

WHO IS THIS?

Matthew 21:1-11

Public demonstrations have always been a means of expressing public opinion – it is a right that has been enshrined in the constitution of South Africa – they are the way to make your voice heard.

I'm sure you will agree that public demonstrations are events that are usually very emotional– people that participate feel very strongly about their opinion – unless they are part of a hired crowd – they want their point of view to be heard and are willing to go to great lengths to make their expectations known.

The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on the last week of his earthly life was just such an emotional public demonstration.

Jesus was crowded by those who had gathered to observe the Passover – the most important Jewish festival of the year – and they were keyed up with national expectations that God would raise up a king to deliver them from the power of Rome. There were shouts of “Hosanna” – which means, “O Lord, save us” – as the crowds acclaimed Jesus as King – this was the only time in Jesus' ministry that He planned and promoted a public demonstration – before this He was rather secretive about being the Messiah – but now it was time to make a public demonstration of the salvation the Lord would provide – and so Jesus comes into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday not as an earthly king, with the purpose of justice and judgment – Jesus didn't come to lord it over anyone or to establish an earthly kingdom where some are in and others are out – Jesus comes into Jerusalem for the purpose of mercy and grace, to establish a spiritual kingdom – the kingdom of God.

Jesus knew what was coming – that He would be the One to be judged – and so He comes with an attitude that Paul so beautifully describes in Philippians 2:

“who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Jesus came to provide salvation for all – not just for a nation or a particular people – Jesus didn’t come to establish an earthly kingdom – he came to establish a spiritual kingdom where all have opportunity to be in and no one is excluded from that opportunity.

The crowd at the first Palm Sunday missed it and they missed it because they had the wrong view of God – their picture of God was distorted - and this had a profound effect on their response to Jesus.

Friends, this can still be a problem for us today – our picture of God, which is formed over the years as we’ve interacted with authority figures – the church – and even our culture – is distorted and it has a profound effect on how we live out our faith in our daily lives.

Perhaps that is why William Temple – Anglican priest and spiritual leader – said that if people live with a wrong view of God, the more religious they become, the worse the consequences will be, and eventually it would be better for them to be atheists. Throughout church history we’ve seen what happens when people have a distorted view of God – most of us here have been part of such a distortion.

And so, this morning as we gather to celebrate Palm Sunday the invitation is for each of us to reflect on our own picture of God.

Perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves is the question many in the crowd asked, “Who is this?”

As we intentionally turn our attention to the crucifixion of Jesus this week this question demands a personal response from each of us – through the words of Matthew each of us is asked, “Who is Jesus to you?”

The scripture we read this morning suggests three ways we may respond to Jesus – let’s have a look.

We may respond the way the religious leaders did.

They had been robbed of the truth of the Word of God – in fact; they were not really interested in the truth, but rather in protecting their own interests.

They had replaced the truth with man-made traditions and in their confession, “We have no king but Caesar”, their wilful blindness is displayed.

Not even the miracles of Jesus convinced them and the longer they resisted the truth the blinder they became.

Their response to Jesus is described in the parable of the sower as the seed that fell on the path and was trampled on and the birds of the air ate it up – they were those who hear the Word of God and then the devil comes and takes it away from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

The religious leaders really showed an indifference to the truth of their own scriptures.

Friends, even as Christians, we can be guilty of this kind of response – we may not openly express it, but it can be an attitude of our heart.

We can show our indifference to Jesus and the truth He taught when we refuse to forgive someone who has sinned against us.

We can show our indifference when we refuse to give time to growing our relationship with Him and His Body – the church.

We can show our indifference to Jesus when we are willing to follow Him as long as He doesn't expect us to do things we don't want to do – as long as it doesn't become an inconvenience to the life we've carved out for ourselves.

We can show our indifference to Jesus when we acknowledge Him as our Saviour yet still try to earn salvation through the things we do.

Is this your response?

Or we may respond as the crowd.

There were two groups in the crowd that day – there were the inhabitants of Jerusalem who didn't know much about Jesus and then there were the crowds who followed Jesus from Galilee.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem hear who Jesus is, but they don't take it too seriously – people love a spectacle and so they just get caught up in the moment and join the mob.

The group from Galilee are the real instigators of the public demonstration of support for Jesus – but if you consider what happened in the week to follow you realise that they were also there because it was expedient to their cause – people are fickle.

They were willing to follow Jesus while it was safe to do so – but when the tide turned against Jesus and following Him was dangerous, they faded into the background – perhaps even this time some of them shouting for His death.

In the story of the sower they are the seed that fell on rock and withered because they had no moisture and amongst thorns that grew up and choked the plants – they heard the Word of truth but it had no effect on their lives – their concern with the earthly caused them to be shallow in their faith and when the time of testing came they fell away.

One of the things we can struggle with as Christians is a divided heart.

There's a part of us that desperately wants to know God and follow God – but there's also a part of us that wants something else – in a sense, we can struggle with the desire to have the best of both kingdoms – the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God – forgetting that in scripture we are told to (1 John 2:15):

“Stop loving this evil world and all that it offers you, for when you love the world, you show that you do not have the love of the Father in you.”

The psalmist pleads, “... give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name” - understanding the danger of a divided heart.

Is your heart divided this morning?

Is this your response?

Finally, we can respond as the disciples of Jesus.

They may not have fully understood – they may also have been misguided in their expectations of Jesus – but nevertheless, they persevered through some very difficult times – they came to understand the cost of following Jesus and yet persevered.

Yes – they abandoned Him on the day He was crucified – but they returned to be His witnesses in very difficult times.

They were like the seed that fell on good soil and yielded a crop a hundred times more than was sown – they were those with a noble and good heart, who received the Word, retained it and through persevering produced a crop.

It's in receiving the Word and persevering that we really come to know who Jesus is.

Yes, there is mystery in our God – there are questions that will just never be answered this side of the grave – but continuing to respond to Jesus by following Him no matter what, we learn more of who this Jesus is – and when we truly know who He is and what He's done for us there wells up within our heart a desire to publically demonstrate it.

As I end allow me to share with you some of the things that I have learnt about God through my relationship with Jesus.

I've learnt that we are loved just as we are and that God is "Abba", our heavenly parent, who welcomes us with open arms when we come home to Him.

I've learnt that our presence is deeply desired at the family table of His friendship and when we hurt each other through our actions and words He is disappointed – but His disappointment will never stop Him loving us.

I've learnt that on the cross He died so that we would know the full extent of His offer of forgiveness – our suffering is His suffering – our grief is His grief – in our darkness and pain He is constantly working to bring about another little Easter.

This is some of whom Jesus is to me.

Friends, the truth of the matter is that throughout our Christian journey we can find ourselves in one of these groups:

- there are times when we are indifferent to Jesus and His demand to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Him.

- there are times when our heart is divided – when we do things the world’s way rather than God’s way because it’s easier
- there are times when our faith is strong, and we feel we can face anything that comes our way

The challenge is then to identify how we are responding to Jesus at any given time – to regularly ask ourselves “Who is Jesus in this situation or circumstance?” so we can follow Him with perseverance throughout our Christian journey.

So, let me leave you with the question again – “Who is Jesus to you?”

Perhaps over the week that lies ahead you can spend some time reflecting to identify some of the distortions in your picture of God.