

“Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna! God save us!”

On what a high note the last week of Jesus’ life—what we relive in what we now call Holy Week—began. The crowds of people, gathered into Jerusalem by the hundreds of thousands for the annual Passover festival, are full of excitement. For three years now the people had been hearing Him gladly; there had been crowds of people swarming and excitement wherever He went.

When He spoke the people instinctively recognized something altogether new and fresh and strong and powerful—“He spoke as One with authority—not as the scribes and Pharisees.” He was not parroting things He had learned from others. This Jesus *knew* what he was talking about.

And His words perfectly mirrored His actions. They recognized in Him a bedrock integrity: His character and His experience integrated with what He kept telling them. “The Kingdom of God has come near; the Kingdom of God is within you...” Jesus did not back down from His adversaries; He acted as a man immune to fear or consequences. He had healed the lame; made the blind to see; cleansed the lepers and included the outcasts and losers. He had fed the crowds when they were hungry. Many of them even believed the incredible tale told by a man named Lazarus...Wherever Jesus went, people were filled with confidence in their future. Finally, God was doing something. Finally, God was hearing their cries for deliverance, for a Messiah.

“Hosannah! God save us!” God had finally sent someone to put the dreaded Romans in their place, to do something about the high taxes and perpetual injustice and indignity of having pagan soldiers with authority to order them around, to mock their religion and even their identity as the children of Abraham, the ancient covenant people of the true God. The God who had promised to protect His covenant people, who had apparently been snoozing for as long as they had been suffering—for a thousand years—was finally kicking into action. Just how could this Jesus be doing all these signs and wonders except by the power of God? He must be the Messiah of God. No wonder there was such excitement in the air that first Palm Sunday.

But Jesus saw it all very differently. He had been at His ministry for three years, but the people still remained aloof. They were interested and curious, but slow to catch on to His central point. Very slow to sign up for duty, to enlist in His mission. Their spirits were still asleep, their poverty was still oppressive, the Romans were still firmly entrenched. His cousin John the Baptist was recently beheaded by Herod Antipas. So Jesus had taken time away to consider His options. His movement was stalled, maybe even losing momentum. He could no longer move around under the Roman radar. Wherever He went, they were onto Him, tightening the noose on His freedom. The religious authorities were growing more antagonistic.

Toward the end of the three years of His ministry, Jesus saw He did not have the option of simply continuing the status quo. Unless He simply chickened out and turned His back on His few faithful friends and His divine mission—as if His whole message and ministry had been of no real consequence, an embarrassing mistake to all concerned and obviously, in the end, ineffective—unless He just decided to give up on the whole

God Mission, everything He had bet His life on, His only option was to press His message right into the heart of the enemy.

He had to bet everything on this one desperate bid. He would have to find out if just maybe the people would stand up with Him, rise up with Him, enthrone Him. Jesus riding on the back of the donkey told the Jews in Jerusalem, and tells us, exactly what His strategy was. He would ride in as King. (Unlike the conquering Roman generals and their magnificent stallions, the ancient kings of Israel used to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, acknowledging that they served as regents, as representatives of the one true King.)

The crowds were ecstatic (for a while) but Jesus was troubled. He knew His odds better than anyone else. He knew how often His followers had failed the many challenges and tests He had put before them. He knew the desires of the crowds, the common people, and He knew His desires for them. He remembered how, once He had fed the thousands, the people had wanted to seize Him and make Him king right there, at the Sea of Galilee.

But the King He came to be and the king they wanted Him to be had never matched up—this was His concern, His foreboding, even as the crowds waved their branches of triumph.

The people wanted the benefits of a changed world. They were hungry and wretched; of course they would be happy for a king who would put a chicken, or a pita sandwich, in every pot. They loved someone who would take their part and kick the Romans out of their beloved Land and leave them in peace for once and for all. They loved that Jesus would establish a government which would be fair and compassionate and just, in which all the peasants would not be in perpetual bondage. They loved that God would change the world while they could pretty much remain unchanged.

But Jesus understood things just the opposite. He had come not to change governments but to change hearts. He had come not to topple the Roman Empire which had toppled the Seleucid Empire which had succeeded the Hellenistic Empire established by Alexander the Great who had defeated the Persian Empire which had conquered the Babylonian Empire which had overcome the Egyptian armies and the Assyrian Empire and so forth all the way back into the mists of recorded history... Was Jesus the first one to figure out that yet one more human empire substituting new technology and better weapons and maybe new uniforms and a new language and new laws and vague new promises was never going to solve the riddle of the brokenness of this world?

[And I can't help, in my more curmudgeonly moments, lamenting that so few seem to recognize that insofar as the U.S. succeeds in repudiating the one true God and completing the agendas now being so aggressively pushed instead: agendas trusting in technology or science, or in "education," or in the power of our military to keep us safe, or in the inherent goodness of human nature and the good intentions of those sworn to bring us down, or in a dynamic free-market economy—as quickly as we place our trust in lesser gods, we rush headlong into the dustbin of history to join all those other Empires who trusted in the lesser gods of their respective ages.]

