

THE DEEPER STORY

You can tell a lot about a culture, a nation, a people by paying attention to how and what they celebrate. In ancient times when people celebrated, they gathered for worship – they ate and rejoiced together. In modern times when people celebrate, they disperse – vacate – go vacant. Happily it was a professor of mine, and not me, who made this ridiculous remark.

It is nevertheless true that what and how we celebrate pretty much defines what we value, what we honor, what we care about. Ancient peoples began each month according to the first moment of the New Moon, so their calendars seem confusing and erratic to us. It's why Easter (Passover) and Pentecost (Feast of Weeks) still jump around each year, instead of being sane and stable, like the later-contrived 25th of December. But it was not jumping for them. The Day of Atonement was always the 10th day of Tishri (October to us). And always five days later the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) began. It lasted seven days. It was a time of feasting and rejoicing – a celebration of the ingathering (Sukkoth), the harvest. In other words, it was Thanksgiving. Only, they didn't do it in one afternoon. They feasted for a week. Of course feasting and celebration were also community worship. God was honored, and the meals were cooked on the altar so that God could share in the feasting and celebration. It had all come from God, so God was at the center of everything. In the Feast of Tabernacles, they were also remembering God's providence and protection in the wilderness, after the escape from slavery in Egypt. They commemorated the time when they had no homes and lived in whatever makeshift tents they could put together. Don't think of a nice REI tent with a screen, zippers, and a dry, canvas floor. Think of a couple of sticks stuck in the ground, and any cloth or skin they could find to drape over them. Thusly they wandered in the wilderness, with only God to depend on. So during the Feast of Tabernacles, everybody moved out of their houses and lived in tents for the week. Can you imagine Jerusalem during this week each October (Tishri)? Great excitement and lots of fun. And imagine how the children looked forward to it. Our Thanksgiving pales by comparison.

Of course, there is always a serious level to celebration. During the Feast of Tabernacles, once each day they recited a portion of Psalm 118: *"This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.*

I thank thee that thou hast answered me and hast become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech thee, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech thee, give us success! Blessed be he who enters in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar! Thou art my God, and I will give thanks to thee; thou art my God, I will extol thee. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever!"

And seven times on the seventh day of the Festival, they recited this Psalm. It became associated with the expectation of the coming Messiah. And there, just off the temple square, was the Golden Gate into Jerusalem. If you came down the Mount of Olives from Bethany and straight into the city through the Golden Gate, you were immediately at the temple square. "Save us, we pray! Save us, we beseech thee!" In Hebrew, it sounds like this: "*Hosanna!*"

The prophet Zechariah: "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.*" (Zechariah 9:9)

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It's Passover time, an even more important festival than the Feast of Tabernacles. That only heightens the drama. None of this is obscure or accidental. For months, Jesus has been sending His disciples throughout the land to tell all His followers: "Meet me in Jerusalem this Passover. The hour has come. Let nothing deter you." And so they are there, waiting for Him.

Palm Sunday is a marvelous day – a day that comes close to the way things ought to be. The true and rightful King is coming into town, and the crowds are cheering and wild with joy. Garments and palm branches are thrown to form a carpet before Him as He comes. It's the "red carpet treatment" He deserves. They shout "*Hosanna!*" Jesus enters the temple square, throws out the moneychangers, establishes His authority – His right to be there. He teaches every day in the temple square. The crowds of supporters are so large that nobody dares to oppose Him – not in the open.

We need also to notice what is not present on Palm Sunday. No soldiers or policemen march into Jerusalem with Jesus. There is no show of political or military might. “I am the true King, but you have to claim me because you want me. There is no coercion here. I only rule those who invite my rule. I only guide and protect those who want me to be their Lord.” *Hosanna* is no joke this time. *Hosanna* is the only way He will agree to be our King.

