

'Dashed Expectation Sunday' – Palm Sunday

by Rev. Robert Griffith

We are used to seeing Palm Sunday as a time of great celebration as we focus on that day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem and hundreds of thousands of people lined the road shouting "*Hosanna to the Son of David,*" and "*Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

The name 'Palm Sunday' comes from the thousands of branches people cut from palm trees and laid them across Jesus' path and waved them in the air. As they celebrated then, so millions of Christians across the world celebrate today. Sadly, as they were totally deceived back then, so are many deceived today as we once again miss what was really happening here.

In fact, I think we could rename today: '*Deception Sunday*' or '*How Wrong Could We Be Sunday*' or '*Dashed Expectation Sunday*.' Hence, the title of the sermon. The most powerful message from that first 'Palm Sunday' is not the one told in many Churches today. The real story tells a different tale. It tells us of the great expectations and shouts of '*Hosanna*' on Sunday, and the dashed expectations and shouts of '*Crucify Him!*' on Friday – and many of those came from the same people!

Palm Sunday is actually a sobering reminder about what happens to a group of religious people when you raise their expectations of a major triumph at the beginning of a week and by the end of the week dash those expectations so completely that even the inner circle of disciples end up denying, deserting, or betraying their Master. All this within four days of this celebration of the palms!

As for the crowds – well they turned very ugly very quickly and this hailed 'king' Jesus was handed over to the Romans to be executed. As we observe this incredible change of allegiance and faith in Jesus, we need to realize from the outset that: **Jesus did not come to meet our expectations or those of His fellow Jews. He came to meet our real needs.**

Jesus did not come to slay our foes and lift us high. He came to serve and give His life as a ransom for all mankind - because the real heart of the human dilemma is never our political problems or our social problems or our environmental problems or our personal and family problems ... our real problem is we need Jesus.

Jesus came as the Prince of Peace, not a warlord, but here's the irony. The crowds don't get it! When they see words like 'king', 'triumphant' and 'victorious' in prophecies of Zechariah about Jesus, they interpret that the way they have for centuries. How wrong could they be!? **They assumed that their interpretation of those prophecies was Jesus' intention.** So when everything took a very different turn by Thursday night, the disillusionment was profound. The truth is, Jesus did not come to be that kind of king. Someone who would run the Romans out of town. He came to die on a cross even for the sins of the enemies of Israel.

Here's another interesting irony in the Palm Sunday story. The pilgrims coming to town with Jesus were singing the so-called Hallel psalms, those '*let's go up to Zion*' songs, rather like the boy scout songs I used to sing when hiking, '*I love to go a wandering*'. The Hallel psalms are full of 'Hosannas' which means *God saves*, and 'Hallelujahs' which means *praise Yahweh*. They are ancient praise songs, and they would sing this whether Jesus was coming into town with them or not.

The line *'blessed is he who comes (to Jerusalem) in the name of the Lord'* was what the pilgrims sang as they went up to Zion. But here it takes on a special poignancy because *this* time their king really has come to town. *This* time the ultimate son of David really *has* arrived and the vast majority of them didn't even know it, or if they did, they had a very different vision of what sort of king He would be. Jesus, from womb to tomb, from birth to death, did not come to meet our expectations of what a king should be like - He came to meet our deepest needs - our need for salvation, our need for Him.

Nine days ago, in the early hours of the morning in this very place, Jesus failed to meet our expectations once again as this building became an island in a sea of destruction. God didn't send this flood – this basin has been flooding like this for thousands of years – someone just decided to build a city at the bottom of the bowl and what happened last week has happened before and it will happen again.

But, long before any of us were even born, God knew the precise time that raging torrent of water would spill over our levee and destroy so much in its path. God knew who needed to be in place here and when and what they needed to do. God knew that His Kingdom would come and His will would be done because of, not just in spite of this flood. Our shattered expectations can become God's once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Our tragedy, can become God's triumph.

Our devastation in seeing the decimation of a sanctuary in which so many precious memories have been generated, can now become God's opportunity to remind us that Church and the mission of Christ has nothing whatsoever to do with buildings, brass plaques or treasured man-made traditions. Church is ALL about relationships and the real presence of God in the midst of His pilgrim people.

This is one reason why the original disciples deserted, denied, and betrayed Jesus. Some of them had hopes that Jesus, especially after cleansing the temple, would kick the Romans out of town and begin to rule as their earthly, human King. Not so. In fact, Jesus actually predicted that in 40 years, Jews who tried to establish God's Kingdom in a mad-made building, would all be destroyed or driven out of Jerusalem.

