

Crowds are fickle. Watch the supporters of any professional sports franchise and you will see. When the team is winning, the stadiums are full, when the team hits a losing streak, ticket sales tank. It doesn't matter if they are pop idol followers, political supporters, or sports fans, crowds are at their best when they are cheering on a winner. Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was a public relations winner. It was a protest statement which drew a crowd who were anti-Pontius Pilate, who just happens to be arriving on the opposite side of a town on a mighty stallion. The messiah-hungry crowd witnessed and interpreted Jesus' arrival as the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy that the much-anticipated Messiah would come to Zion on a donkey and a foal. Making the story even more striking is that it is at the start of Passover. The 8-day Passover, you may recall, is a holy time of remembrance, marking the call of Moses to lead the Jewish people to freedom, away from the hardship of oppression they had been enslaved to in Egypt. Through Moses, God guides the rushed preparations to flee slavery. God then parts the Red Sea, leads them through the wilderness for 40 years, gives the 10 commandments, and places them at the edge of the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. In our text, the Jewish people are preparing to celebrate this sacred time and have realized that just as Pharaoh had been the oppressor in Moses' time, now Caesar and his henchman, Pilate, are doing the same things all over again. In both time periods, and throughout human history, they are burdened, like us, with the same reality which is, "We will never truly live until we know what to die for." Passover asks the same question to us all, "Now that we are free, how shall we truly live and what does the Lord require of us?"

We are starting a week-long journey into Holy Week which prompts us to remember that parade of protesters who gave Jesus a hero's welcome. Jesus then heads for the temple where he will confront the money-changers and overturn the tables of greed; later he curses a fig tree for failing to produce good fruit, is questioned by temple authorities, and astounds many by his teachings, making many folks very uncomfortable. His journey through Jerusalem leads him to an upper room where we

remember Jesus' last meal with his disciples and where he makes a towel the symbol of servanthood. At that meal, Jesus predicts a betrayal and a denial by two who are very close to him, then enters the Garden of Gethsamane and pleads for the journey to end without more pain, but instead is arrested. The next day, he has a conversation with Pilate, who has been hell-bent on keeping control of the peasant protests at all costs. This meant sweeping people not just off the streets but often from places of sanctuary like temples and homes, separating them from their families and basic human rights. The crowd that once adored Jesus now turns on him crying "Crucify, crucify" and not wanting to go against the crowd, Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' fate. Those in the crowd take on a mob mentality as they press Herod for what they define as justice – Jesus, the troublemaker must die. Trying anything to keep his poll numbers up, Herod caters to the crowd as well and sentences Jesus to death.

But if we are honest, we would rather not go down that road – we would prefer to just move from the palms of today's parade to the glorious lilies of Easter. We avoid the cringes and agony which make up Holy Week because we don't like to feel bad about the stuff from back then, about now, about ourselves, and even about Jesus. The problem with the cross is it feels rather senseless or condemning and sometimes both. Jesus could have avoided it if he had just been a little less bold, a little less in-your-face with the authorities, kept his head down, his eyes lowered. If he had just gathered a bigger army, a larger and more efficient arsenal; if he had just planned a bit better, then he could have led the people to an uprising which would have assassinated Pilate and terminated the opposing soldiers. If he had just been a bit more willing to smite his enemies, to tap into his powerful connections and capabilities, then going to the cross wouldn't have been necessary. Yet, in the end, it's like that quote from Albert Einstein, "the same thinking that created a problem cannot solve the problem." A bigger, badder version of humanity cannot save us... ever.

Back to today's story, crowds were present at both ends of Jerusalem. Soldiers marched with swords and knives while on the opposite end peasants marched with palms and cloaks thrown down on the road. Leaders of both parades came to

Jerusalem with peace on their minds. Pilate claimed peace was made possible by strength and the greatest army on earth; Jesus claimed peace was made possible by love and servanthood. Chants from Roman citizens cried, "Hail to Caesar! Son of God and King of Kings!" while chants from Jewish peasants cried, "Hosanna! Son of David" which means "Save us, Divine One!" Their message comes with undertones of radical spirituality. Save us from the violence all around us. Save us from the corruption of religious and government authorities. Save us from our own hatred and desire for revenge. Bystanders watch as these protesters with palms in hand move through the streets alongside Jesus. They ask, "Who is this? Who is this that has attracted such an unusual parade of children, men, and women without swords, stallions, or style?" Those that march respond, "He is the one who comes in the name of the One and Only God. He is the Messiah!" What kind of peace does he bring, the bystanders ask? No one is sure and that becomes a problem for the crowd. Later, Jesus answers, "Peace I leave with you. But I do not give peace as the world gives peace." What does that peace look like, they wonder? Sometimes you may find yourself on the other side of a sword. Sometimes you may find yourself on a cross. Sometimes in a world hell-bent on violence, you may need to offer divine love in return. That is the way to true peace, not as the world gives; but as God gives. Yet this didn't jive with the crowd's expectations, so Jesus the Victor became Jesus the Loser four days later. That was a serious drop in ratings. I doubt Bill Cosby, Elon Musk or Cesar Chavez could top that!

Probably the most dangerous thing Jesus did in those few days was mess with the economy and the crowd's perception of wealth. The religious industry was what made Jerusalem work economically. When Jesus overthrows the tables of the money lenders in the temple, he challenged the buying and selling of sacrificial animals and the practice of changing money into exclusive temple currency. Jesus called out the evils of scamming the poor to line the pockets of the rich. Peter Woods, a white South African theologian, was once asked what ended Apartheid? He responded that what brought the Apartheid regime to the negotiation table was primarily economics. The sanction blockade against South Africa from the global community made the old ways

unworkable. At the heart of that sanctions campaign was a small, ever smiling Archbishop Desmond Tutu, someone I was deeply blessed to hear speak at our denomination's General Assembly in St. Louis. But the truth is that if the Apartheid rulers could have crucified Archbishop Tutu, they would have! As has been said, "You challenge my treasury at your peril." Jesus adds, "Where your treasure is, your heart will be also." The arrival of Jesus in a city made rich, not just by the Romans abusing Jewish peasants, but by the church taking advantage of its own, was a threat that couldn't be tolerated. Jesus refused to join with the crowd and conform to an agenda established by the Jerusalem stakeholders, but rather emerged as a radical, who had justice at his core. As Richard Rohr put it, "A Jesus who refuses to be an insider, but who always sides with the outsider," will always upset our carefully laid economic tables and status quo. I confess I understand the fickle crowd; it is easier to be one of them than speak out on your own. The real, radical Jesus, from time to time, can evoke deep visceral anger in us, just as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The truth will set you free, but first it can make you very angry!" The key is how we handle that anger.

This Holy Week, in part, is a story of the crowd, from Palm Sunday to Golgatha, for human beings in crowds can display the darkest underside of humanity. Mobs get worked up by demagogues to achieve outrageous consequences, they join the stampede with no sense of decency, which often ends up with someone dying. The only hope comes when people disconnect and begin to act as individuals. As individuals, some were able to overcome the temptation to join in yelling "Crucify him!"; as individuals, some stood at the foot of the cross in support and love of Jesus while the crowd mocked him. The thief on the cross turned to Jesus in remorse, while the other followed the crowd and tormented him. The message becomes clear – following Christ instead of the crowd is an individual act. If you follow Jesus, you do it as your own, lone self. You follow Jesus as an individual or you do not follow him at all. Then as now, if you cry out "Hosanna! Save me," you must step aside from the crowd. You must walk your own path, think your own thoughts, and act according to what you see coming from Jesus. Look to Jesus, follow Jesus, no turning back.