And that, of course, is precisely why Palm Sunday turns to ashes in our hands. We are not always as loyal to *Him* as we want Him to be to us. On the other hand, freedom cuts both ways. Jesus does not coerce. Jesus does not force anyone to follow or accept Him. Therefore Jesus does not have to please us – He does not have to compromise. He makes no vapid political speeches to win our votes. He promises what He means, and means what He promises. His rule and His WAY are not offered for us to mess around with – to change all around into something we think will be more comfortable for us, or less offensive to our friends and relatives. Jesus never tries to coerce us, but neither will He allow *us* to coerce Him. We are completely dumbfounded on both counts. That is not how it’s supposed to work. We have never heard of such a thing. We have never experienced either principle – not in real life. So we keep waiting for Him to do something to convince us, to make us follow Him, to make us behave – to make us believe. No way! Not ever! He just waits. And if we ever decide that maybe we want to follow Him ... immediately we try to change things all around, amend His truth, improve His approaches and techniques. No way! Not ever! The true King is not like the others.

It’s no wonder Palm Sunday didn’t stick. Such approaches do not fit in our kind of world. Please don’t misunderstand me – I do not think people are horrible, or hopeless. I know some wonderful people who have done some pretty terrible things, and some terrible people who have done some pretty wonderful things. By the way, I am not just an observer here myself – I am not just here to give an objective, unattached opinion about everything going on. How about you? Jesus has had some truly remarkable support and love from a lot of humans here in this world. And it is still going on.

In the early days, we might remember, nearly all of the people who were drawn to Jesus – who loved Him, believed in Him, tried to follow Him – were Jews. There would be no Christianity today if Jews

had not carried the Message. There would be no Christianity today if Jews had not decided to take the Message beyond their borders to non-Jews. Why don't we want to tell the story straight? Some Jews hated Jesus and were completely threatened by Him, and they pressured the Roman Governor to crucify Him. Rome didn't know or care anything about Jesus. He wasn't even a blip on their radar screen. Pilate didn't care about Jesus; he disliked Caiaphas. If Caiaphas wanted it, Pilate did not. Pilate was a ruthless, unprincipled man who crucified a great many Jews at the drop of a hat. What's one more? This one was no different except that Caiaphas wanted Him dead. But Pilate soon tired of the game and gave the order. No skin off his nose. Caiaphas insisted that Jesus was an insurrectionist. Pilate didn't believe it, but one more example to Jewish terrorists to stop killing Roman soldiers was fine with him. I doubt if Pilate lost a moment's sleep over it. That's what is so devastating!

In any case, Jews got Jesus killed. And Jews loved, followed, and died for Jesus, ultimately transferring the Message from a Jewish cult to a world religion. If somebody wants to make anti-Semitism out of that, let them. The Jews were the only real players in the early story. Nobody else knew the Scriptures; nobody else was waiting for Messiah to come; nobody else would have or could have picked up on what Jesus was doing, or who He was, or why He had come. Likewise nobody else would have been infuriated by His behavior, His teachings, or His claims if they believed them to be false. Rome was not religious enough to comprehend blasphemy if it hit them between the eyes. Rome only cared about allegiance to the state and about prosperity.

It is tragic that a lot of Christians have killed Jews. How do we call them Christians when they pay absolutely no attention to anything Jesus taught, came for, or stood for? In earlier times, when Jews were getting Christians killed, Christian leaders reminded their people that these were not true Jews. (Revelation 2:9; 3:9) Despite the growing animosity, our best leaders have always hoped and prayed and believed in the time when Christians and Jews would be reconciled in God. Paul says so with tears of passion. It's why there are twenty-four Elders around God's throne in the fourth chapter of Revelation, and why the redeemed are singing the song of Moses *and* the song of The Lamb in the fifteenth chapter of Revelation. No remorse for the way we live, and the way we sometimes treat each other, can ever be enough.

Getting Jesus crucified was also against everything Judaism taught or stood for. We have real problems; is rewriting history going to help solve them? If Jews had been in power in the Middle Ages, do you think Christians would have fared any better than Jews did? Being anti-Jewish is a sin, no doubt about it. We all hope that every Christian knows this and will never forget it. We now live in a culture where being anti-Christian is perfectly acceptable. And in some parts of the world, killing us is not only acceptable, but an act of faith.