His Kingdom was not, essentially, of this world. It was not to be just one more in a succession of kingdoms which never did and never can and never will solve the basic problems of human existence.

Those crowds in Jerusalem could not envision anything much more than to be left alone by the Romans and to have enough to eat, maybe to come and go and practice their religion in peace. Meet our material needs, Jesus, and we're all for you. Change the world, change the circumstances, change the balance of power, and we're all for you. Allow us our freedoms, keep out of our personal lives, don't question our "spirituality" or demand anything of us, bring us bread and circuses and prosperity and entertainment and leisure and everything we feel lacking in this lifetime and we're all for you.

But Luke tells us Jesus then and there broke down and wept—wept over Jerusalem. What He came to offer is not what the crowds were wanting, then or now. "If only you all could have recognized the things that really make for peace, the One who can make for peace... This was your chance, this was your time... But still you resisted understanding. I hate to tell you, but this city will be ransacked, the people massacred. You will get what you have chosen. You did not recognize this one time when God *has* offered you everything you really want and need..." "I have been among you, trying as best I possibly know how, to explain to you that what you really need can never come from trusting in governments and circumstances "out there." I have come to convince you to allow God to change what's "in here." How can I ever get thru to you...?"

Jesus rode into town on that donkey having a pretty good idea that His ride would come to an end with Him nailed to the cross a few days later. He was not suicidal—He loved this life, life in this world. How He must have loved the beauty of the Galilean hills; how He loved to encourage the hopeless, the time He spent with His closest followers, and everyone else, around the table.

Still, Jesus did not hold back. He rode on. He rode into Jerusalem, all too aware of the mismatch between what the crowds wanted and what they just might rally to support, and what He, Jesus, had come to offer them. He loved them with the love of God; He entrusted His life and His mission to them. (It was because they failed to rally to His cause, to support His candidacy and enthrone Him as king that He was left naked, vulnerable.) Only then could the civil authorities later round Him up and haul Him in.

Jesus kept pushing—pushing His message of repentance—and therefore death to the old ways of religion and fear and hypocrisy and worshiping comfort, of preoccupation with security and safety and ego and ourselves. He kept pushing because He loved His followers, the crowds, the whole world, enough to risk everything for them. The trouble is, as He kept pushing, He pushed harder and harder into the fears of those with power to push back.

We gain some insight into the dynamics of Holy Week by considering one detail from the gospel lesson we just heard. [Jesus went straight to the Temple, to clean up the ancient institution of changing money for the travelers who were required to purchase animals for sacrifice in the Temple. The Temple and its rituals were redundant now that God had come to us in Christ, now that God the Holy Spirit may dwell within our hearts and lives. The entire class of priests, intermediaries between God and the people, were unnecessary now that God has come to us directly and invites us to pray and to enter into His presence directly. The entire institution of Temple sacrifice—priests ritually killing all the lambs and other animals—became unnecessary when the Lamb of God came among us to take away the sins of the world, once and for all. But this doesn't mean the priests had to like it.]

Later, following the parade, in His first official act as unauthorized “king,” Jesus went onto the Temple grounds and cured the blind and the lame who came to Him. Even the children were crying out to Him, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Surely the holy men, the priests and the scribes, would join in the Great Parade and follow Jesus? Surely they whose lives were committed to serving God would be the first to welcome this God/Man who kept doing works of supernatural power pointing to the Kingdom of God in which all are made whole, all would live in harmony *because* they live in joyful submission to the rightful King, the King of glory?

But no. “They became angry.” Of course. People still do. You and I did, did we not?

Jesus would have been OK if He had just told nice stories and healed a few people in the hinterlands. But He kept pushing. Even though what He was pushing was the love of God, the one effective answer to the riddle of human suffering and brokenness, He kept running into barriers of fear. He still does. Back then, and still today, people resist His message of the love of God because our shields of fear are so firmly in place. Until we trust in God, we are bound to live in fear. The more we have, the more we stand to lose.

This principle hasn’t changed: until we know we have been forgiven much, we will not love God much. The more we benefit from the way things are, the more we fear Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The more we have to lose, the less easy it is to trust in God. Think of those religious officials, all their years spent in study, all the benefits and prestige they derived from their chosen occupation. Did we expect them simply to step aside and say, “Oh, Jesus—we were waiting for you to come set us right. Come in; take right over. We were misguided all along. We quit, and we’ll now become your biggest fans.” (Then it’s a bit sobering, isn’t it, for us to consider how much we have invested in thinking ourselves self-sufficient, how much we benefit from the *status quo*...)

