

Don't Forget the Cross!

by Mark Jarvinen

¹As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ²saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.' "

⁴They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

¹⁰"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

¹¹Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. **(Mark 11:1-11)**

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:8)

Philip Yancey is a well known Christian author who grew up in a fundamentalist church in the South which didn't observe the major events of Holy Week. Throughout his childhood, he never attended a Maundy Thursday or Good Friday service. Consequently, in his early Christian life, he shied away from the symbols like crucifixes as being **"too Catholic."** Yancey writes, **"The church I grew up in skipped**

past the events of Holy Week in a rush to hear the victorious cymbal sounds of Easter.”

We can understand the desire to skip through Holy Week. After all, Jesus on the cross is death, while Easter is Jesus risen to life. Talk about a bad news, good news, contrast! Who wouldn't rather hear the good news? But what the church wants to get through quickly, the Bible takes slowly. As one NT commentator wryly suggests, ***“The gospels are actually the record of Jesus' final week ... with extended introductions.”***

The fact remains, however, that after today, many in Christendom won't be in church again until next Sunday, Easter. They'll go from the triumphal moment of Jesus riding into Jerusalem, being hailed as King, to the triumph of the resurrection announcement, without the benefit of following Jesus to the cross. In more recent years, those who lay out the church year have begun referring to this Sunday as **Palm/Passion Sunday**. The challenge for the preacher, therefore, is to present in one message what the Gospels take the majority of their pages to unfold. Thus between two triumphant moments, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the resurrection, my task today is to remind you - **“Don't forget the cross!”**

The irony of the Palm Sunday story is how it ends with a **fizzle** instead of a **sizzle**. It begins with elaborate preparations to secure a colt. Jesus then parades into Jerusalem as the crowds hail him as King. He enters the Temple in triumph and then, most curiously, he just looks around and leaves. There's a clue for us in this abrupt ending to an otherwise triumphal moment. ***Palm Sunday's meaning***

can only emerge as we observe what happens to Jesus during the rest of the week.

Mark 11 presents the authority of Jesus, both in what he did and what he taught. But it's not the kind of authority the world is used to seeing. If his authority were that of power and might, he would have ridden into Jerusalem on a fine stallion, not a domesticated animal of peace, like a donkey. In riding a donkey into Jerusalem, Jesus was doing the modern day equivalent of riding into Washington, D.C. in a ***Chevrolet Spark*** instead of an ***Abrams tank***.

Furthermore, doesn't it seem strange that Jesus would walk the 90 miles from Galilee to Bethany and then secure a donkey for the final two miles into Jerusalem? If you're going to borrow a donkey, why not borrow one with ***"unlimited mileage?"*** But Jesus wasn't worried about tired feet. He was more interested in observing every nuance of the Biblical understanding of who the Messiah was. Jesus fulfilled ***Zechariah 9:9*** - ***"...your king comes to you: triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*** Jesus is grounding his victory in humility. His triumph would not be in might, but in service. ***Philippians 2:8*** tells us that Jesus, in coming to earth, ***"humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!"*** Jesus knew who he was. He understood that the Palm Sunday support of the crowds shouting ***"Hosanna"*** was misguided and superficial. There would be ultimate victory, but first must come the cross. The cross was His mission - the moment toward which His whole earthly life had pointed. ***And so, we do well to heed these words - "Don't forget the cross!"***

When we look at the cross of Jesus, we need to remember that the forces which put Jesus to death around 2,000 years ago are still in effect today. We see in the **Pharisees**, the *intolerance toward Christianity* we see today. In the **Saducees**, we see the *abuse of religious status for commercial gain*. In **Pontius Pilate**, we find a classic example of *political expediency at the expense of truth*. In **Herod Antipas**, we see *pleasure-loving irresponsibility*. In **Judas Iscariot**, the betrayer of Jesus, we see *blatant unfaithfulness*; in the **jeering crowds** we notice a *mob mentality*. In the **Roman soldiers** we see *militarism*, in the **crowds who remained silent** at Jesus trial, we see *public apathy*. In the events of the final week of Jesus' life, they were all there. **WE WERE ALL THERE.**

If you were to look at **Rembrandt's** etching of "**The Three Crosses**," your attention would first be drawn to the center cross on which hung the dying form of Jesus. Then as you viewed the crowd gathered around the foot of the cross, you'd be impressed by the various facial expressions and actions of the people involved in the awful crime of crucifying the Son of God. Finally, and only after close inspection, your eyes would drift to the edge of this work, where you'd notice another figure, almost hidden in the shadows. Art critics say this is Rembrandt's representation of himself, who recognized that by his sins he had helped nail Jesus to the cross. Yes, Rembrandt depicts what the Bible teaches - **WE WERE ALL THERE.**

