

Sermon: Who is This?

April 2, 2023

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11

by Eric Anderson

The crucial question comes up near the close of today's reading from Matthew's Gospel: "When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"

"Who is this?"

That – not "To be or not to be?" – no, "Who is this?" – that is the question.

For the residents of Jerusalem, for the many visitors gathered there to celebrate the Passover, "Who is this?" was a critical question. The answers could be reassuring but they could also be threatening. The crowd's shouts, in fact, fell into the category of "dangerous." "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they cried. "Hosanna," you see, was a Hebrew word meaning, "Save us!" or possibly "Savior!" In Psalm 118:25, the word translated, "Save us!" is "Hosanna!"

Crying for help can be dangerous in itself, but the crowd addressed that cry to the Son of David. "Son of David" was a political title, it was a royal title. "Son of David" addressed to someone stated that this person was the rightful ruler of the people of Israel. The *de facto* rulers – Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee, and Tiberias, Emperor of Rome – would not and did not tolerate rivals. People who claimed the titles and roles of Hebrew kings, who accepted the word, "Messiah," those people would be quickly arrested, tried, and executed – by crucifixion.

Those who followed them, or who shouted those titles in the streets, couldn't expect much better.

"Who is this?" the people asked, and some in the crowd decided to take things down a notch, and said, "This is the prophet Jesus" – not Messiah, not Son of David, but a prophet.

The crowd, you see, wasn't of one mind, not on that day or on any other day. As Cheryl Lindsay reminds us at ucc.org, "The gathering of Palm Sunday frames what is to come, yet if we take this metaphor too far, it encourages us to assume the community of Holy Week is consistent. The same crowd that cries, 'Save us,' is not likely the same crowd that yells, 'Crucify him,' although there may be some overlap. The money changers did not sit at the feast and get their feet washed. The community changes even if the action progresses in a definitive manner."

These different communities had different answers to the question, “Who is this?” Clearly some among the Palm Sunday crowd believed Jesus to be the Messiah, the political and military leader who would kick out the Romans and replace the collaborator kings descended from Herod the Great. Others, as Matthew records, believed Jesus to be a prophet. That’s not the same thing as a political figure – the role of prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures was mostly to influence and irritate political figures.

Some of those who cried, “Save us!” may have had a more personal need for aid: an illness that needed healing or a decision that needed guidance. Some looked at Jesus as a healer, some as a teacher. Some, we have to admit, saw him as a troublemaker, a disrupter of good order, someone whose teachings needed to be corrected, opposed, or silenced. “Who is this?” people asked, and they could have and would have received a universe of answers.

We still face the same question. It was a critical question for the first century people of Jerusalem. It remains a crucial question for the twenty-first century people of Earth. “Who is this?” determines the relationship we will have with Jesus during our life on this planet.

Fortunately, Jesus gave us some hints on that day when he rode a donkey into Jerusalem.

Entry parades would have been somewhat familiar to the residents of Jerusalem. Herod Antipas had a palace there, and you can be sure his arrivals came with lots of pomp. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, lived in the city of Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast, most of the year. He would come to Jerusalem during major festivals, partially to be visible, and partially to increase the Roman presence when crowd sizes increased. When Pilate came to town, you could count on a grand spectacle indeed: marching soldiers, horses, imperial standards, drums, trumpets, speeches, and more.

Warren Carter writes at Working Preacher, “Yet there are significant differences. Jesus rides not a war horse but an everyday beast of burden. Crowds of common folks welcome him. There are no speeches of welcome from elite leaders. He is not an elite figure. He is not authorized by the dominant ruling power. He represents God’s purposes, not Rome’s.”

“Who is this?” Well, it’s not the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. It’s not the Tetrarch Herod.

Instead, it’s somebody who acts to subvert those expectations of worldly power, and to do so with reference to a prophet’s ancient word. Matthew made sure to quote the passage from Zechariah 9:9, “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.” Now, I doubt very many in the crowd that day recognized that line from Zechariah – literacy was rare and, let’s face it, when was the last time any of us read Zechariah? – but Jesus, I’m sure, knew the text. He deliberately chose to match that union of royalty with humility. He had other options. In Jeremiah there’s a prophecy – repeated – that if the people obey the word of God

then “through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses.”

Jesus didn't do that. He chose the donkey. Whatever else we say about Jesus, we have to note that he chose the path of humility, not the path of glory, not the path of pride.

“Who is this?”

In the first decades of the Christian church, that continued to be the urgent question. In that letter to the church in Philippi, it looks as if the Apostle Paul chose to quote a poem, perhaps a hymn that was being sung in those congregations. Jesus “did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself (there's that word again) and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

We dare not forget that the humble yet noisy celebration of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem led directly to his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion in just six days. Jesus showed us that a truthful answer to “Who is this?” has to include not just humility connected to authority, but also a courage and dedication and faithfulness that could not be shaken by the threat of or the imposition of death itself. And again, Jesus' choices mean that there are things we cannot say truthfully about Jesus. Jesus refused to coerce. He refused to use violence. He refused to flee. He refused to accept anyone else's definition of who and what he should be.

“Who is this?”

That remains the question for us, friends. On this Palm Sunday, we once more need to come to grips with our own understanding – our understandings, because I would guess there's more than one – of who this is. On this Palm Sunday, we once more need to prepare ourselves to answer the question others ask of us: “Who is this?” with something a little more complete than, “This is a prophet.” On this Palm Sunday, let us consider our own cries of “Save us,” and the titles we use like “Christ,” deepening our understanding of the humility and the royalty and the faithfulness and the commitment as best we can.

When they ask, “Who is this?”

What will you say?

Amen.