Jesus was exactly right. In A.D. 70, exactly 40 years after His death, Jerusalem was torched and became a pagan city! After the second Jewish revolt in the second century A.D. which was also squashed by the Romans, no Jew was allowed anywhere near the Temple remains until 1967.

Now, unlike our brothers and sisters long ago, we will return to our building one day. But what if we couldn't? What if, like those early Jews, we all died, never having seen the inside of our Church building again? What if, like the early Jews, God asked us to find Him and worship Him in a different way, in a different place – even in exile, as it were? Could we do that? Well we are right now. But for how long? Well I guess we will see, because it will be quite some time before we return to our 'Jerusalem.'

That statement makes many of us sad. Of course we would never have wished this flood upon us or anyone – but it came and God knew it was coming and He had plans in place long, long ago to use this disaster to achieve His Kingdom purpose and I believe God is really excited about meeting us here or wherever we gather.

Many of you are bitterly disappointed that this has happened and you will be able to poke your head into the Church on your way home today, if you want to, and see the new reality we now face. And many of you will just wish things could be as they were. Jesus knows that. But unfortunately, Jesus has disappointed lots of people by acting in ways they didn't expect and didn't appreciate.

Jesus bitterly disappointed both the hopeful crowd of pilgrims and His own disciples during what we now call Holy Week. And when you dash peoples' highest hopes that severely it's no surprise that you end up on a cross by the end of the week! Can you see those crowds worshipping our Lord? Can you hear them crying out, "*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" "*Blessed is the King of Israel.*" Jesus was asked to keep the crowd quiet. He proclaimed, "*If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.*" It's a moment frozen in rapturous worship and praise.

But something went horribly wrong. In just a few days, the tide of public opinion turned against Jesus as violently as the Wilsons river turned against our city. How could that be? Did Jesus take off with the Rabbi's wife? Did He steal from the coffers of the Temple? Did He assassinate the mayor or the emperor of Rome? Did He lie? No. He did nothing like that.

But something went horribly wrong. Was it a massive public propaganda campaign to sway the uneducated public away from this man on the donkey? No, they tried but the Scribes and Pharisees were silenced. Something went horribly wrong. They believed He was the King! They believed He had come to establish His kingdom their way! Salvation was at hand. Brothers and sisters, **Jesus is never what we make *Him*. We are what *He* makes *us*.**

What went wrong? Quite simply, we wanted Jesus to be Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy all wrapped up in one. Instead He was Jesus, the Christ. No longer just a prophet or a good guy. He was and He is God incarnate and He came to fulfill the Kingdom purposes of God, not make life comfortable for the people, socially or politically. The disciples and thousands of adoring palm branch wavers got it completely wrong that day all those years ago because the Jesus they were supposedly following was a product of their own expectations, their own hopes and their skewed worldview.

The *real* Jesus was still right in front their eyes, desperately desiring to enter their hearts and change their expectations. But they continued to worship a king they would never have – a king God refuses to be. Their true King, their Lord, their Saviour, their Redeemer, their Deliverer, was about to fulfill His mission as Messiah in a way nobody saw coming – but they should have. This was predicted many times over many years. But they still missed it!

I wonder how many times you and I miss Jesus when He is right in front of our faces; when He is right in the middle of our circumstances; when He is poised, ready to bring victory – but we are looking for something or someone different. More often than not, victory comes to us the same way it was secured by Jesus – in brokenness, submission, surrender and death. Death to our expectations, death to our hopes and our vision of how Jesus *should* behave. When those flawed expectations die, then we can accept how Jesus wants to be in our lives and the lives of those around us.

So on this '*Dashed Expectation Sunday*' we need to ask God to give us the courage to accept that His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are far higher than our thoughts. We need the Spirit to reveal to us afresh that the Jesus who started a global movement by getting Himself killed, is the same Jesus Who will turn up in unexpected ways in your life and mine and do things and say things we never anticipated and often never wanted. But will we trust Him? Will we even recognize His hand at work?

Well, if we follow the original Palm Sunday script – the answer is no. We will miss Him entirely and continue worshipping a Jesus of our own making – which is no Jesus at all. But if we embrace Jesus as He truly is, here and now, we will never be the same again. Our spiritual lives will be refreshed beyond measure. Our love for Him will be renewed. His Spirit will explode from deep within us where He has been quenched by all those expectations we pile on one another – most of which never came from God.