During this season, we sometimes sing the hymn that asks the haunting question: "**Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?**" The refrain says, "**Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble,**

tremble, tremble.” My question for us today is ***“Does the preaching of the cross cause us to tremble?”*** Are we cut to the quick because we helped nail Jesus to the cross? ***Oswald Chambers*** once said, ***“All heaven is interested in the cross of Christ, all hell is terribly afraid of it, while men more or less ignore its meaning.”***

Where are the days in which people owned the fact that they were responsible for killing Christ? Remember Peter’s Pentecost sermon in **Acts 2**? In **2:23**, Peter said to the men of Israel gathered in Jerusalem: ***“This man (Jesus) was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to a cross.”*** Peter’s sermon continues, but by **2:36**, we hear him say: ***“Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, WHOM YOU CRUCIFIED, both Lord and Christ.”*** The indictment is clear. Although they had not hammered in the actual nails, they were charged with His crucifixion. Why? Because of their sinful rejection of God’s gracious provision for their forgiveness. Notice their response to this indictment - ***“When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37).***

Who’s saying today ***“What shall we do?”*** in response to the preaching of the cross? It seems to me that we’re living in a day when people have become hardened to the fact that we all helped put him there. ***A.W. Tozer***, one of the fearless preachers of the mid - 20th century, lamented the tendency of society in his day to water down the preaching of the cross. He said, ***“The old cross slew men in their***

self-reliance; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemned men still in their sins; the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it. The new cross does not slay the sinner; it re-directs him. It gives him a cleaner, jollier way of living, and saves his self-respect.”

Friends, until people are slain, spiritually speaking, by the message of the cross, and understand that they helped put Jesus on that cross to begin with, then the message of the resurrection will not seem like the earth-shaking good news it really is. Easter will never touch your heart until you've realized that ***“you were there too”*** when they crucified Jesus.

This speaks to us about the kind of evangelism we do in today's world. There's a lot of emphasis today on ***“earning the right to be heard”*** by first building bridges of care to those we seek to introduce to Christ. Implicit in this emphasis is our understanding that Jesus is the answer for people's problems and pain. By caring for others as ambassadors for Christ on earth, we want people to sense that God cares for them too, and invites them to know Him and walk with Him in a living and vital relationship through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

But there is a clarification required. ***We must not lose the heart of our message by proclaiming to the world the gospel without law, any more than we proclaim law without gospel.*** Our message to the world needs to express both the reality of God's loving care for the world without compromising the inevitability of the cross.

To again quote Tozer: ***“We, who preach the (Word), must not think of ourselves as public relations agents sent to establish good will between Christ and the world. We must not imagine ourselves commissioned to make Christ acceptable to big business, the press, or the world of sports, politics, or modern entertainment. We are not diplomats, but prophets; and our message is not a compromise, but an ultimatum.”***

Our message is embodied in a verse like ***Romans 6:23***, which states ***“For the wages of sin is death, (law); but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (gospel)***. Mankind is born under the curse and condemnation of sin, yet wondrously, by grace, at the cross our sin is dealt with once and for all, making forgiveness possible as we receive it by faith. We don't deny the presence and power of sin in our lives, but we acknowledge it and turn from it as we rest in what Jesus did for us at the cross. Another way of saying this is ***“Stop trying to be your own Savior and Lord, just lay your sins at the foot of the cross.”*** Or ***“Don't try to put on a Sunday suit over the filthy rags of your own self-righteousness, instead, by faith, put on the white robes of Christ's righteousness.”***

Hopefully we will see that although our sin helped put Jesus on the cross, yet because of His love, He would have gladly died anyway. As an anonymous writer once penned: ***“He came to pay a debt He didn't owe because we owed a debt we couldn't pay.”*** The cross was an instrument of punishment for sin, but also a symbol of incomparable love for sinners.

And so, let's not rush through Holy Week in order to hear the crashing cymbals of Easter victory. Let's first remember the cross upon which Jesus died - and that we helped put Him there. But remember too, He would have given His life anyway. So great is His love for sinners like us. ***Romans 5:8*** says it so well - ***“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** Don't forget the cross - an unyielding instrument of death, yet a sign of God's redeeming love. **A-men.**