So we live in a harsh and broken world. Yet wonderful things go on here too. I believe that one of the favorite themes of Palm Sunday is entirely false. The crowd that had gathered before Pilate in support of the Jewish authorities – the crowd shouting “Crucify him!” – was *not* made up of the same people who came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday crying “*Hosanna!*” That makes no sense. People were polarized over Jesus. Thousands had supported Him at the temple throughout the week. Jesus was arrested well into the night, and I suspect most of His followers didn’t even learn of it until the mock trial was over and He was in the hands of the Roman soldiers, if not already on the cross.

In short, Jesus’ followers were not fickle; they were blindsided. Things were happening too fast. They didn’t know how to get organized. They didn’t know what to do. What *could* they do against Roman legionnaires anyway? They were outclassed and outmaneuvered, and being terrified and broken-hearted at the same time did not help. Evil is never as simple as we are expecting, or as one-dimensional as we are prepared for.

But now I have ruined everything. Palm Sunday is a marvelous day – a day that comes close to the way things ought to be. The true and rightful King is coming into town, and the crowds are cheering and wild with joy. But I have ruined it, as indeed our world keeps ruining every wondrous day. Is there any way for us to get back to the wondrous day – the day and the way that is like it should be?

Palm Sunday raises all such issues to their ultimate height. Palm Sunday catches us halfway between defeat and victory. Palm Sunday is the highest point and greatest celebration of Jesus’ *earthly* life – of Jesus’ *earthly* ministry. As such, it merely sets us up for the true sorrow and despair of Good Friday. The only point higher than Palm Sunday is Easter, but Easter cheats. Easter jumps track altogether. Easter switches to spiritual realms, and is only apprehended by faith. Easter does not change anything physically, pragmatically, or automatically. Caesar still

rules, Pilate still governs, and the world has gone back to business as usual. At least that's what it thinks! If you do not believe in Jesus Christ, you can never get higher than Palm Sunday. And in this world, Palm Sunday is always followed by Good Friday.

So then what *is* Palm Sunday? It is the day of pronouncement – the day Jesus makes absolutely clear that He is the Messiah. It is the day Jesus makes unequivocal claims to the kingship of Israel. It is the day Jesus calls for the recognition and allegiance of everyone and anyone who wants God's Messiah to rule and govern their lives. "I am He," says Palm Sunday – from the branches and garments that carpet His way ... to the donkey He rides, the route He takes into the city, the crowds that accompany Him, shouting "*Hosanna!*" ("Save us, we pray – save us now!") Only, He comes without coercion – without army or sword. He comes claiming true authority, but not domination. This King is unwilling to rule, unless we are ready and willing to have Him rule. *Of course* it would have to be that way with the TRUE Messiah. We just never thought of it before. Otherwise God's Kingdom ends up as just one more human tyranny, one more police state. Hell, humans can do that all by themselves; they don't need God for that. (I don't swear as often as some of you think. That was a theological statement.)

As a personal aside, I take strange comfort in the realities of Palm Sunday. Some people are always bitching at us because we have not and cannot solve all the problems of the world. Well, even Jesus couldn't make it work here like it's supposed to work! With some of the best-intentioned and most loyal, devoted followers imaginable, even Jesus couldn't make it work right here. Does that register? We are talking about the SON OF GOD – the One with gifts and power and intelligence beyond our imagining. If *He* had so much trouble here, no wonder *we* are having our problems! No wonder we cannot get this world all fixed and right. Even *Jesus* couldn't make it work right here! Even Jesus couldn't make it stick – not with the world the way it is, and people on the level they presently live. Being kicked out of the Garden of Eden takes on new conviction and new depth. It echoes, in all the corridors of our tradition, more powerfully than we ever realized at first.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" (Luke 13:34) *"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom*

men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” (Isaiah 53:3) *“He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.”* (John 1:11)

Even Jesus couldn't make it work right here! The physical, material plane does not contain what we seek. We were not designed or created for this realm. I know most of you do not believe this yet, but I mention it anyway. We must transcend, be converted, turn our wills and our lives over to a power and an intelligence and a love far greater than our own. We must live, not for this world, but for God's Kingdom – not to fulfill our own desires, but to serve and obey the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ. If we are to live for any of the goals or values that truly matter to us, then conversion really is necessary. We really do have to be born anew. The hope of the world is not on the outside. It is on the inside – in a different realm.

