

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Palm Sunday

April 17, 2011

Who Is This?

Matthew 21:1-11

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The shouts and songs were genuine. The crowds were authentic. The people were dancing and celebrating the arrival of a famous person coming into the Holy City. Crowds of pilgrims had come to celebrate the Passover Feast. It seemed everyone was having a great time. Some were shouting, “Behold your King! Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna in the highest.”

“And when He entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, ““Who Is This?””

(Matthew 21:10)

And the answer from the people celebrating was clear: “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.” (Matthew 21:11)

Riding on a donkey was right for a prophet—especially for a simple one from Nazareth. Perhaps they thought that since God had given this prophet the ability to do miracles and raise a man from the dead, surely God intended to give him the military power to defeat the Romans and restore the kingdom of Israel to the glorious nation when it was under King David.

In the Old Testament, rulers sometimes rode a donkey in times of peace. Those Jews who knew the prophets might understand this as the fulfillment of Scripture for the long-awaited Messiah. This showed the kind of peace-loving approach Jesus was making to the city.

And so, the people celebrated their own dreams by cheering a man they hardly knew and hoping he would give them the worldly kingdom they had been waiting for. But they did not know Who He really was.

God had a much larger dream for Jesus, and the crowds did not see any of it at the time. Jesus was a king, but His kingdom was not of this world. His kingdom put

love over law,

compassion over command,

faithfulness over fear.

Even if we accept Jesus as a prophet from Nazareth, then we must take seriously His teachings of God being a Spirit who creates out of His boundless love for all people.

We would accept His teachings of what it means to be blessed:

being a peacemaker,

hungering and thirsting for righteousness,

being poor in spirit and humble.

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If we believe the teachings of this prophet, then we must take seriously when Jesus says, "...Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant." (Matthew 20:26)

If we believe this prophet, we would know that Jesus was a messenger sent by God as the Son of Man who gave His life to ransom many. When we study this prophet and His teachings, either they were true or we must answer once more, "Who Is This?" For Jesus claims to have come from God, to be so close to God that what he says is not of His own accord but are the very words God has given Him to say. He even said that He and God were One and if you have seen Jesus, you have seen His Father.

The person in the center of the parade is at the center of the struggle between our wanting to have a worldly king who will gain control over all the evil in the world versus being a spiritual king who offers Himself as a sacrifice for His people. He was killed and raised again, becoming available to all persons in all ages as the Holy Spirit from God. His kingdom is not a visible, geographic, material place.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Messenger from God, who is sent to turn our hearts in a spiritual direction. Yet, repeatedly western history takes us in a worldly direction rather than a spiritual one. During the Enlightenment, people in Western Europe tended to worship intellectualism, the rational use of one's mind, as supreme. During the Industrial Age, steel and the machine became the foremost way to change the world. Machines became an extension of a person—the greater the machines, the more powerful the person. Control of machines became the goal. Then science came surging back to captivate the imagination and claim our allegiance, saying some day science would be able to discover everything there is to know about the universe and all that is therein. Technology today has its devotees, for when paired with science, we experience the explosion of knowledge and information transferred on wafer-thin chips at speeds faster than we can imagine. Those persons or nations that control science and technology have power beyond geographic borders. Does control over science and technology constitute a kingdom on earth?

Control over people and information seems to be our modern-day equivalent to a king over a kingdom in Jesus' day. We even speak of a news media giant as having a "Media Empire."

The individual at the center of that celebration in Palestine some 2,000 years ago did not last a whole week before He was killed by the power of organized religious leaders in collusion with the military rulers of the city. They had the power at that time and in that place, and they used it to kill this one popular man whose message somehow threatened their comfortable control of power, which was their kingdom on earth.

But killing this man did just the opposite. It released Jesus from His earthly bonds to be raised by His Heavenly Father so His message would become available to every person's heart and mind through every generation in every country in the world. Now, some 2,000 years later, the message of hope and the power of love is quite alive and well, which sings in our hearts and resonates in our relationships.

This message of hope, joy and love gives us the strength as Carole Mayhall puts it, to keep look-

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ing at the goal, not the going, seeing the prize and not the process, the treasure not the trial, the joy and not the journey. (*Stories from the Heart*, p 114)

Clearly, the kingdom of God is among us. It is within us as well as far beyond us. The kingdom of God cannot be limited to an individual or a geographical location.

“Jesus was a king, but He was a King in a nobler way than any crown of gold could show. He was King of all who accepted His way. He was a King of hearts and lives rather than a ruler of empires. He was King in the only way that lasts forever.

“Our little kingdoms rise and have their day, then pass away and are remembered in the ruins of their structures and in the records of their rise and fall. His kingdom knows no end. It is alive today in the lives and works of His followers. It is eternal. Our works show the worth of our worship.” (*Waymarks*, HD Gray, p. 57)

What are the identifying characteristics of the kingdom of God? How about being kind to one another, forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven you? “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

How about being one who serves others rather than being served? How about being able to say to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

Wouldn't you like to hear the words Jesus said to the thief, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise?”

The road Jesus took, we continue through this Great and Holy Week. He knew better than we do what lay ahead for Him, and there was no other human being who was going to walk the path with Him.

Because of His faithfulness, we are given the choice to walk with Him or leave Him and go our own way. We can seek His Spirit in our lives, or turn away and reject the sacrifice He made that we might be at one with God, His heavenly Father and ours.

Jesus did not suffer and die for His own reputation or to get extra credit in heaven. He did it for you and for me. “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (John 3:17)

God blesses us with the capacity to celebrate, to think, to consider, to choose, to freely make our own personal commitment to accept Jesus' teachings as the guiding principles of our lives and follow them, just as He followed His heavenly Father's will for His life.

Please join me in prayer:

Come Holy Spirit, speak to our hearts and minds. Turn us this Palm Sunday from being content with an earthly kingdom of worldly things to lifting our thoughts, hearts and loyalties into the beauty and eternity of Your perfect love. Amen.