

“Who Are We Cheering For?”
Matthew 21:1-17

Rev. Kenneth M. Locke; Pastor/Head of Staff,
First Presbyterian Church; Fond du Lac, WI
April 2, 2023; Palm Sunday

Jesus has arrived at Jerusalem shortly before the great festival of Passover. The city is packed. Thousands of devout Jews from all over – Egypt, Greece, Italy, Turkey, and everywhere in between - are pouring into Jerusalem for the holy festival.

The Roman military presence has also been beefed up. Even Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, has left his headquarters on the coast and come to Jerusalem.

Jesus enters the city by way of the Mount of Olives. It’s crowded, also, absorbing a lot of the overflow from the city. Which means there are lots of people to join the parade.

We have this business about the donkey and the colt. Did Jesus ride the donkey and the colt at the same time? Did he ride one first and then the other? How did that work?

No. Of course not. Jesus rode the donkey and the colt trailed along behind. This is one of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry, it makes a point by saying the same thing twice but with added intensity. ‘Four things I have heard from the Lord. For five things my soul will bless God.’ ‘Six times a day I will pray to the Lord. Seven times a day I will send my prayers to the Holy One.’ You get the idea.

Here, the point is Jesus is a gentle and humble King. He’s not arrogant or proud or ruthless. He is gentle, humble. ‘Your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of donkey.’ Jesus is a gentle, humble ruler.

Which is odd because that is NOT how the crowd addresses him. They call Jesus the ‘Son of David.’

David was Israel’s greatest king: a mighty warrior who drove out the gentiles and expanded the nation’s borders. Being the **Son** of David means you’re going to follow in David’s footsteps. It would be like a politician saying, “I am the next George Washington. I am going to unite our country and drive out the invaders.”

So, which is he? Jesus is a king, we get that, but what kind of king is he? Is he gentle and humble or is he a mighty, conquering warrior who's going to drive out the Romans?

Eventually, Jesus makes his way down the steep hill to Jerusalem itself. The city is in an uproar. The Greek word actually means 'earthquake'. Jerusalem is rocked by Jesus' presence. Who is this man?

'This is the prophet Jesus, from Galilee.'

Wait a minute, I thought Jesus was a king. That's what the crowd was saying. Now you say he's a prophet? Which is it? One fights wars for the people, the other brings the Word of God to the people. Which one is Jesus? Or is he both?

The crowd is going nuts, but they clearly don't know who they're cheering for. Is Jesus a humble and gentle king? Is he a mighty warrior? Is he a prophet, bringing us the word of God? It's confusing.

We get it. We've been there. We've all been to a parade or a county fair where there was a marching band or a speaker and everyone was yelling and cheering. "Why are we cheering?" "I don't know. Everyone else is."

I have to tell you a story. I was a Junior in High School when I attended my first pep-rally. Before then we were living in Hong Kong. We didn't have pep-rallies. We had sports, lots of sports, but no cheerleaders and no pep-rallies.

We're in the school gym. The cheerleaders are doing their cheers and whipping up the crowd. Everyone's stomping on the wooden bleachers. Music is blaring. Total confusion.

Suddenly, the cheerleaders stop and face my section of the bleachers, and they start yelling at us. I turned to the fellow sitting next to me and said, "What are they saying?" He looked at me and said, "I don't know."

And then, we're all on our feet yelling at the cheerleaders. Why are we yelling at the cheerleaders? We're all yelling and pumping our arms and the cheerleaders haven't done anything.

What was happening was the cheerleaders had been chanting a cheer, and we were supposed to stand and finish the cheer. I didn't know. I didn't even know who we were cheering for. Took me a month to figure out we were cheering for the football team.

It's easy to get caught up in a crowd. We can't blame the people for being confused. But the question remains. Who is Jesus? Who are we cheering for?

Jesus enters the city and goes to the temple. There's a big ruckus about the animals and the money changers. Money is scattered, tables overturned, animals taking off in all directions.

Understand, the temple mount, the walled area of the temple complex, is 40 acres. It's a big place. And right now, it's packed with people attending the festival.

Not only that, these money changers and animal sellers are necessary. If you're going to make a donation to the Temple, you can't use pagan money with images of the emperor or the gods on them. You have to use temple money. So, you have to have money changers to change your money for you.

If you're going to make a sacrifice, you're not going to bring your animal all the way from Athens or Rome. You're going to buy your animal there. So, you have to have people selling animals.

Of course, with this many people involved the system is going to be abused. There's always going to be a bad apple.

But what is important is not Jesus disrupting the temple. What's important is what he does next. He begins caring for the blind and the lame. He begins caring for the powerless. By putting these two actions together, Matthew is showing us we worship God not by making a sacrifice in the temple. We worship God by doing all those things Jesus does, all those things we've been talking about.

We worship God by caring for the poor and powerless. By being the peacemaker in our community. We worship God by living our faith where everyone can see and by living a higher morality. And when we're about to do that thing, that thing we know we shouldn't do, we stop and ask – will this please God? Will this please God? When we see someone who is spiritually thirsty, we point them to the living water of God's love. When we see someone who is spiritually blind, we bring them to the Light of the World. And when we find someone who is spiritually dead, we share the good news of Jesus and the resurrection.

Finally, Matthew puts the finishing touch on this portrait of Jesus by having the children chant, 'Save us! Hooray to the Son of David.' But now, now we know what kind of Son of David Jesus is.

Who is Jesus? Who are we cheering for? Today, Matthew shows us exactly who Jesus is. Jesus is our king, conquering the forces of evil with gentleness and humility. Jesus is our prophet, teaching us not to worship God by ritual sacrifice but by how we live.

Who are we cheering for? As we approach the festival of Easter, who are we cheering for? We are cheering for Jesus, our gentle king, who shows us how to live lives of worship.

Hosannah! Amen.