

PALM SUNDAY - TRIUMPH OR TRAGEDY?

Did anyone here watch Canada win the gold medal in hockey a few weeks ago? Odds are that you did. An estimated 15 million Canadians (almost half the population of Canada) tuned in to the game even though it was early on a Sunday morning. What was so amazing to me about this and every other major sports event is the way that different people respond to the exact same situation. There are always 3 distinct groups of people. There are those who are happy because their team won. There are those who are sad because their team lost. Lastly, there are those who really didn't care about who won or lost. They were just there as observers not placing any significance in either winning or losing.

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem a week before His crucifixion. Just like at a sporting event there were three distinct groups of people that were there that day long ago. There were those who saw triumph, there were those who saw tragedy and there were those who simply missed what was happening.

Luke 19:37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 38 "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" 40 "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." 41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it 42 and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace--but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

1. TRIUMPH - those who received (vs. 37-38)

A week before the cross Jesus entered Jerusalem to cries of praise and worship. This was the Triumphal Entry. It was at that time that Jesus was at the height of His public ministry. He was recognized as being the Messiah. In Matthew it says "Hosanna to the Son of David!". In Mark it says: "Hosanna - Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David". In John it says "Blessed is the King of Israel!" The word Hosanna means "Save us now!" and was an expression of praise. The crowds recognized who Jesus was and "for all the miracles they had seen."

A week later a similar scene took place on the cross. There were those there on that day who understood what was happening. One of the thieves nailed beside Jesus accepts Him as Lord. He recognized his crime and knew he was getting exactly what he deserved. He had broken the law and was being punished for it. His "Hosanna" was a simple declaration of faith and trust "remember me when you come into your kingdom". Jesus responded to his request with an affirmation and promise of salvation "today you will be with me in paradise". No theological arguments or strings attached. Just the gift of eternal life.

A boy and his father were driving down a country road on a beautiful spring afternoon, when a bumblebee flew in the car window. The little boy, who was allergic to bee stings, was petrified. The father quickly reached out, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand, and then released it. The boy grew frantic as it buzzed by him. Once again the father reached out his hand, but this time he pointed to his palm. There stuck in his skin was the stinger of the bee.

"Do you see this?" he asked. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I've taken the sting for you." We do not need to fear death anymore. Christ has died and risen again. He has taken the sting from death. We need no longer fear the grave.

Like the disciples and that thief who accepted Jesus, I hope Hosanna is on your lips today. You recognized that you have a need and have asked Christ to save you. Thank Him for what He has done and give Him the honor due His name. Like those early followers we worship our king and lay down what we have before Him as He moves through our lives.

2. TRAGEDY - those who rejected (vs. 39-40)

At the triumphal entry the Pharisees had understood clearly what the crowds were saying. They knew that the crowds were naming Jesus as their Messiah and they knew that this was a terrible blasphemy against God. Jesus responded to their complaint that He was more than just a prophet but He was God incarnate. The only reason a rock would praise Him is if He himself were the maker of that rock. The Pharisees had made up their mind that Jesus could not have been what He claimed so they decided to kill Him.

A week later one of the thieves nailed with Jesus denied Him as well. He had made up his mind that Jesus was not who he claimed to be. He wrote Him off as just another crazy man dying for some crime. He rejected His claim to deity and rejected His claim that He was the Messiah or savior. Though Jesus was so close and the gift of eternal life was offered, this thief rejected it.

There are many in the world today that have rejected God's gift of salvation. They understand what Jesus said and who He claimed to be and they have rejected it.

During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, George Wilson, a postal clerk, robbed a federal payroll from a train and in the process killed a guard. The court convicted him and sentenced him to hang. Because of public sentiment against capital punishment, however, a movement began to secure a presidential pardon for Wilson (first offense), and eventually Jackson intervened with a pardon. Amazingly, Wilson refused it. Since this had never happened before, the Supreme Court was asked to rule on whether someone could indeed refuse a presidential pardon. Chief Justice John Marshall handed down the court's decision: "A pardon is a parchment whose only value must be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from that which the receiver gives to it. George Wilson has refused to accept the pardon. We cannot conceive why he would do so, but he has. Therefore, George Wilson must die." George Wilson, as punishment for his crime, was hanged. Pardon, declared the Supreme Court, must not only be granted, it must be accepted.