The miracle is that the more we shift to the unseen Kingdom, the more value we find in physical, mundane reality. This is not where any of our hope lies; we do not expect anything to last here. Yet once we have given up on it – not in despair, but in hope of a higher realm – then more and more we discover the marks of the Creator everywhere. If we get attached to them again, we lose them again. But if we are free, they sparkle all around us.

You already know this, but I want to try to say it anyway: There are representations, images, hints, vignettes of things *as they should be* (could be) all around us. They are not permanent representations, yet they are indeed here: Moments in the midst of chaos, turmoil, defeat – and if we are discerning, moments even in the midst of success, achievement, progress – that are truly beautiful. Moments that remind us of the reality of the Kingdom, even though we know they are fleeting. Moments when people run to each other with open arms; when the symphony gets a little too beautiful; when everybody really does work together; when everyone cares more for the task, and for each other, than for personal fame or gain.

Palm Sunday itself is such a moment – a vignette of how it is supposed to be. Jesus comes riding in, and the crowds shout and rejoice. The whole scene looks, for a moment, like the rightful King coming to lead the righteous Kingdom and all its righteous subjects, and everybody is wild with joy. (When is the last time *you* were wild with joy?) What is

wrong is not in this moment. In this moment, things are very close to right. What is wrong is what comes after. What is wrong is that it doesn't last. That is what is unbearable. Having once seen it and felt it and recognized it, how is it possible to let it go? Even when it's wrenched away from us? Yet the world takes it away – destroys the dream, destroys the rightful King ... or at least thinks it does.

Maybe you already know it, and if you don't, you should: The Book of Revelation picks up the Palm Sunday story. It knows we cannot leave it where the world left it. We just read some excerpts from the great scene – Palm Sunday as it happens in the spiritual realm, where all of us *do* receive our King, and mean it forever. So the people sing a new song, and the Christ is saving and welcoming people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Revelation is the most hopeful and universal book in the Bible, if you read it like I do. In Luke, Palm Sunday is in Jerusalem, and a few thousand people are shouting their welcome and recognition. In the Book of Revelation, Palm Sunday is finally put together right. Listen: “*And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, crying, ‘To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!’*” [“For ever and ever – Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”] Who did we leave out? Every creature in Heaven and on earth is shouting. Who did we leave out?! *That* is Palm Sunday as it is supposed to be.

“*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!’*” (Revelation 7:9-10) Who did we leave out? I don't know, but I'm afraid it wasn't *any* of my enemies. Of course, the great multitude cannot shout “*Hosanna!*” anymore. *Hosanna* is a plea to be saved – a cry for God to come save us. These folks have already accepted that they have been saved. It is already an established fact for them. They are singing songs of appreciation. “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!*” *Hosanna* ... is fulfilled!

What about us? Well, let's not be wimpy. What about *you*? Are you winning here? Do you think your fame and prowess are going to make it – carve out a world that you will be satisfied with, will be content

with, can keep and preserve the way you want? Some of you still think so, or at least you act like it. There are others of you here today who do not think that way anymore. You have seen enough and tried hard enough, for long enough, and you know it is never going to work right here. I have news for you, and an incredible invitation. It is not mine, I merely bring it from Another.

You are invited right now, this very moment, to welcome the true Messiah into your life. You can live in His Kingdom, starting today. It will not get you out of this world, and that means it will not get you out of trouble. It will not lessen, and may very well increase, your activities to bring healing and help – comfort and love – to this broken and troubled world. Only, you need never depend on this world again. Never again will your efforts be measured by how well things are working or how badly they are failing here. Hope will burn bright, and knowledge of your own importance and acceptance by the Christ will be with you through all the days of your life. Only, that is going to be for a lot more days than you can possibly imagine.

So we switch from “*Hosanna!*” to “*Hallelujah!*” And we become as loyal to Jesus as we want Him to be to us.