

## “Why Did The Celebration Stop?”

Matthew 21:1-17

April 5, 2020

Normally the church would be filled with people today. We would be waving palm branches, we would be joyfully singing “Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” and extended family members and friends would be joining us today. There would be a lot of activity happening at the church. There certainly would not be any social distancing. We would be shaking hands, hugging each other, welcoming one another as we celebrate the exciting news that Jesus our Savior, our King of kings and Lord of lords, entered Jerusalem on a donkey to fulfill a prophecy made about the Savior over 500 years earlier in the Old Testament. Palm Sunday in the church is always a great day of crowds and cheering and celebration, similar in a sense to the way it was on the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem on that donkey as people gave Him a red carpet welcome by cheering, placing their coats on the ground, and waving palm branches.

But the cheering did not last very long. There came a point in less than a week when the tide began to turn against Jesus. The crowds got smaller and maybe there were moments of silence in people’s homes in those days as it is here in the church today. Who ever would have thought that we would be celebrating Palm Sunday in our homes, only with our immediate family and away from others? Who would have thought that churches on Palm Sunday would be empty? It feels strange and a little disappointing as we gather for worship around our televisions, computers, and smart phones, and not to be together in one place. But the silence we are experiencing at the church or the calm you may be experiencing at your home today actually gives us a glimpse as to how the week went for Jesus. We know the cheers we should be hearing today, but the silence reminds us of how quickly the cheering stopped for Jesus as His critics began to publicly attack Him. Last week we heard how the religious leaders of the day were afraid to speak out for fear of the crowds, when Jesus brought Lazarus back from the dead as so many people started following Jesus. But a few days after the crowds welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday, the religious leaders began to perceive, maybe from silence, that they could turn the public against Jesus. And by the end of the week, the opposition grew almost out of control.

But why did the people turn against Jesus? How did the shouts of “Hosanna” on Sunday change to shouts of “Crucify Him” on Friday? Why did the celebration stop? One reason why I think the celebration stopped is that Jesus, upon His entry into Jerusalem, began to talk more and more about commitment. Just before His entry into Jerusalem, a rich young ruler came running up to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him, “Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and then come follow me.” The Bible tells us that the crowd was stunned, because they had been raised to believe that God had especially blessed rich people. If you were rich, it meant that God was very pleased with you. And yet, here is Jesus turning big money away. I wonder how many churches would do that today?

So it may have bothered the people to see Jesus turn away a rich man, but that didn’t stop Jesus. In fact, Jesus spent the entire week talking about commitment and our response to His love and grace as His followers. The next day, after Palm Sunday, Jesus stopped by a fig tree, because He was hungry, but He didn’t find any figs. So Jesus then withered the tree from its roots, because it wasn’t producing any fruit. His point was that we, as His followers, must produce fruitful committed lives.

Then, a day or two later, Jesus made another call to commitment by announcing that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. In addition, Jesus told the people to be on guard, keep watch, because no one knows the day or hour of His return to this world.

Everywhere He went, after His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus asked for commitment from the people, but that is not what He saw or heard. As that rich young ruler walked away from Jesus full of sorrow, I’m sure he was not the only one. I think it’s safe to say that many uncommitted people also walked away. The celebration began to stop when Jesus began to speak of commitment.

I also think the celebration began to stop when Jesus suggested that all people are worth loving. Right after Jesus stopped by that fig tree, He went to the temple, and instead of the temple being used for worship, Jesus saw that it was being used for business purposes. Not only was there no room to worship, but people were being taken advantage of by the different businesses that were operating inside. As you can imagine, Jesus was furious. He flips over the tables of the moneychangers and drives everyone out. But it’s interesting to note who

Jesus then invited in to the temple. The Bible says it was the poor, the lame, the blind, the sick, and the outcasts of society. By doing this Jesus was demonstrating what the Kingdom of God would be like – that all people would have access to God.

What's really amazing about all of the events leading up to this day we call Palm Sunday, is that it was the poor, the powerless, or the disenfranchised of society who recognized Jesus as the Savior of the world. For example, as Jesus made His way to Jerusalem, a poor blind beggar on the side of the road cries out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." And what was the response of the crowd? They rebuked Him and told Him to be quiet.

When Jesus came into Jerusalem, who was standing on the temple steps shouting "Hosanna" and waving palm branches? Adults and children. It was children who were getting under the skin of the Pharisees, because they asked Jesus, "Do you hear what those children are saying?" And Jesus replies, "Yes, and if I tried to keep the people quiet, the stones on the ground would then cry out." Time and time again in Scripture it is the ones who are powerless in society who recognize Jesus as the Savior of the world, while those who have power reject Him. Why did the celebration stop? Because on Palm Sunday Jesus opened the doors of the church to all people. It angered some people then, and it continues to anger some people today.

Finally, the parade celebration stopped because Jesus began to talk more and more about a cross. In the early part of His ministry, Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, and the people wanted to hear about it, because they mistakenly thought Jesus was referring to the land of Israel becoming a "superpower" nation once again, like it was in the Old Testament during the reign of King David. But increasingly Jesus began to talk about sacrifice, even giving up your life. Well, the people didn't want to hear that, and so the celebration stopped; but that didn't stop Jesus from fulfilling His mission of giving His life on a cross for the sins of the world. Oh, He could easily have turned back. Just imagine how many times the security of home and family must have pulled at His heart. He could have turned back when the Pharisees criticized His every step, questioned His every move, stirred up public opinion against Him, or plotted His death.

But His heart heard the cries of the poor and the despair of those who were lost in their sin. Later that week He saw the faces of the people gathered around Him, some weeping, some obscured by fear, and some filled with hate. He could have turned back at any moment, but He didn't, because among the faces that He saw was your face and mine. He saw our fears, our hopes, our tears, and our silent prayers.

To live for us and die for us, that was His purpose; it was God's gift of love for us and it continues to be our hope for eternal life. Yes, in less than a week the celebration that welcomed Jesus stopped, and many times in our world it appears that the cheering has stopped, but I pray that it will never stop in our hearts. I pray in these unusual days that it will only get louder as we seek to serve Him and follow Him all the way to the cross. We may not be together in one place today, but we have a message of love and hope that we can still share with our world through technology.