We live in a world that does not recognize Jesus for who He is. Though a pardon has been granted they refuse to accept it. They have rejected the idea of Jesus as Lord and savior. They pass Jesus off as just a prophet or a good moral teacher - ignoring His words and works. They see our praise as blasphemy of the worst possible kind. They would seek to quiet us - but even if we should stop all creation would still worship. The Kingdom of God is forcefully advancing and nothing will stop it from moving forward. God's plan for the nations will become reality.

3. Those who missed what was happening (vs. 41-44)

Perhaps the largest group were the bystanders that day who saw what was happening but did not understand what it meant.

With the Passover approaching the road to Jerusalem would have been a very busy place. Certainly there must have been many there that day that wondered what was happening. Perhaps they had heard all the things that Jesus had done. They were spectators and undecided in what to make of Him.

When Jesus looks up at Jerusalem as He approaches He knows what will happen. He sees the day in AD 70 when it will be burned and destroyed. He sees the destruction. He sees that the enemy will triumph over it. It would be destroyed because it did not recognize the time of God's coming.

A week later there were also bystanders at the foot of the cross. Yes there were many soldiers who mocked and cursed Jesus but I am sure that there were others there that day who were just doing their job. They were told to crucify an outlaw and that is what they were doing. They were not there to bless or to curse. They were simply there because they were supposed to be. That was their job, what was expected of them. They were there playing games at the foot of the cross.

These men were so close. That sat at the foot of the cross, inches away from the savior of the world. Seeing a chance to make some money they took the cloths of Jesus and rolled the dice for them. They were so close, and yet so far away. They neither accepted nor rejected - they were simply there. Killing time and playing games at the foot of the cross.

There are people like that who may be here today. You are here but you are on the sidelines. You claim to see, and yet don't see. You don't curse God but you don't praise Him either. You do not deny the claims of Jesus, but you also do not accept them. You do not shout insults and mock Him, but you also do not fall at His feet and call Him Lord. You are simply here, sitting in church week after week doing your duty. You come because you are expected to come. You sing because you are expected to sing. You are so close to the cross but you are playing games.

Easter is a time of decision. Two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus. One believes and one rejects. One is saved and another is lost. It is the very picture of decision.

For each one of us here this is a day of decision. You must decide today between triumph and tragedy. Either accept Jesus or reject Him, but you cannot keep sitting there playing games at the foot of the cross. Call Him Liar, or Lunatic or Lord - you must decide.

When Jesus looked up at Jerusalem it says he wept. He said "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace -- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you ... They will dash you to the ground ... They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you". Jesus saw the future of the city. He knew what would happen. He wept because he knew the city He loved would reject Him and be destroyed.

I just returned from 2 weeks in Japan. It is a nation where, by and large, people have never heard a clear presentation of who Jesus is. They are bystanders. They have heard about Christianity but not enough to make a choice. Who will tell them?

When Jesus looks at you today what does He see? Does He rejoice over you or does He weep that even though He was so close you still did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. Jesus is passing by each of us again today. You must decide what you will do. How many times have you seen Him pass by you? Don't let Him pass you by again. Call out to Him today.

Story of Artful Eddie. He was a lawyer for Al Capone and worked the dog tracks. He did not want his son Butch to follow the life he had led so he cut a deal with the police. He would give them Al Capone if he could gain a new life. He knew the risks but was willing to take them for the chance of a better future. He ended up dying for his betrayal. His son Butch went on to be commissioned in WWII as a Navy Pilot. On Nov 26, 1943 he downed 5 bombers one night and saved the Lexington. He received the Congressional Medal of Honor. Chicago airport (Butch O'Hare) was named after him.