a long Facebook post this week which suggested that this virus is not as serious as the response it has triggered and that this whole scenario is all about shutting the Church down and removing our influence from the world. Even house Churches are not permitted now and some people are even suggesting this has been deliberate on the part of our Government. In spite of the fact that we have an evangelical Christian Prime Minister who has placed these restrictions upon us all, people are still crying 'anti-Christian conspiracy.'

But then I saw another Facebook post this week which was far shorter and far more engaging for me. It was written as a message from God to us all and this is what it said: *"Sport has now been shut down; organised religion has now been shut down. You can't go to work or the pub or the club or the gym anymore. So now that you have all this spare time ... can we talk?"* At first it made me smile but then it made me think.

Is it possible that so much of our activity, even our Church activity, does little more than fill our time, crowd our lives and make it harder to actually relate to God personally? I am not suggesting like some have that God sent this virus among us to achieve His purposes. I think that is nonsense. We know exactly where it began and why and it was not an act of God at all.

However, of one thing I am sure: God will always use every circumstance for His purposes and He knew before the foundation of the world that His people would have a lot of time on their hands in 2020. Have you wondered what God is hoping we will do with some of that time?

A wise old Pastor once told me that some of the most magnificent flowers on this whole planet only grow at the bottom of the deepest, darkest valleys and very few people ever get to see them because when we find ourselves in a valley, we expend all our energy and passion trying to climb out! God's people missed those flowers on that first Palm Sunday. Their expectations of where God was and what God had planned for them were completely wrong and they missed the miracle which was happening right in front of their faces – right in the middle of the disappointment, pain and death which overwhelmed them later that week.

Have you pondered the possibility that God does not want us to fight against this new reality and claw our way out of this valley too quickly? Perhaps God wants us to submit to our current reality and listen to what His Spirit might be saying to us during this forced exile?

On that first Palm Sunday all those years ago, the people of God missed what He was doing because their expectations of God and His plan for them were completely wrong. Brothers and sisters, in 2020, in the midst of these unprecedented circumstances, we risk doing that again as our expectations of God at this time are completely at odds with what God might desire to do for us, in us, to us and through us in the weeks and months ahead.

Let those who have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to us right now.