[The late Henri Nouwen hits close to home: “Are we not constantly concerned with whether we are noticed or not, appreciated or not, rewarded or not? Are we not always asking ourselves whether we are better or worse, stronger or weaker, faster or slower than the one who stands beside us? From elementary school onward haven’t we experienced most of our fellow human beings as rivals in our own race for success, influence, and popularity? As soon as our own safety is threatened, we tend to grab the first stick or gun available, telling ourselves that our survival is what really counts. Aren’t we so insecure that we will snatch at any form of power that gives us a little bit of control over who we are, what we do, and where we go? I know my sticks and guns. Sometimes my stick is a friend with more influence than I; sometimes my gun is money or an academic degree; sometimes it is a little talent that others don’t have; and sometimes it is special knowledge, or a hidden memory, or even a cold stare. I will grab it quickly and without much hesitation when I need to stay in control. And before I realize it, I have pushed a friend away.”]

A lot of what Jesus came to set right addresses our fears at different levels. The marriage is struggling? “He never did meet my needs.” We push our spouse away. The wayward son concludes, “Dad never did pay enough attention to me, never did believe in me.” The father whose daughter has broken his heart says, “She never appreciated anything I did for her.” We push each other away. The United States didn’t want to take chances with terrorists and took to arms; Iraq naturally resents a foreign military presence

on its soil yet fears the chaos our absence will bring; Iran and Great Britain, North Korea and Libya and France—everyone has an agenda: “we have to secure our existence, protect our rights; we need to stand up for our sovereignty.” It’s understandable—we all want to secure our welfare, our place in the world. Why take risks? We push each other away.

Jesus understood the way of the world, the way of fear, does not work in the end. (A tragic historical irony: Jerusalem would not trust God, would not recognize God the Son leading the parade right in front of their noses. They trusted in their own ability to secure their existence, they trusted in their institutions and political alliances and independence efforts and they lost it all—shortly after Jesus, in 70 AD, the Romans came in and annihilated the City. A million lives lost, according to Josephus; not one stone left standing upon another.)

He understood the sad irony of the frightened ways of the world: all our military expenditures do not necessarily make us more secure. All our personal anxieties do not make us more secure. The more I have, the more I want. The more I focus on my needs, the more needy I become. More than ever before we Americans have been delivered from financial anxiety only to lose our health to depression, to heart disease, to diabetes and headaches and high blood pressure. The more we want to secure our own future, nail down every detail, the more fearful we become.

Jesus is one shining Exception: He got onto that donkey and rode into Holy Week to take His chances. He gave His followers their chance to stand up with Him; He gave the crowds their chance to stand up with Him and be changed and in the end to make Caesar and the Roman Empire irrelevant. I don’t think Jesus thought they would succeed that week, but that did not stop Him from offering them, and you and me, yet one more chance to stand up with Him and declare our loyalty. To live in radical trust, according to His Way. Jesus keeps offering us one more chance to join Him and live out our allegiance in spite of our fears; to step up and be counted with Him even though we have much to lose. Especially though we have much to lose.

A psychologist—I think it was M Scott Peck—writes of one of his toughest counseling sessions, with a woman he calls Charlene. At a crucial point in their process, he asked her what she thought was the purpose of her life. He was surprised when she recited from the Westminster Confession, “The purpose of our live is to glorify God.” “Well,” the therapist interjected, waiting... (For a moment he thought she might cry, which would have been the only time that happened in all their time together.) He waited... “I cannot do it. There’s no room in me for that. That would be the death of me.” It’s a powerful fear which keeps us from joining more fully in His parade.

In contrast, I hope you can all go watch the movie Amazing Grace—maybe this week, as a Holy Week observance. A true story, tellingly told, of the man who did more than anyone else in the world, after Jesus and maybe Paul, to eliminate the institution of human slavery. Of a man born wealthy in 18th Century England, with much to lose, who wanted only to become a monk or a pastor to serve God. But God called him into the political arena, and William Wilberforce responded with every ounce of his strength. For years he was made a laughingstock; the bills he kept introducing and fighting for lost out to the rich and powerful economic interests benefiting from the slave trade, and he lived in constant ill health and physical pain induced by the pressures and setbacks of his struggle. For over 20 years he kept up the losing fight—until, over time, his vision of the

Kingdom of God had won over the hearts and minds of the people of all Great Britain—and, in the end, the laws of the British Empire were changed to ban the institution of slavery. (Don't doubt that Jesus knew what He was about: in the end, His mission to change hearts on the "inside" has led to the greatest advances in physical progress on the "outside" the world has ever known.)

"Hosanna to the Son of David!" Save us, King Jesus, from all the fears which keep us distant from You and Your Kingdom, which keep us wanting to sit safely on the sidelines.

For the love of God, save us.

Matthew 21:1-17

21:1 When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,
2 saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.
3 If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."
4 This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,
5 "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."
6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;
7 they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.
8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.
9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
10 When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"
11 The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."
12 Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.
13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a den of robbers."
14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them.
15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry
16 and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'"
17 He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

